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Science of Reading

EDITOR'S NOTE

Reading instruction received even more attention during the shift to remote learning. In this Spotlight, review where the learning gaps are for those learning to read; determine if teachers are properly prepared to tackle such a task; discover ways misconceptions are passed down; and assess what 'the science of reading' means to you as an educator.

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Is the Bottom Falling Out for Readers Who Struggle the Most?

By Sarah D. Sparks

More and more American students are falling significantly behind in reading, and the widespread academic disruptions during the pandemic are likely to create a critical mass of struggling readers in the nation's schools, new analyses of federal data show.

There's been no improvement in overall reading performance at any grade level in the national tests called the Nation's Report Card for the past decade or more, with declines for lower grades happening since 2017 and for 12th graders since 2015.

That stagnation has been driven largely by a growing share of students failing to meet even the most basic level of reading proficiency, and by steadily falling scores in the National Assessment of Educational Progress for the 10 percent to 25 percent of students who struggle the most with reading.

The NAEP measures three levels of reading achievement—basic, proficient, and advanced—based on students' understanding of literature and their ability to gain information from texts. However, since 2017, the number of students who cannot meet even the basic literacy benchmark has grown in 30 states among 8th graders and 13 states for 4th graders. Nearly half of 4th graders in New Mexico,

for example, cannot meet the lowest reading benchmark, according to a new analysis by Ebony Walton, a statistician for NAEP.

The decline in performance for the bottom 10 percent of readers has spanned nearly all racial and socioeconomic groups, NCES reported in a symposium on reading research last week. And the drops have been significant enough to prompt the Council of Chief State School Officers and the Institute of Education Sciences to launch initiatives focused on studying and supporting the most-struggling readers.

"This is not a Black and brown problem. It's not a problem just for poor students or students with special needs," said Peggy Carr, the associate commissioner for the National Center for Education Statistics, which administers the NAEP. "We all are represented in the bottom—perhaps disproportionately for some relative to their representation in the population, but nonetheless we're all there."

What skills trip up struggling readers?

While the group of students who fall below basic reading performance has been growing, their educational status is largely a black hole. We still know relatively little about what these students can understand and what skills they most need, according to Lynn Woodworth, NCES commissioner.

In an attempt to get a clearer picture, one analysis by the IES looked at NAEP oral reading data from a nationally representative group of 1,800 4th graders from 180 public schools. While the study could not determine which skills caused students' overall low reading performance, "a large body of research has established that foundational skills are the main drivers of oral reading fluency, which in turn is necessary for reading comprehension," said Sheida White, an NCES researcher and the author of the study.

White found, for example, that, among below-basic-level readers, the difference in accuracy was greater between students in higher and lower groups than it was between readers in the proficient category and those who barely missed making it into the basic reading performance category.

The lowest-performing 4th graders misread about 1 in 6 words, on average, and often didn't recognize words in print that they knew from spoken language.

Low below-basic readers had significant trouble decoding key words, and focused on reading individual words rather than phrases, sentences, or passages. In one example, demonstrated in the audio clip [found here](#), the 4th grade student only finished about a third of the text within the allotted time and read in a stilted monotone, which has been associated with poor comprehension. (The photo associated with these audio clips from IES does not depict either of the actual students speaking.)

By contrast, proficient readers like the one in [this second audio excerpt](#), completed the passage and read with expression, pausing in the correct places and emphasizing particular parts of the text for listeners, showing understanding rather than just decoding the material.

P. David Pearson, a reading researcher and emeritus faculty member in the University of California, Berkeley, Graduate School of Education, argued educators need to avoid siloing different areas of reading instruction for different students and grades. Teaching reading comprehension should begin in the earliest grades, and teachers should continue to look for and remediate problems in decoding and other early-literacy skills among older struggling readers.

"We can fall into an either-or track, so comprehension and word recognition become a kind of a zero-sum game. And we want to discourage that," Pearson said. "Just because we're teaching them word recognition doesn't mean that we can't teach comprehension. And just because we're focusing on building knowledge, doesn't mean that we have to de-emphasize strategy instruction. ... We want to think of the various instructional components and

activities as complementary and integrated rather than completely separated and independent of one another.”

Reading skills and deficits compound over time. While the oral fluency study did not look at 12th graders, a proficient 4th grader reads aloud more accurately than an adult with only basic literacy—159 words correct per minute versus 123 words correct per minute, based on data from the National Assessment of Adult Literacy.

And poor reading skills significantly narrow students’ choices after high school. In a separate study based on the Program for International Student Assessment, IES researchers found U.S. students’ focus of study at age 19 was strongly linked to their reading proficiency at 15. For example, while 9 percent of all 19-year-olds were still working to earn a high school diploma and 26 percent were not studying for any higher degree, among students who had performed in the lowest two reading levels on PISA at age 15, 23 percent were still working to graduate high school at 19, and another 49 percent were not in school at all. By contrast, only about 4 percent of the best readers at age 15 were not studying for a postsecondary degree by 19.

In January 2020, just before the pandemic, the Council of Chief State School Officers released a report calling for states to pass new laws and launch initiatives aimed to improve reading—and in particular, to ensure that teachers base instruction on the latest science on reading development.

But more than a year of school and community disruptions and switches from in-person to virtual learning formats and vice versa have likely slowed progress or worsened reading performance gaps, according to Carr and Scott Norton, deputy executive director of programs for CCSSO.

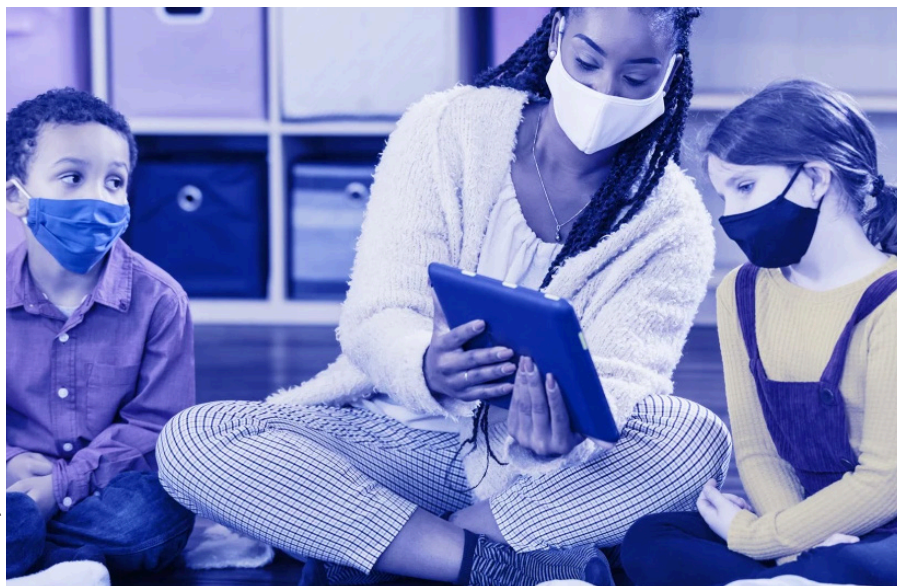
Low-income students and students of color, who were already disproportionately more likely to read at a below-basic literacy level, have also been significantly more likely than white and wealthier students to learn only through remote and virtual instruction during the pandemic, Carr noted. ■

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Which Students Struggle Most in Reading?

Where Do Struggling Readers Concentrate in States?

[View Interactive](#)



—E+/Getty

Published on March 23, 2021

Most States Fail to Measure Teachers’ Knowledge of the ‘Science of Reading,’ Report Says

By Sarah Schwartz

For many elementary school teachers, teaching students how to read is a central part of the job. But the majority of states don’t evaluate whether prospective teachers have the knowledge they’ll need to teach reading effectively before granting them certification, according to an analysis from the National Council on Teacher Quality.

According to NCTQ’s evaluation of state licensure tests for teachers, 20 states use assessments that fully measure candidates’ knowledge of the “science of reading,” referencing the body of research on the most effective methods for teaching young children how to decode text, read fluently, and understand what they’re reading.

For special education teachers, a group that regularly works with students with reading difficulties, just 11 states’ certification tests meet this standard.

Previous studies have shown that early elementary teachers often have gaps in their knowledge of evidence-based practices for teaching reading, and that many teacher-preparation programs that don’t ad-

equately cover this topic. Some preparation programs introduce strategies that aren’t supported by research.

A 2019 [Education Week Research Center survey](#) of K-2 and special education teachers found that only 11 percent said they felt “completely prepared” to teach early reading when they finished their preservice programs.

By NCTQ’s assessment, 32 states require elementary preparation programs to address the five components of reading, as defined by the National Reading Panel report released in 2000—phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension.

Ensuring that teachers are prepared to teach reading before they enter the classroom, and incentivizing preparation programs to provide that training, will be especially important over the next few years, said Kate Walsh, the president of NCTQ.

“In normal years, we know about a million 4th graders haven’t learned how to read,” Walsh said, referencing results from the 2019 National Assessment of Educational Progress that categorize only 35 percent of 4th graders as proficient in reading. It’s possible that the pandemic will leave students with more ground to make up, she said.

Some research has suggested that young



Empowering Educators with the Skills They Need to Teach Reading

Research shows a gap between what educators know about reading and whether they're prepared to teach it. Why are they graduating from college without the skills they need to teach reading?

Former educator Donna Hejtmanek asks this question and more in her podcast, "The Science of Reading: Why Didn't We Learn What We Needed to Know in College?" She also shares the story behind her incredibly popular Facebook group, Science of Reading—What I Should Have Learned in College.

Tune in to learn more about:

- Why schools and districts continue to discount reading research
- The biggest challenges educators face teaching the science of reading
- Suggested resources for teachers

What is the science of reading?



The "*science of reading*" refers to a comprehensive body of research that encompasses years of scientific knowledge. Based on the science of reading, the 2000 National Reading Panel Report outlined the five essential components of reading: phonological awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and reading comprehension.¹



Why aren't educators taught the science of reading?
Listen to the podcast at go.voyagersopris.com/college

1. Gewertz, C. States to schools: teach reading the right way. Education Week. February 20, 2020. Retrieved 6/11/21 from <https://www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/states-to-schools-teach-reading-the-right-way/2020/02>



Speech to Print vs. Print to Speech: Does It Make a Difference in Beginning Reading Instruction?

The short answer to this question is yes. Before students can learn to read, it's essential to orient them to spoken language as an anchor for processing print.

Literacy experts Dr. Louisa Moats and Margaret Goldberg explore this important topic in their webinar, "Speech to Print vs. Print to Speech: Does It Make a Difference in Beginning Reading Instruction?" They review examples of several curricula and student writing samples to reveal why a speech-to-print approach is more effective.

Watch the on-demand webinar to learn more about:

- The linguistic demands of reading and writing an alphabet
- The steps necessary for readers to establish automatic word recognition
- How to recognize when a program, approach, or lesson structure does and does not facilitate use of alphabetic decoding and word recognition



Teacher knowledge of language is critical. Find out why in our webinar at go.voyagersopris.com/speech



The Mississippi Momentum—and How Other States Are Following Suit

In 2019, Mississippi achieved the number-one spot in the nation for gains on the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP), with fourth-grade students making the largest score gains from 2017 to 2019 in reading and math.

A statewide LETRS® (Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling) literacy professional learning implementation catapulted Mississippi's growth. Their scores demonstrate a science-based approach maintains consistent, powerful improvement year over year.

Two major factors that drove success:

- Teach educators how to teach reading and ensure they understand the science behind it
- Make the science of reading part of your Educator Preparation Programs (EPP)



Find out how to make the science of reading part of your program. Learn from educator and reading consultant Dr. Antonio Fierro in his blog post at go.voyagersopris.com/momentum

For more information about LETRS® and other structured literacy solutions, visit www.lexialearning.com.

students may need more support with reading next year. A study of 400,000 students released in December 2020 by Amplify, a digital reading company, found that students were further behind in early literacy skills at the beginning of the 2020-21 school year than they have been in previous years.

Can changes to licensure tests lead to better reading instruction?

For this analysis, NCTQ looked at content outlines, test objectives, and test prep materials for the state licensure tests given to elementary, early education, and special education teacher candidates—the three groups that are most likely to be responsible for foundational reading instruction.

The organization based its evaluation of the tests on two guiding questions: 1) whether the tests addressed each of the five components of reading, and 2) whether they assessed students on any practices that aren't supported by evidence, like three-cueing—a method that teaches students they don't need to rely on decoding alone to figure out what a word says, but can also make guesses based on pictures and syntax. (Three-cueing can lessen the chances that students will use their understanding of letter sounds to read through words part-by-part, taking away an opportunity for students to practice their decoding skills and making it less likely that they'll recognize the word quickly the next time that they see it.)

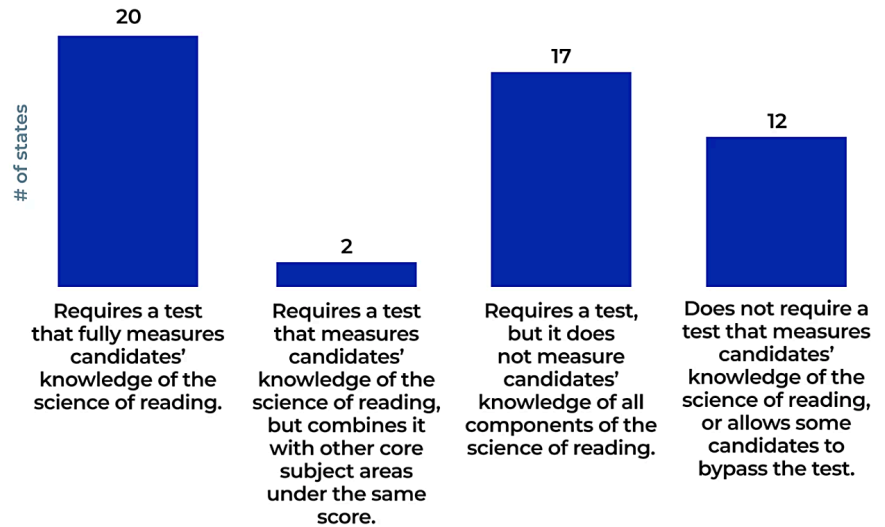
Many of the tests that didn't meet NCTQ's criteria paid little attention to two important components of foundational skills instruction, Walsh said: phonemic awareness (the understanding that spoken words are made up of individual sounds) and phonics (how those individual sounds are represented by letters). These two skills are building blocks to fluent reading, and without them, some students will continue to struggle with reading into higher grades.

Walsh would want to see more states start giving tests that fully assess teachers' knowledge of the five components of reading. Giving these tests, and holding preparation programs accountable for students' first-time pass rate, would incentivize preservice programs to devote real resources to teaching these skills, she said.

Still, some education professors don't place much emphasis on teaching candidates how to do explicit, systematic phonics instruction, and resist what they often call a "one-size-fits-all" approach, as Madeline Will reported in 2019.

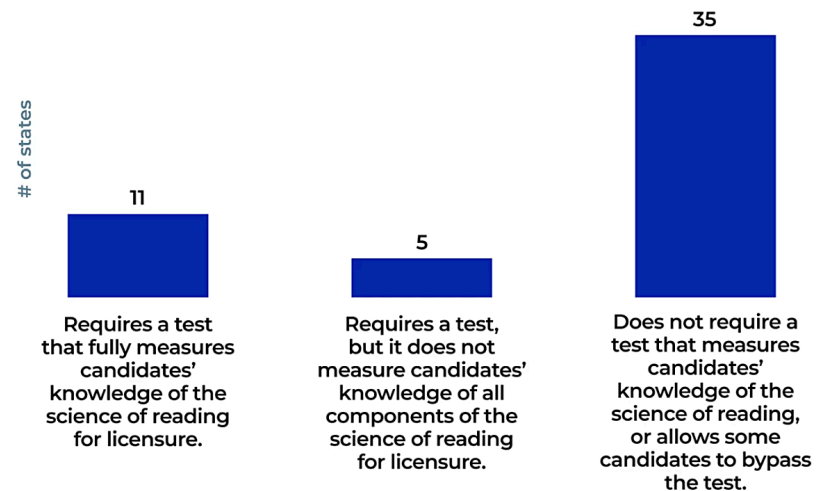
Another hurdle, Walsh said, is that some states are also wary of adding more or tougher assessments to teacher candidates' plates.

State Licensure Test Requirements for Elementary Teachers on the Science of Reading



SOURCE: National Council on Teacher Quality

State Licensure Test Requirements for Special Education Teachers on the Science of Reading



SOURCE: National Council on Teacher Quality

In some cases, reading instruction tests are the only barrier between teacher candidates and certification. In California, for example, one-third of prospective teachers fail the first time they take the Reading Instruction Competence Assessment, or RICA, as EdSource reported in 2019. First-time failure rates are higher for Black

and Latino candidates, and opponents of the assessment have argued that it's racially biased. (The majority of teachers of all races pass after multiple attempts.) The state has assembled a panel to recommend alternatives to the test.

In general, "it's reasonable to say that teachers need to know certain things before they get

classroom responsibilities of their own,” said Dan Goldhaber, the director of the Center for Analysis of Longitudinal Data in Education Research at the American Institutes for Research and an expert in teacher certification, who wasn’t involved with the NCTQ study. Even so, he says, any time certification tests show disparate impact on different populations of teacher candidates, it raises concerns.

It’s up to professors of teacher education, and preservice programs more broadly, to make sure that what they’re teaching is aligned to what states expect candidates to know, said Travis J. Bristol, an assistant professor at the University of California, Berkeley’s

Graduate School of Education, who studies teachers’ workplace experiences.

“We’re placing an undue burden on candidates of color when the preparation programs aren’t giving students the necessary skills to pass this exam, and so these teacher candidates of color are now having to do extra work,” he said.

States should also be considering whether a paper and pencil test is the best way to determine how prepared preservice educators are, and whether a performance-based assessment might be a better demonstration of candidates’ skills, Bristol said. “There is evidence that people of color across all standardized ex-

ams do not pass them at the rate of their white peers,” he said. “I think what we have to ask ourselves is, is that the right way to determine proficiency?”

Teacher preparation programs could set a higher bar for early reading instruction, Goldhaber said, a change that would be “at least as important” as stricter testing requirements in supporting teacher knowledge and effective instruction.

“What programs do or don’t do to try to develop teacher candidates, and teach them how to teach, is really important,” he said. “And it’s that part of the system that I think we know very little about.” ■

Published on March 13, 2020

‘Decodable’ Books: Boring, Useful, or Both?

By Sarah Schwartz

To really learn a new skill, you need to practice. That theory drives much of Katie Farrell’s reading instruction.

In her 1st grade class at Bauer Elementary School in Hudsonville, Mich., Farrell teaches students phonics—how letters on the page represent the spoken sounds children hear.

But for some kids, the learning only really clicks once they practice these patterns in decodable books. These short texts are written with a high proportion of words that are phonetically regular—meaning they follow common sound-spelling rules—and mostly include words with phonics patterns that children have already learned.

“When you can make that match ... that’s where the power lies,” she said.

Research has long shown that teaching early elementary students phonics is the most reliable way to make sure that they learn how to read words. And much of the debate around reading instruction has focused on phonics teaching, as many schools don’t follow research-based best practice in this area.

But text plays a big role in the reading classroom, too. Decodable text, specifically, is a “crucial learning tool,” said Wiley Blevins, who has written several books on phonics and currently works as a consultant training teachers.

Even so, teachers are divided when it comes to decodable books.

In an Education Week’s national survey of



—CHUNW/Stock/Getty

early reading teachers, only 23 percent said that beginning readers should be using these texts most often. The majority, 61 percent, said that students should be reading books with high-frequency words, predictable sentence structures, and pictures that emphasize meaning. Often called leveled books, these texts are rated on a difficulty scale. Teachers aim to match students with books at their level.

There’s also a common criticism that decodable books, because of their inherent language constraints, are boring and stilted. Why subject students to these contrived stories, the argument goes, when they could be reading something more engaging?

But many experts agree that kids need that targeted practice. “When you are teaching phonics, the way to get that learning to stick is to apply it in connected text,” said Blevins.

“It builds the right strategies,” said Farrell. “They’re not reading books that they’re not ready for, and using the pictures to guess.”

Still, decodables aren’t the only books that young students should read. Most experts suggest a varied text diet. And, decodables are ultimately a stepping stone.

Eventually, Farrell says, “I want them in that authentic text using the strategies that they practiced when they’re using the decodable books.”

Building Strong Habits

Researchers agree that decodable text is meant to be used during a short window, when students are first learning to sound out words.

Studies have shown some benefits for early readers. When kids read decodable books, they’re more likely to try to decode—to sound out the words. Some studies have found that they’re also more likely to read words accurately.

But other research suggests that it may not matter what kind of text students read, as long as they’re getting strong phonics instruction. In one 2004 study, two groups of struggling readers in 1st grade received one-on-one phonics tutoring. One group read books that were mostly decodable; the other read books that were mostly not decodable.

There wasn’t any significant difference in the word reading or comprehension of the two groups at the end of the study.

Still, there's more research on decodable text than on other types of early reading materials, like leveled readers, said Heidi Anne E. Mesmer, a professor of reading at Virginia Tech.

She suggests that decodable books be used like “a set of training wheels on a bicycle.”

“If you think about the amount of time that children learning to ride a bike use training wheels, it's not long,” she wrote in an email to Education Week. “Also, not all children need training wheels.”

These “training wheels” help students practice their phonics skills in a controlled environment. But just as importantly, they teach students to try to sound out words, Blevins said.

He pointed to a 1985 study by researchers Connie Juel and Diane Roper-Schneider, which found that the texts students were exposed to early on could affect how they tackled words.

In the study, students who read decodable text tried to sound out words more often than students who read text that prompted students to use other cues.

When students are mainly reading leveled text with predictable sentence structures, “they're undervaluing and underusing their phonics skills,” Blevins said. “This creates a really bad habit. Every book they pick up, their first strategy is, try to look at patterns, look at pictures, memorize.” Decodable books encourage the right strategy of sounding out the words, he said.

‘Boring and Stupid’?

In Claudia Margaroli's 1st grade class, decodable books help remind students that they should be focused on sounding out the words.

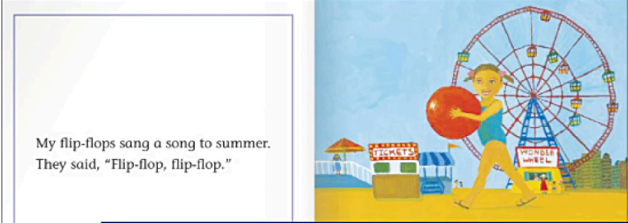
“This year, I've been trying to be more specific with teaching sounds in a sequential order,” said Margaroli, who teaches at Charlotte East Language Academy in Charlotte, N.C. She teaches sound-letter correspondences explicitly in her phonics lessons, and then students practice in decodable books.

“They know—and I make them say it and verbalize it—that these are sounds they've been working on, these are words they can read,” Margaroli said.

Decodable books should follow the progression of a phonics program, focusing on new sound-spelling patterns and “folding in review and repetition,” said Blevins.

But some teachers balk at the idea of using these books, even for practice of key skills, said Blevins, who does training with schools. Why? He remembers one group of teachers who were especially blunt about decodables: “They're boring and stupid,” they told him.

Decodable vs. Leveled Books: A Comparison



My flip-flops sang a song to summer.
They said, “Flip-flop, flip-flop.”

In **decodable text**, most of the words are made up of letter-sound correspondences that students have already learned. This book, *I Sang A Song To Spring* from Flyleaf Publishing, is designed to help students practice decoding multisyllabic words.



The little turtle
can see a duck.

Leveled readers are written with predictable sentence structures and include pictures that emphasize meaning. The words in the stories usually aren't constrained to specific letter-sound correspondences, and may or may not line up with the phonics patterns students have already learned. This leveled reader, *Snap!*, was published by Heinemann.

Margaroli says it's true that some decodable books “just don't have a storyline.” She looks for decodables “that you can actually use for comprehension,” she says, “rather than a weird story about a cat and a mat, where at the end nothing happens except that cat is on the same mat.”

How did we get “weird” stories about cats and mats, with thin plots and stilted language? Researchers trace the trend back to the late 1990s and early 2000s, when Texas and California both required decodable texts in their reading program adoptions. The states set decodability thresholds for texts: In Texas, 80 percent of the text had to be sound letter correspondences that students had already learned; in California, the number was 75 percent.

In response, publishers got competitive, each trying to make the book that was the highest percent decodable, Blevins said. Irregular words, like “the,” often disappeared, even though they're highly common in the English language.

But there isn't evidence to suggest that a 90 percent decodable book is more effective than one that's 75 percent decodable, or 60 percent, said Timothy Shanahan, professor emeritus at

“

If you think about the amount of time that children learning to ride a bike use training wheels, it's not long. Also, not all children need training wheels.”

HEIDI ANNE E. MESMER
PROFESSOR OF READING,
VIRGINIA TECH

“
Decoding the same word
several times helps kids
link the sound to the
spelling in their minds.”

ELFRIEDA H. HIEBERT

READING RESEARCHER AND
THE PRESIDENT AND CEO
OF TEXTPROJECT

the University of Illinois Chicago. There’s no “magic level,” he said.

In the rush to fill texts with only decodable words, the number of unique words per hundred in these books also increased during this time, said Elfrieda H. Hiebert, a reading researcher and the president and CEO of TextProject. So instead of seeing the same word multiple times throughout a story, students would see different words that all had the same spelling patterns.

To clear the high decodability bar, publishers started using sentences that English speakers wouldn’t say or write under normal circumstances, said Blevins—like, “Let Lin dab a lip.”

“The problem is, these stories made no sense,” he said. “These books aren’t Shakespeare, but they should be good stories that children enjoy reading.”

There’s also value in repeating some of the same words throughout the story, said Hiebert. Decoding the same word several times helps kids link the sound to the spelling in their minds, Hiebert said, and can lead to more fluent reading. “There has to be a really strong component of consistent data that kids are getting,” she said.

What Makes a Good Decodable?

Hiebert looks for a few criteria when she’s evaluating decodable books.

She wants to know if they’re exposing students to “highly consistent and prolific patterns” in the text, getting practice with letter-sound correspondences that they can apply to other texts.

She also wants to know if the texts make sense as stories, and are building student knowledge. What are they teaching students about the world? A lot of decodables still fall short in this category, she said.

But when a decodable book has a story, it doesn’t have to be relegated just to sounding out practice, disconnected from the rest of the lesson, said Blevins. He suggests that teachers have rich conversations about the stories with students, asking comprehension questions to demonstrate that reading is about meaning. Students can also write about the books.

In Margaroli’s class, students do just that, writing responses to questions about the text. Still, reading and writing about decodable text is only one part of Margaroli’s literacy block.

Her students also listen to read-alouds, have conversations, and read books from their class library.

There are no research-based rules on how much time beginning readers should spend with decodable text, said Shanahan. It would be “very reasonable,” though, to spend some portion of phonics instruction on practice, he said. This includes decoding individual words, spelling words, and reading decodable books.

Shanahan, Blevins, and Mesmer all said that decodable books aren’t the only kind of text that students should have access to in these early elementary years. And though Margaroli’s students practice in decodables, they have other time in the day to read books of their choice from the class library.

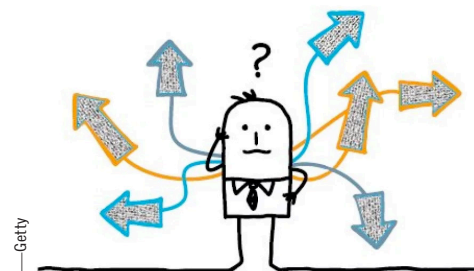
This kind of diverse reading diet is important for students because it exposes them to a broader representation of the English language, said Shanahan. Decodable books are usually constrained to phonetically regular words. Letting kids read books without those constraints can give students some experience encountering words that don’t follow normal patterns, and help them “figure out the statistical properties of the language,” he said.

How can teachers know when students are ready to take the training wheels off, and stop practicing on decodables altogether?

Farrell, the 1st grade teacher in Michigan, watches how students are segmenting and blending words as they read.

Once they can consistently apply the skills they’ve learned in their phonics lessons, “that’s my first clue that I think we’re ready to move on,” Farrell said. It shows her that, with her guidance, students could apply the same strategies when they read more authentic text, she said.

By the spring of 1st grade, “almost no one in the class is using decodable books,” said Farrell. “I love them, and then we get to a point where we just don’t need them anymore.” ■



Published on December 3, 2019

Improving Reading Isn’t Just A Teaching Shift. It’s a Culture Shift

Flawed methods are often passed on through mentors, popular programs, and professional groups

By Stephen Sawchuk

Already troubled by her 4th grade students’ low reading levels, San Antonio-area teacher Melody Fernandez entered “survival mode” when she was moved down to 1st grade—and discovered the full scope of what she and many of her elementary colleagues were not prepared to teach.

She had learned a lot in her preparation about reading theories, but no specific protocols for teaching the subject. So she did what many teachers new to a grade do. She used the methods more seasoned colleagues told her to use, and the curriculum on hand, which relied on leveled picture books with easily memorized, repetitive sentence structures.

“You would just do different strategies, different little activities to get this rote memorization of sight words,” she said. “I did everything I was supposed to do. Kids were supposed to need kinesthetic movement, and so we did ‘reach up high for the tall letters and hang down low for the low letters.’ We had our weekly spelling test and our sound of the week, and that was supposed to translate to reading,” she said.

In all that’s been written about early literacy, little attention has been given to the cultural factors that influence how such practices are

learned, reinforced, and transmitted. Yet sociology plays a major role in why they linger on in classrooms—despite evidence that they can hinder young readers’ ability to crack the code.

This is a story about how Fernandez realized there was a better way to teach early reading. It’s also a cautionary tale illuminating the cultural obstacles that hold back many of her K-2 reading peers, and the field at large, from similar shifts.

For one thing, new data from the Education Week Research Center, released as part of this special report, suggest that in the pursuit of “balanced literacy,” many teachers are blending multiple approaches in a way that can weaken instruction. What that means is that shifting early literacy practice on a large scale won’t happen merely by switching out a textbook or two. It will require helping teachers make a culture shift—without blaming or shaming them.

Teachers are using flawed reading practices not because they’re ignorant, ill-prepared, or incompetent. They are doing it because, like Melody Fernandez, they are being told to use them—usually by deeply trusted sources, like cherished mentors, colleagues, or the popular curriculum sitting in their classrooms.

Taking a Cue

The Education Week survey paints the first nationally representative picture of how K-2 teachers instruct students to decode, or identify new words on the page—a critical piece in the complex process of learning to read.

Balanced literacy is a term with a number of interpretations, but teachers appear to use a mix of techniques to put it into practice—some research-based and others not. Nearly 60 percent of teachers said that when students encountered a word they don’t know, they taught them to first “sound it out,” a core component of phonics, which helps students master how to decode and encode letter sounds. But that’s undercut by the more than half who said they agreed that students didn’t need a good grasp of phonics to read unfamiliar words. And 3 in 4 U.S. teachers said they taught students to use the “three-cueing system” when reading.

Cueing, sometimes called “MSV”—short-hand for meaning, syntactical, and visual—developed from whole language, an approach that prioritizes meaning over learning the alphabetic code. The basic idea is that students use cues like pictures, sentence structure, and sometimes letters to decipher a new word. Students are assigned books with predictable sentence structures that reinforce the use of the cues, and

What Teachers Mean When They Say 'Balanced Literacy'

Nearly 70 percent of K-2 and special education reading teachers in a nationally representative survey conducted by the Education Week Research Center said that they are using balanced literacy. But what did they mean by it? In responses, teachers outlined how they defined the term, with most falling into one of the following three categories.

A combination of phonics and whole language instruction

Balanced literacy is often defined as “taking the best parts” from these two approaches. Among the most common blended approaches is the notion of using “cueing systems” to solve unfamiliar words: Students are asked to use meaning cues like pictures and context, syntactic cues like sentence structure, and “grapho-phonetic” or visual cues like initial letter sounds to identify a new word. In practice, phonics is often subordinated to the other two cues.

Guided reading or leveled reading

These are most associated with two specific curriculum providers, both of them popular among educators. The Education Week survey found that 4 in 10 teachers use Fountas & Pinnell’s Leveled Literacy Intervention and 16 percent use Units of Study for Teaching Reading, developed by Teachers College Professor Lucy Calkins. In a guided reading program, students work with a teacher in groups separated by their reading level, usually determined via periodically administered “running records” looking at student reading errors based on cues. The students read and analyze texts at their instructional level, rather than books deemed too challenging or easy. Phonics skills are generally introduced within context.

A program that bases instruction on all five major components of literacy

The “big five” refer to the 2000 National Reading Panel report. The federally financed panel concluded from a review of empirical research that phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension were critical elements of early literacy teaching.

But the panel did not prescribe a particular way that these components should be put together in a curriculum.

they’re frequently put in teaching groups based on which cues they supposedly need help on.

Empirical research studies overwhelmingly support a systematic code-based approach over the meaning-first ones. But many teachers protest that the two should be complementary—what’s wrong with uniting them? It’s a common refrain among reading teachers, after all, that students can benefit from “all the tools in the toolbox.” Or, that students can use cueing systems to “cross check” whether they’ve successfully decoded a word.

In essence the problem is that phonics and cueing work at cross purposes to one another. As researchers like Marilyn Adams and Keith Stanovich have found, good readers attend to all the letters in words when they read, rather than predicting upcoming words from context. Cueing,

on the other hand, encourages students to take their attention off of printed text.

'I Felt Like a Failure'

Fernandez actually had heard about phonics, phonemes, and digraphs in her teacher preparation program. But she also was told about the reading wars, that a balanced approach was the best way to teach, and that students should spend a lot of time reading “authentic texts,” while learning their sounds separately. So alongside phonics, she learned about sight words and the principles of “guided reading.”

Once in the classroom, with no scope and sequence for teaching phonics, Fernandez prompted her students to use the cueing methods when they came across words they didn’t know. She had posters on the walls depicting

animals, each touting a different reading strategy: “Eagle Eye,” who encouraged students to look for pictures if they didn’t know a word, and “Skippy Frog,” who told them to “skip the tricky word” they didn’t know and come back to it later. She made popsicle-stick reminders that students could refer to when reading independently.

But she began noticing small things that didn’t add up. For one thing, students’ brains “seemed to turn off” in her small-group lessons. They weren’t paying attention to the printed words on the page; they were scanning the page looking for pictures and making guesses.

For another, they couldn’t recognize words out of context: “They would memorize a story in a book, but when they saw those same words in another book they wouldn’t be able to transfer their knowledge,” she said.

By the end of her second school year teaching 1st grade, Fernandez wasn’t satisfied with her students’ reading growth. “They’d improved, but the students with the lowest skills still had the lowest skills,” Fernandez recalled. “And that was a problem to me. I had won Teacher of the Year one year. And I felt like a failure.”

Sending Mixed Signals

This mix of techniques isn’t a bug in the system: It is often communicated to teachers as a best practice. When the cueing systems are taught in education courses next to phonics, the message that sends is that no one method is superior to another. Logically, teachers assume that it’s perfectly acceptable to pick and choose, or blend them together.

Teacher preparation is hardly the only transmitter of mixed signals. For years teacher

“We’re talking about things that are settled, versus things that aren’t settled or proven outside of anecdotal little stories.”

JARED MYRACLE

CHIEF ACADEMIC OFFICER FOR THE JACKSON-MADISON DISTRICT IN TENNESSEE

licensing exams have included questions related to cueing, often alongside important literacy topics like phonemes and morphemes. Though the Educational Testing Service has phased out most references to cueing in its tests, its reading-specialist exam, required in about 20 states, still includes the topic. (ETS officials said that test will be replaced in September 2020, and will no longer include cueing.)

A set of reading standards used by the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, which runs the prestigious national board-certification process, state that “accomplished teachers know that strategic readers use a variety of cueing systems, and they understand how to instruct students to use these systems flexibly.”

Both the ETS and NBPTS exams are taken by teachers of an array of grade levels, including those working with K-2 students, where cueing is likely to cause the most harm.

As explored elsewhere in this special report, some of the most popular early-reading curricula encourage teachers to use the cueing ideas with their students. Even in those that have recently rushed phonics supplements to market, an implicit message continues to tell teachers that phonics should be separated from the “real” work of reading.

Marketing materials for the Units of Phonics K-2 curriculum, written by Lucy Calkins and her colleagues at Teachers College, Columbia University, and published by Heinemann, say: “Lucy and her coauthors aim to protect time for authentic reading and writing, while also helping you teach a rigorous, research-based phonics curriculum.”

Professional associations also send a variety of mixed signals. Conferences hosted by the International Literacy Association and the National Council of Teachers of English continue to include sessions critical of code-based instruction. The American Association of School Administrators’ November 2019 issue contained an article written by Calkins on her balanced literacy curriculum, whose materials use some of the cueing prompts. It ran right next to an essay by another superintendent, who noted—correctly—that the curriculum’s approach lacks empirical research.

In light of that, it’s no wonder misunderstandings persist, some frustrated district officials said, in response to the odd juxtaposition.

“We’re talking about things that are settled, versus things that aren’t settled or proven outside of anecdotal little stories,” said Jared Myracle, the chief academic officer for the Jackson-Madison district in Tennessee, about the articles. “Most superintendents are not

“

You’re really not teaching it the best way. Letter names aren’t as important as teaching all the letter sounds.”

MELODY FERNANDEZ

SAN ANTONIO

experts in the science of reading. ... The next time the discussion comes up in the district and you’re making decisions about materials, you’ve opened a door for an unsupported theory to take over your district’s literacy initiative, even though I’m sure that wasn’t the intent.”

For Fernandez, things came to a head after one particularly brutal lesson. Students were working on the word family of the week, specializing in a particular vowel sound, like the long o. They were excited, peppering Fernandez with examples. But then she ran into a problem: Students were naming words with the correct phoneme but lots of different spellings. And Fernandez realized she couldn’t explain to them why the /o/ sound could also be spelled -oa or -ow or -oe.

“They came up with these great ideas, and it would absolutely be the right sound, but it wouldn’t fit into that word family. And I’d tell them that, and their faces would fall,” she said.

She commiserated with a colleague, newly arrived from a different district that had been using a systematic code-based approach, who ultimately told her: “You’re really not teaching it the best way. Letter names aren’t as important as teaching all the letter sounds,” Fernandez recalled.

She thought that was crazy at first, but she determined over the summer that she’d get to the bottom of matters before starting at a new school district. She Googled “teaching letter sounds.” She spent hours on blogs. She eventually came across articles on the science of reading, participated in webinars, even paid for some private training on phonemic manipulation and phonics out of her own pocket. And eventually, all the pieces clicked.

“I was just kind of shocked, I guess, like, ‘Huh! This is so weird. This makes sense to

me, and it makes sense to teach. Why isn't everyone doing it this way?" she said. "It's baffling to me, still."

Unmixing the Clay

It's not as baffling, though, when you consider just how complex foundational alphabetic skills are. The rules for phonics aren't simple or intuitive, and guiding students through 44 sound patterns is a lot more difficult than reading alongside a student and prompting him to use context to guess at new words.

Marnie Ginsberg, a former federally funded literacy researcher, is now a literacy consultant and one of the sources Fernandez credits with her breakthrough. She says the teachers she works with generally fall into several categories. Some have access to great phonics resources, but simply feel overwhelmed trying to put them into practice. Others, like Fernandez, don't arrive with a particularly strong philosophical bent: They're using weak materials and approaches because that's what they know.

More challenging, she says, are those teachers who have seen old-fashioned phonics worksheets and thus have the idea of phonics as "drill and kill" teaching. But the hardest of all is working with teachers who have been trained in specific balanced literacy curricula.

Indeed, many teachers are deeply skeptical of recent reporting, including Education Week's, that questions staples of the balanced literacy classroom. And it's no wonder: Whole teaching careers, not to mention professional reputations, have been built on these methods. Ideas like cueing are so ingrained that many teachers don't even realize their origins; they may only know them as the "animal strategies."

In those cases, working with teachers is a little bit like trying to separate two colors of clay that have been kneaded together: getting rid of practices like cueing while keeping the commendable focus on reading and writing.

That usually means showing how teachers can start to shift in small, digestible ways. For example, Wiley Blevins, who trains teachers nationwide, helps teachers who lack "decodable" or controlled texts that help students practice newly learned phonics skills create some of their own, and he insists that teachers spend at least half of their lessons having students apply phonics knowledge to actual reading and writing to dispel the idea that building background knowledge isn't compatible with foundational skills.

"We work on how teachers can write [decodable] text sentences—like maybe five sentences, with one new word introducing a new

61% of teachers use leveled texts with predictable sentences and pictures during small-group instruction.

23% use decodable texts.

SOURCE: Education Week Research Center

EdWeek
Research Center

phonics skill. You can write sentences on the topics you're talking about so you're reinforcing it in a phonics way," he said. "I don't make them write stories—that's too hard. But five sentences and one new word? That they can do."

As teachers gradually learn effective decoding practices, they also start to realize that they've become experts in early literacy research, he said.

The challenge facing the nation now is how to do that work at scale. And surprisingly, much of the recent interest in early literacy has been driven by grassroots parent groups, rather than by district brass.

Increasingly, it's also being led by practicing classroom teachers, who are organizing themselves into networks to spread research-based approaches to early literacy and other subjects. ResearchED, a teacher-led network inspired by a similar effort in the United Kingdom, has been leading conferences and trainings, as has The Reading League, which began in 2015 as a dedicated group of teachers and administrators in Syracuse, N.Y.

"We don't push strategies, activities, or programs—we push knowledge," said Maria Murray, the CEO and president of The Reading League. She's heartened to see the rise of like-minded groups and senses that a sea change is coming even if it's early days yet.

"I think because it takes a while for phrases and realities to make their way into schools. Twenty years ago you didn't dare do PD and say 'science of reading,' but now it's been around so long that there's more than one person in a school who knows what it is," she said.

Bottom Up or Top Down?

There are some emerging signs that states are pressing for more systemic changes, too. Mississippi has invested significantly in teacher preparation, while in an aggressive recent move,

Arkansas declared that it won't give any early literacy curriculum program whose theoretical base includes cueing a state stamp of approval.

Still, major knowledge gaps remain. And even those teachers who have successfully shifted their own practices often feel that they're swimming upstream against the cultural tides.

Fernandez's current district selected a new curriculum with a lot of word memorization, and it came with fewer decodable books, she said. There's a separate phonics program that doesn't appear to be well integrated with the core curriculum. She must still administer periodic "running records" based on the cueing philosophy, because the district uses them to track progress in all its elementary schools.

And fear of falling afoul of administrators remains a powerful deterrent. Education Week spoke with at least two teachers in other districts who shared remarkably similar experiences to Fernandez's, but declined to share them on the record, citing concerns about professional repercussions.

Fernandez understands. She worries that someday, she'll be asked to tell students to take the new, not-great curricula out of their desks and to use them.

"I've had to find all these reading materials myself, and learn the research by myself without getting caught," she said. "There is always that fear that the other shoe's going to drop, and I'm going to get my hand slapped for not doing what the district has said is the way to teach reading." ■

Video Resource

The debate on how to teach early reading has raged for a century. In [this video](#), reporter [Sarah Schwartz](#) offers an overview of the important research findings on early reading. [Take Me to Video](#)



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Published on December 15, 2020

Students' Reading Losses Could Strain Schools' Capacity to Help Them Catch Up

By Sarah D. Sparks

Children beginning their school careers during the pandemic are likely to need a lot more support than usual to build their foundational skills for reading.

The most comprehensive study to date of pandemic-related learning loss in the earliest grades finds that some 40 percent of 1st graders have come to school significantly behind in early literacy skills—particularly around phonics—and they will need intensive interventions to prevent them from ending the year reading below grade level. The study confirms that even the youngest students are experiencing the so-called “COVID slide,” and counters some studies that suggested there have been minimal losses in reading.

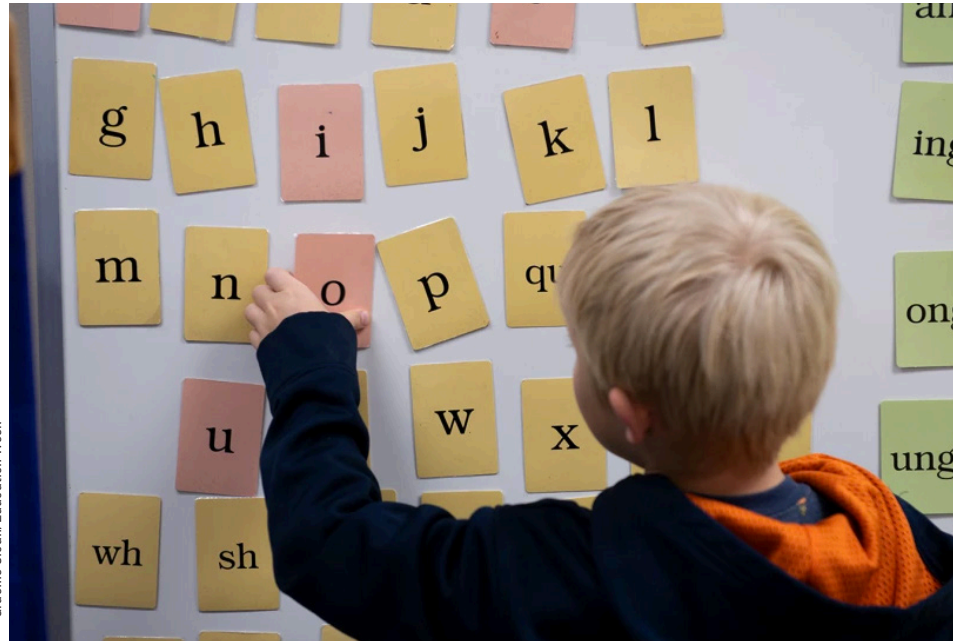
Researchers from Amplify, a digital learning company, analyzed data from 400,000 students from more than 1,400 schools in 41 states who participated in DIBELS, a commonly used early literacy test. Unlike the computer-administered Growth-MAP and iReady assessments used in other recent analyses of learning loss, the DIBELS is given by teachers one-on-one with students, either in person or over video conference. Direct teacher observation helps control for potential parent influence or child technology difficulties during the test.

Researchers tracked both the percentage of students scoring on grade level in various early literacy skills and the percentage who are considered in need of intensive intervention. Fewer than 20 percent of students who score at that level typically read on grade level by the end of the year.

Students from grades K-5 all saw fewer students scoring at grade level and more students scoring significantly below grade level in fall 2020 compared to fall 2019, but Black and Hispanic students were particularly in need of support.

Among students of different racial groups,

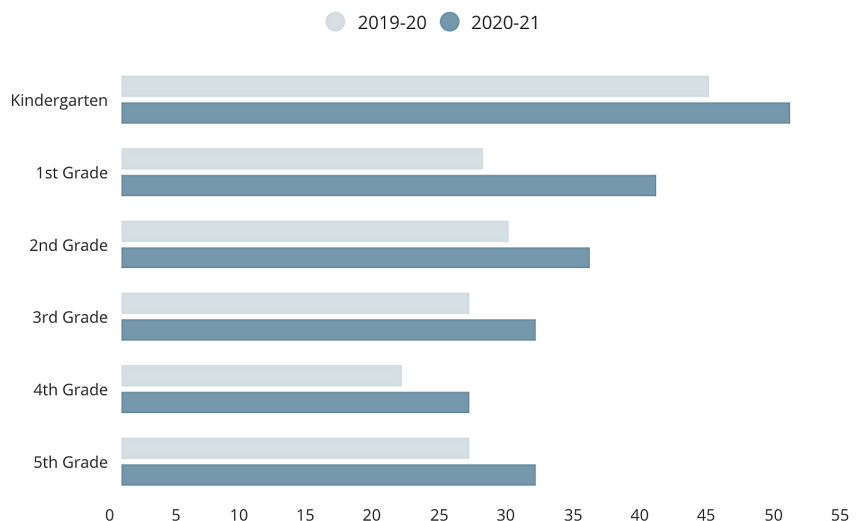
Second grader Braydan Finnerty, chooses letter magnets while doing a spelling exercise in front of his class at Beverly Gardens Elementary in Dayton, Ohio.



Graeme Sloan/Education Week

Children in Early Grades at Risk From Pandemic Learning Loss

A new study of early literacy skills by the testing research group Amplify, Inc. finds the pandemic dramatically increased the percentage of students in fall 2020 considered in need of significant intervention to read on grade level, compared to fall 2019.



SOURCE: Amplify: "mCLASS: Instructional Loss Due to COVID-19 Disruptions"

Black students had the most need for intensive reading interventions. Eleven percent more Black students in grades 4 and 5 needed intensive support this fall than last—twice as great a jump as for white and Hispanic students. In 1st grade, 17 percent more Black students, 13 percent more Hispanic students, and 9 percent more white students were significantly below grade level this fall.

The Amplify study comes on the heels of a flurry of new research clarifying the magnitude of the learning loss students are experiencing from the combination of sudden school closures last spring and shifting hybrid, in-person, and remote instructional formats this spring.

Those studies have laid out a picture of widening disparities between students in wealthy homes and those from low-income families, as well as greater academic losses for Black and Hispanic students whose communities have been disproportionately hit by the coronavirus itself.

One study of the Curriculum Associates iReady Platform, a computer-administered adaptive test, found this fall that the K-5 students in their sample learned only 67 percent of the math and 87 percent of reading that grade-level peers would have learned the previous fall. But in schools with a majority of students of color, the learning loss was even greater—students learned only 59 percent of a typical year in math and 77 percent of a typical year in reading.

Costs of Remediation

The disruptions related to the pandemic hurt students’ foundational reading skills.

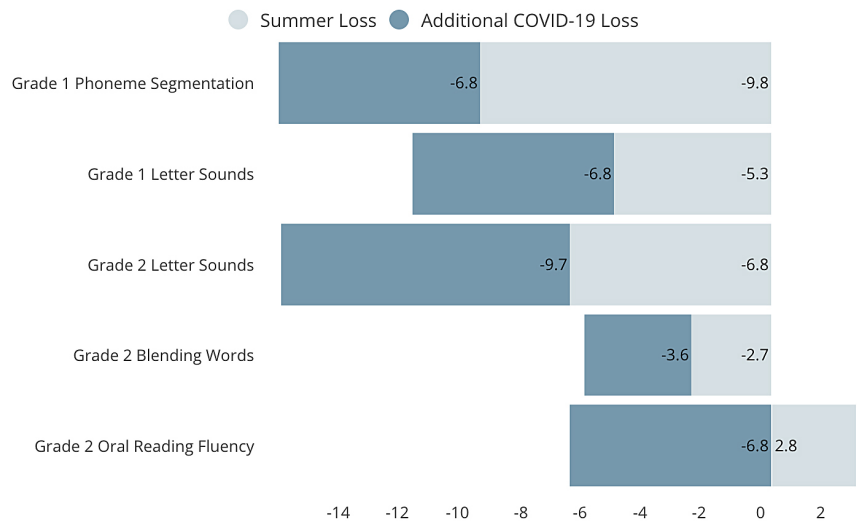
In particular, researchers found 1st grade students struggled more with phoneme segmentation and letter sounds, and 2nd graders showed significantly less progress in letter sounds, blending words, and fluency when reading aloud.

“One of the most expensive problems you can create is a kid who does not master phonemic awareness by the end of 1st grade,” said Larry Berger, chief executive officer of Amplify, which in addition to its assessments provides consulting to districts on using student data. “So even if you have limited money, you might want to move it toward that problem, because that failure to learn to read has cascading downstream effects that are well known. I think districts that are taking this seriously are saying OK, I have limited resources but this is a triage situation.”

That means school leaders may face ma-

Early Literacy Skills Hindered by Pandemic Learning Loss

The Amplify study finds phonics skills particularly hurt during the school shutdowns and move to remote learning since last spring. The chart below compares the average typical summer learning loss in specific early reading skills on the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills, or DIBELS, and the average additional learning loss seen in fall 2020. Individual skill scores are used to calculate a student’s composite score.



NOTE: Individual raw skill measures on DIBELS follow different scales, and data should be compared within a skill, not among skills. The points in the chart above are based on the average score of students taking the test, out of a total 116 possible points in Grade 1 phonemes segmented correctly, 230 possible in Grade 1 correct letter sounds, 355 possible in Grade 2 correct letter sounds, 100 possible in Grade 2 words blended, and 225 possible in Grade 2 oral reading fluency/words read correctly. For context, a student who is considered on track at beginning of year can, within one minute: segment 31 phonemes and correctly sound out 30 letter sounds in Grade 1; and correctly sound out 50 letter sounds, blend 15 words, and read 49 words correctly within a reading passage in Grade 2.

SOURCE: Amplify: "mCLASS: Instructional Loss Due to COVID-19 Disruptions"

For budget costs to catch up students who have missed out on basic skills. Amplify’s analysts estimated even a 5 percent increase in the number of students who need intensive interventions could stress schools’ budgets this year.

“When schools change from 27 percent to 40 percent of students [scoring significantly below grade level], that requires a massive capacity for reading interventions that they don’t have,” Berger said “This is a sign that some of the plans that have worked in the past for making sure you have enough capacity to do intervention are going to be insufficient to the magnitude of the slide we are seeing in early grades.”

Likewise, the iReady study estimated it could cost \$42 billion to provide two-week intensive reading academies to catch up six months of instruction for half of the U.S. public schoolchildren who need it, and \$66 billion

“One of the most expensive problems you can create is a kid who does not master phonemic awareness by the end of 1st grade.”

LARRY BERGER
CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER,
AMPLIFY

to catch those students up on one to two years' worth of lost instruction using daily tutoring over the course of a year.

In the District of Columbia public schools, which participated in the DIBELS study, Emily Hammett, the director of English/language arts instruction, said her teachers have seen more “unfinished learning” among students

of color, English-language learners, and special education students, both in the DIBELS data and their own district tests. They are planning for the need for long-term academic supports to help students recover from the instruction they've missed as well as broader disruption in the community.

“For this entire school year, we've planned

out what that unfinished learning was for each student,” she said. “We're doing a lot of [professional development] with instructional coaches on learning variability and perception of disability and basically making sure that students furthest from opportunity have teachers who are knowledgeable about differentiation.” ■



—Tetiana5/Stock/Getty Images Plus

OPINION

Published on May 3, 2021

Science of Reading Advocates Have a Messaging Problem

The reading wars are back. Opaque language isn't helping

By Claude Goldenberg

In case you haven't noticed—and given a pandemic, political mayhem, and general weariness, you would be forgiven if you haven't—a new front in the decadeslong reading wars has opened up called “the science of reading.”

To many, the lines of demarcation separating the sides are ambiguous, even puzzling. Herein lies a problem for those wanting to put reading pedagogy on a more secure—or “scientific”—footing. As so often happens, the term has taken on a life of its own, signaling different things to different people.

There are substantive issues at stake in the debate over reading, but we are hampered by how we talk about, or more precisely, how we don't talk about, the issues.

Certain education terms become lightning rods for controversy, usually to no good purpose. Think of “progressive education” or “back to basics” or “choice” or ... shudder ... “No Child Left Behind.” Simply stating them evokes a visceral reaction, pro or con. The “science of reading” is in danger of falling into this category, if it hasn't already.

To some, the science of reading means findings based on principles of scientific research. To others, the term invokes a narrow and reductionist view of the world or at least the world of reading.

There is large effort currently underway by those championing the science of reading to have it become the principal catchword in local,

state, and even national reading policies. For example, in the “Excellent Public Schools Act of 2021,” the North Carolina General Assembly declared that the Department of Public Instruction “shall use the Early Literacy Program to build strong foundational early literacy skills utilizing the Science of Reading.” As its definition of “science of reading,” the act says this:

“Science of Reading” means evidence-based reading instruction practices that address the acquisition of language, phonological and phonemic awareness, phonics and spelling, fluency, vocabulary, oral language, and comprehension that can be differentiated to meet the needs of individual students.

This definition is nearly useless. For starters, what constitutes evidence? For years, we've tried using “evidenced-based” as a way to get reliable and valid research into the hands, hearts, and heads of teachers and teacher educators. It hasn't worked very well. Perhaps even more important, what does “address” mean? Talk about? Teach occasionally? Teach mixed in with other things as the spirit moves the teacher or the students? And so on.

If state legislatures are to put “the science of reading” into legislation, the definitions should at the very least be clear, meaningful, and useful.

What is happening in this new stage of the reading wars is there for all to see in North Carolina's and others' use of the phrase. Instead of spelling out what they mean, “science of reading” advocates wrap themselves in the protective mantle of science, as if invoking science is all that anyone needs to be credible and persuade others to join them. Anyone disagreeing is anti-science, i.e., ignorant.

This is not a great persuasion strategy. Not surprisingly, those from a different vantage point argue that no one has a right to define science in a way that conveniently fits their perspective.

Since the fog of war engulfs this conflict, I would like to offer my understanding of what the science of reading has actually found. These findings should be uncontroversial, but I admit that hope may prove naïve.

First, unlike learning to speak and understand spoken language, learning to read (and write) is not a naturally acquired skill or set of skills. But it is entirely possible for the vast majority of individuals to learn to read. However, much depends on what we actually mean by “reading.” If we mean being able to read—decode or recognize—words and text on the page or screen, well over 90 percent of students can learn to read at an early-elementary level, provided they receive the right kind of instruction. The primary limitation on continued progress is language proficiency, including vocabulary.

We don’t have comparable estimates for English learners, but with the right instruction, they could also attain much higher levels of reading proficiency than they currently do.

The right kind of instruction, for both speakers of English and English-language learners, includes explicitly and systematically teaching students (or anyone learning to read) the letters that represent sounds, how letters are used to sound out words, and how to fluently read words, sentences, and

paragraphs so that reading development can proceed. These so-called foundational skills, often grouped together under the not entirely precise label “phonics,” constitute what most people would consider common sense. Here, I am happy to report, common sense and educational research converge.

Moving past reading words on the page or screen to being able to comprehend at appropriate levels of sophistication—the whole point of reading—requires the foundational skills and much more. Successful reading programs must also include language development (vocabulary, syntax, discourse), strategies that help students comprehend what they read, making sure students acquire specific and general knowledge, and providing students with motivating reading material and instruction that is engaging, organized, purposeful, and effective.

There are two final points the science of reading supports:

- As is true of all complex human behaviors, some students will require a great deal

of foundational skills, i.e., “phonics,” instruction; others will require much less; almost all will require some.

- We don’t know all there is to know about promoting optimal reading development for every learner. There is more to learn and there will probably always be more to learn.

Personally, I don’t see how anyone could object to these findings. The supporting data are compelling and should help determine what programs of instruction to use. But first, we must fix the messaging problem.

Once we get past the logjams, wars, ad hoc recriminations, and so forth, we can make sure anyone teaching our kids to read has, understands, and can use the best knowledge and tools available. For that to happen, we must stop getting distracted and mystifying others with opaque language. It’s just not helpful. ■

Claude Goldenberg is the Nomellini & Olivier Professor of Education, emeritus, at Stanford University and a former elementary and middle school teacher.

OPINION

Published on October 26, 2018

Why Doesn’t Every Teacher Know the Research On Reading Instruction?

Three recommendations for greater reading proficiency

By Susan Pimentel

Almost two decades ago, the National Reading Panel reviewed more than 100,000 studies and arrived at recommendations for how students should receive daily, explicit, systematic phonics instruction in the early grades. Why is this literacy research not more widely known? Why is the fact that reading skills need to be taught, and that there is a well-documented way to do it, not something highlighted in many teacher-preparation programs (or parenting books, for that matter)?

Recently, a remarkable audio-documentary by Emily Hanford went viral, shining a spotlight on such crucial literacy research—none of which is new, but much of which is



—Getty

unknown to today’s teachers. Like many in the literacy community, I worry about our failure to bring research into classroom practice. My concern is greatest for teachers who are being sent into classrooms without the tools they need to succeed. I’m hopeful this renewed interest will serve as a catalyst for overhauling reading instruction in our teacher-preparation programs. However, relying solely on better preparation for the next generation of teachers is a slow delivery system to children. The stakes are too high. We need more immediate solutions.

Only roughly one-third of our nation’s 4th and 8th graders can demonstrate proficiency on national tests, with students from low-income families and students of color faring the worst. When students can’t read, they have trouble learning; the great majority of students who fail to master reading by 3rd grade either drop out or finish high school with dismal lifetime earning potentials.

I’d like to build on the momentum Hanford’s piece has sparked to call attention to additional research-based practices that go hand-in-hand with the importance of phonics. As educators experience ‘aha’ moments about the need for stronger phonics instruction, let’s talk about some other literacy practices that need fixing in elementary classrooms. Here’s

my short list of practices and resources to add to the conversation:

1. Let all kids read the good stuff. The pervasive practice of putting kids into reading groups according to their “just right” reading level has meant that large numbers of students receive a steady diet of below-grade-level instruction. The texts they’re reading don’t require them to decipher unfamiliar vocabulary, confront challenging concepts, or parse new and complicated language. Noted literacy researcher Timothy Shanahan has written extensively about why this is the wrong approach, documenting that “after 70 years there still isn’t any research supporting the idea of matching kids to just-right texts” after 1st grade—yet still the practice persists. This, despite research showing that the ability to handle complex text is the distinguishing characteristic between students who go on to do well in college and work and those who don’t.

Why would we deprive our youngsters of the opportunity to build this muscle in elementary school, when all that’s standing in the way of their doing so is the opportunity and the support that close reading can provide?

The Council of Chief State School Officers offers a host of resources to help teachers guide students with complex texts.

2. Build students’ general content knowledge. Some of the most profoundly important, yet under-recognized, reading research shows that students’ reading comprehension depends heavily on their background knowledge about the world—knowledge that comes largely from learning about science and social studies topics. When students know something about a topic, they are better able to read a text in which that topic is discussed, even when the sentence structure is complex or the words are unfamiliar. Cognitive science expert Daniel Willingham explains this principle clearly, and the Knowledge Matters Campaign expands on it further.

The implications for literacy instruction are enormous because young children are receiving less time with science and social studies content in their school day. According to a 2007 study, instructional time spent on these subjects dropped by an hour and a half per week since the 1990s. The diminished attention to these knowledge-building topics creates less fertile ground for reading comprehension to flourish and is a significant culprit in our stagnant national reading outcomes. Given that time is a scarce commodity in most schools, the takeaway for school leaders is to

incorporate rich content, organized around conceptually-related topics, into the reading curriculum so that students learn new information about the world while they develop as readers. Student Achievement Partners has ready-made resources that teachers can pull into their classrooms.

3. Let quality English/language arts curriculum do some of the heavy-lifting. Poor-quality curriculum is at the root of reading problems in many schools. It is not an overstatement to say that a school that doesn’t have a phonics program is doing its students a huge disservice. Increasingly, the same can be said about the lack of intentionality for building students’ knowledge of the world and access to complex text. The current lack of educator know-how can be remedied by curriculum that points the way.

Fortunately, bolstered by emerging research about the “curriculum effect,” we’re in the midst of a curriculum renaissance. In recent years, a number of respected organizations have developed curricula that are tailor-built to both state standards and the latest research. Educator reviews conducted by organizations such as the nonprofit EdReports or Louisiana Believes can help schools easily identify the best curriculum for their context. No longer should classroom teachers need to scour the internet for materials. Instead, educators can spend their time focusing on how to become the best possible deliverers of thoughtfully arranged, comprehensive, sequential curriculum that embeds standards, the science of reading, and the instructional shifts described above.

I have great empathy for teachers who have labored under the weight of misdirected teacher preparation, insufficient curriculum, ever-shifting educational fads, and ever-increasing professional demands—and welcome the attention of journalists who are shining a light on the opportunity represented by the convergence of science and a new class of high-quality curriculum materials. Based on my own experiences with educators taking this improvement journey, significant reading gains are possible with the right support. Our students’ reading future can be bright—if we seize the moment. ■

Susan Pimentel is a co-founder of StandardsWork and a founding partner of Student Achievement Partners, both nonprofits dedicated to improving K-12 student achievement through evidence-based action. She was the lead author of the Common Core State Standards for English/language arts literacy.

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