EDITOR’S NOTE
Learning to read and write is vital. This Spotlight will help you evaluate the possible gaps your current curriculum may have; you’ll gain insights directly from teachers on the frontlines; discover what research says about specific teaching approaches; get strategies for encouraging writing; and begin looking for new ways forward because there’s no going back.

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Popular ‘Wonders’ Curriculum Shows Gaps in Alignment to Reading Research

By Sarah Schwartz

A review of one of the top 10 most popular reading programs claims that the curriculum has gaps in its alignment to reading research, and doesn’t offer enough supports for teachers.

The analysis comes from Student Achievement Partners, a nonprofit educational consulting group that started tapping teams of researchers to evaluate popular reading programs last year.

The organization made waves with its first review, published in January 2020, of the Units of Study for Teaching Reading in grades K-5—perhaps the most well-known workshop-style reading program. The researchers said it was “unlikely to lead to literacy success for all of America’s public schoolchildren.”

This latest review is more mixed. The curriculum in question is Wonders, a basal reading program published by McGraw Hill. It’s one of the top 10 most popular reading programs, according to a Education Week Research Center survey: 15 percent of early reading teachers surveyed used Wonders in their classrooms.

Because Student Achievement Partners conducted its review before they could access the 2020 version of Wonders, the group evaluated the 2017 California edition. Reviewers found many positives: foundational skills components, lots of English-language learner support, complex texts, and some evidence of knowledge building.

But the reviewers also said the program was “overwhelming” and bulky, “a significant issue that dilutes its many strengths.” There’s more content than teachers could reasonably get through, they wrote, allowing for teacher choice in designing units—but the reviewers cautioned that this design puts a lot of onus on teachers.

“Teachers could easily shortchange research-based elements,” the report reads. “The ‘make-your-own-adventure-because-one-cannot-possibly-teach-all-that-is-offered’ design of Wonders left reviewers skeptical that crucial aspects of reading acquisition would get the time and attention required to enable all students to become secure in their reading ability.”

In an email, Tyler Reed, the senior director of communications for McGraw Hill, wrote that Wonders—and other basals—“include many resources by design.” The programs are meant to be comprehensive and address all state standards.

“While we recognize the SAP concerns over the amount of material in California Wonders ©2017, it is also true that the wealth of additional activities, texts, and choices provide an effective way to meet a wider range of students’ instructional needs,” Reed wrote. He also noted that the company works with district leaders on implementation and training plans.

Review seeks to evaluate alignment to research

These findings don’t entirely line up with the Wonders evaluation from the well-known curriculum reviewer EdReports, a nonprofit that enlists teams of teacher reviewers to examine math, English/language arts, and science materials for alignment to the Common Core State Standards. (Most states still use these standards, or similar state variations.)

According to EdReports, the Wonders 2020 edition meets expectations across all domains—the highest rating that the organization gives. The 2017 edition met expectations for text quality, but only partially met expectations for building knowledge.

But the authors of the Student Achievement Partners report claim that their review and EdReports’ review don’t necessarily contradict each other—they’re just measuring different things.

EdReports measures alignment to standards—what the SAP review calls the “what” of curriculum. But SAP says it’s evaluating the “how” of curriculum: whether the methods outlined in these materials are evidence-based.

“Standards are an outcome. They’re not what you do to hit the target,” said SAP reviewer David Paige, a professor of literacy and the director of the Jerry L. Johns Literacy Clinic at Northern Illinois University-DeKalb.

Student Achievement Partners’ review looked at Wonders in five areas, each evaluated by a different reading researcher:

1. Foundational reading skills
2. Text complexity
3. Knowledge building
4. Support for English-language learners
5. Historically and culturally responsive instruction and representation
In 2019, the Nation’s Report Card found that two-thirds of U.S. students could not read proficiently. Then the pandemic happened. This has led to learning interruptions and literacy learning gaps, further impacting fluency among second- and third-grade students. What can be done to accelerate progress as these challenges continue?

The science of reading is based on decades of gold-standard research. It provides clear evidence on reading acquisition and instruction. As educators prepare for the 2021–22 academic year and formulate plans to address interrupted learning and recovery efforts to get students on grade level, the proven efficacy of the science of reading offers a way forward.
A pandemic-proof approach

During the pandemic, curriculum developers at San Antonio ISD created a year’s worth of carefully paced material in English and Spanish based on the science of reading. The result? At a time when San Antonio ISD students could not learn to read in a classroom environment, the science of reading still worked.

The science of reading has shown that learning to read and write requires explicit, systematic, and cumulative instruction. Structured Literacy is the application of the science of reading into reading instruction. Through this approach, San Antonio ISD teachers holding class remotely were able to “give kindergartners, first-, and second-graders bite-sized pieces of reading they could use in the world around them.”
Time is of the essence

Educators cannot afford to experiment with strategies that are not proven effective. When evaluating instruction to help students catch up, educators should keep a few questions in mind:

• Does it include assessments that can lead educators to the most targeted and time-efficient pathways to close the literacy gaps for students?

• Is the instructional content based on data from gold-standard research?

• Does the content include components most predictive of reading success, such as phonology, orthography, and morphology?

During this time of challenge, how can Structured Literacy instruction informed by the science of reading help teachers accelerate progress? Read this blog from Lexia: Trust the Science of Reading to Inform Pandemic Recovery. As the pandemic continues, educators need evidence-based Structured Literacy instruction more than ever. Learn how Lexia’s singular focus on literacy and proven solutions can accelerate learning growth during the pandemic.

Read our blog
The group also consulted five educators who had worked with the curriculum in the Long Beach Unified school district for their opinion on ease of use and reflections on the five above categories.

The program’s positives, according to SAP: It has a coherent scope and sequence for letter-feature instruction, includes direct and explicit instruction, and focuses on reading prosody—reading out loud with appropriate expression. Text selections are varied and complex, and there is a full range of English-learner supports throughout the program. There’s also racial and ethnic diversity among the characters in the passages that children read.

Still, the reviewers identified what they felt were shortcomings, including pacing that was too slow or too fast in some foundational skills instruction, not enough time spent on each text, and little guidance on which ELL supports and supplements to use in different situations.

The section on equity and cultural responsiveness found that representations of characters of color were “often myopic, shallow, and stereotypical,” and that the program included few selections from authors of color.

In his email to Education Week, Reed of McGraw Hill said that changes have been made in some of these areas in the 2020 edition of Wonders, giving students in grades 2-5 more time with individual text sets, increasing some practice opportunities for foundational skills, updating ELL supports, and developing supplemental culturally responsive lessons.

The review also looked at how well the curriculum built student knowledge about social studies and science topics through literacy lessons. It does partially, said Sonia Cabell, an assistant professor of reading education at Florida State University, who reviewed knowledge building for the SAP report. Social studies and science content is covered every week, but the curriculum itself is not organized around these topics, nor designed to systematically build students’ knowledge—rather, the curriculum is organized around themes.

What should teachers and schools take away from this analysis?

It’s not as simple as a recommendation for—or a warning against—using Wonders, the researchers said.

Schools need to decide what they want their ELA program to do, Cabell said. Wonders may not systematically build knowledge in social studies and science. But, she said, “I think that is a judgment call on whether you want a curriculum that does that.”

If a school has strong elementary social studies and science programs, teachers and instructional leaders could look at Wonders, figure out where lessons could reinforce these programs, and then think about where they might want to bring in supplemental resources. But if a content-rich ELA curriculum is a priority, then maybe a school might want to compare Wonders against some of the programs that are specifically designed to meet this goal.

“I don’t think any one English/language arts curriculum is the key to building knowledge,” Cabell said.

When it comes to teacher support, the review argues that Wonders doesn’t provide enough direction. On the one hand, “I’m not sure if it’s fair to expect any reading program to be able to do all that,” said Paige. A curriculum is “kind of like a set of tools in the hands of a carpenter,” and relies on teacher knowledge, too.

On the other hand, Paige said, it can take a lot of time and effort to figure out how to use those tools effectively.

One of the teachers interviewed for the review said that it took her two years to become comfortable with the program.

And survey results from the Education Week Research Center have found that, in general, only about 1 in 10 teachers feel that their preservice training “completely prepared” them to teach reading.

A school or district using Wonders should be providing a lot of support, especially around pacing, Paige said.
Then there’s this:

A number of participants in the conversation said they wished their administrators recognized the value of cross-disciplinary literacy. One teacher, responding to @Mr_ARobertson, tweeted that the No Child Left Behind Act, which focused schools heavily on math and English/language arts, didn’t help the cause of strengthening students’ knowledge in other key subjects.

Clusters of tweets argued in favor of sustained silent reading, a practice that many teachers love. (Research on this practice can be a little confusing. Studies show a correlation between reading more and being a better reader. But there isn’t a big research base that shows that independent reading actually causes students to become better readers.)

Another popular theme was how building subject-specific literacy skills should go hand-in-hand with building students’ content knowledge, something that’s widely recognized as an important key to students’ reading skills.

This tweet is from a reading professor.

In the swirl of conversation about sustained silent reading, one administrator stepped in with this:

A few people pointed to the school library and media specialists as an important and overlooked resource.

A number of participants in the conversation said they wished their administrators recognized the value of cross-disciplinary literacy.

This tweet is from a reading professor.
Reading Workshop ‘Unlikely to Lead to Literacy Success,’ Researchers Say

By Sarah Schwartz

The players have changed in the curriculum review market: Nonprofit consulting group Student Achievement Partners announced this week that it is going to start evaluating literacy curricula against reading research.

The group released its first report: an evaluation of the Units of Study for Teaching Reading in grades K-5, a workshop style program designed by Lucy Calkins and published through the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project.

The seven literacy researchers who reviewed the program gave it a negative evaluation, writing that it was “unlikely to lead to literacy success for all of America’s public schoolchildren.”

Children who come to school “already reading or primed to read” could likely stay on track with the program, the researchers write. “However, children who need additional practice opportunities in a specific area of reading or language development likely would not.”

They found that Units of Study doesn’t provide enough systematic, explicit instruction in foundational reading skills, and that there weren’t consistent opportunities for students to experience complex text and build background knowledge. “The ‘make your own adventure’ design left reviewers skeptical that crucial aspects of reading acquisition would get the time and attention required to enable all students to become secure in their reading ability,” the researchers write.

In an emailed statement to Education Week, Calkins responded to the critiques in the report. “The Teachers College Reading and Writing Project has always been a learning community. We’ll learn from this review as we have learned from everything else,” she wrote.

Calkins also said that the program develops other skills that the review didn’t evaluate. “Teachers in our schools work to help students become passionate, critical, life-long readers, and writers who develop confident voices,” she wrote. “We applaud our schools for creating communities that increase equity as well as achievement.”

Student Achievement Partners’ project comes amid a push for evidence-based early reading instruction. Reporting, including from Education Week, has identified the ways in which some popular instructional practices and early literacy curricula don’t align with the science around best practices. Still, it can be difficult for schools and districts to evaluate whether materials are supported by validated research.

There are organizations that independent-rate curricula. The most-well known of these is EdReports, a nonprofit that enlists teams of teacher reviewers to examine math, English/language arts, and science materials. The group also recently took on foundational skills programs, which cover the basics of early reading and writing.

But EdReports evaluates how well materials meet the Common Core State Standards. Looking at alignment to the research base is a “different lens,” said Meredith Liben, the senior fellow for strategic initiatives at Student Achievement Partners.

It’s significant that the organization has determined a need for reviews that look beyond the common core. Student Achievement Partners’ founders were lead writers of the standards. But there are factors that the standards alone can’t capture, said David Liben, an adviser to the group.

For example, he said, the common core says that programs need to teach vocabulary. But there are lots of different ways to go about doing that in a classroom, and not all of those practices are research-based. That’s the kind of information Student Achievement Partners is seeking to clarify with its reviews.

Units of Study is one of the most popular early reading programs in the country. According to an Education Week Research Center survey, 16 percent of teachers have used the materials in their classrooms. The report notes some of the features that have made the curriculum popular with teachers, including the value it places on learning to love reading as a lifelong habit, and the respect for teachers conveyed in the lessons.

Its popularity is one of the reasons Student Achievement Partners chose to review Units of Study, according to Meredith Liben. Calkins’ approach is the “balanced literacy prototype,” she said.

Eventually, Student Achievement Partners plans to review examples of several different types of reading programs: a basal reader, a knowledge-building curriculum, and a hybrid, “innovative” model. The goal is to give curriculum decision makers a better idea about the differences between programs—so they can make informed choices when selecting materials, but also so that they can “backfill” the gaps that may exist in the materials they’re already using, Meredith Liben said.

Lack of Systematic Instruction

The Units of Study’s workshop model takes a constructivist approach to education, prioritizing student choice and independent learning. Teachers demonstrate the skills and habits that good readers have, and then students practice them on their own in books of their choice, with teachers acting as guides.

As Education Week has reported, the K-2 lessons emphasize students developing their identities as readers and exploring print, with comparatively little focus on learning how to decode words.

Calkins has pushed back against critics. In November 2019, she released a statement...
in response to “the phonics-centric people who are calling themselves ‘the science of reading.’”

“I want to point out that no one interest group gets to own science,” Calkins wrote, in the statement.

But the seven reading researchers who evaluated the program said that much of its content doesn’t align to evidence-based best practice. There’s not enough explicit instruction in foundational skills, they write, and the focus on student choice of leveled books doesn’t provide sufficient opportunity for children to grapple with complex text and build their knowledge.

“Mapping the print system to our oral speech system is what’s fundamental in learning to read,” said Claude Goldenberg, a professor emeritus at Stanford University and an author of the report. But in the Units of Study, “there’s no systematic building up of how you teach kids to understand and apply the alphabetic principle.”

Goldenberg, who is an expert on reading development for English language learners, said the lack of systematic instruction is a special concern for this group. And while Units of Study includes general guidance on supports for English learners in its introductory materials, individual lessons don’t include guidance for differentiation for this group. The lack of explicit supports for ELLs, along with “inflated claims” about the program’s alignment to the research base on supporting ELL literacy development, were surprising and concerning, Goldenberg said.

In response to critiques of the program’s support for ELLs, Calkins cited TCRWP’s own analysis of state achievement data in “core” schools, which have been using the program for an average of 10 years. English learners in these schools outperformed English learners citywide by 13.5 percentage points, Calkins said.

The program also uses the three-cueing system, a strategy that can encourage students to use pictures and sentence structure to figure out what words say. Teaching these cues “is in direct opposition to an enormous body of settled research,” the report’s authors write.

Looking beyond foundational skills, the researchers evaluated the program’s text complexity and ability to build vocabulary and background knowledge.

In grades K-2, when students are just learning to decode words, they’re relying on read-alouds for most of their exposure to complex, knowledge-building texts, writes Lily Wong Fillmore, a professor emerita at the University of California, Berkeley and one of the report’s authors. These read-alouds should be well above grade level, she says, to maximize students’ learning opportunities. But she found that for the most part, the read-alouds suggested in Units of Study are only at or slightly above grade level.

In general throughout K-5, students are encouraged to stick to independent reading books that are at their grade level. There’s no research to support this practice, said Timothy Shanahan, a professor emeritus at the University of Illinois Chicago, and an author on the report. And it limits students’ exposure to challenges like complex sentences and advanced vocabulary.

It’s also hard to know how well students’ independent reading books meet standards of text complexity, Shanahan said. That’s because teachers are instructed to draw on their own classroom libraries, and students pick the books they want to read.

“The chance that a youngster or a teacher would create a series of texts that would be an adequate challenge or support—it could happen, but it’s rather a chancey proposition,” Shanahan said.

Students who have already developed foundational reading skills and have a lot of prior exposure to books might be successful in Units of Study, said Shanahan. But the students who need more support are likely to struggle.

“Kids are going to have to figure out a lot of things for themselves,” he said.

The chance that a youngster or a teacher would create a series of texts that would be an adequate challenge or support—it could happen, but it’s rather a chancey proposition.”

TIMOTHY SHANAHAN
PROFESSOR EMERITUS, UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS CHICAGO

Reading on Screen vs. Print: New Analysis Thickens the Plot On Promoting Comprehension

By Sarah D Sparks

The pandemic has increased the amount of reading young children do in digital formats, and a research analysis suggests parent and teacher behavior can mean the difference in whether e-books help or hinder reading skills in the long run.

All else being equal, children 8 years old and younger comprehend storybooks better when they are in print rather than digital form, according to an analysis of 39 experimental studies published in the Review of Educational Research.

But print wasn’t an end-all, be-all, they found. Researchers also found that most of the commercially published e-books explored in the studies didn’t enhance the text in ways that focused children’s attention as adults naturally would when reading a story to a child, such as pointing out main story elements, asking questions, and focusing children’s attention on the chain of events in a story. The electronic books that did use these elements tended to outperform print books in children’s comprehension.

“We need to have a more nuanced language about when reading digitally or print is beneficial and when not,” said Natalia Kucirkova, the corresponding author and a professor of reading and early-childhood development at the University of Stavanger in Norway and the Open University in the United Kingdom.

Co-author Adriana Bus, professor of language and literacy at Leiden University in Amsterdam, agreed. “Digital devices may always be distractive, thus predicting adverse effects of digital reading. However, our study also shows that books with digital enhancements can benefit and result in better comprehension than paper books if the enhancements support comprehension,” she said.
Reading to children via Zoom has been happening in many families during the pandemic but anecdotal evidence shows that this was mostly for the most privileged children.”

NATALIA KUCIRKOVA
CORRESPONDING AUTHOR AND A PROFESSOR, UNIVERSITY OF STAVANGER IN NORWAY

More reading time during the pandemic

Children have been reading more during the pandemic, including in electronic formats, according to the census by Common Sense Media, a nonprofit that studies children and media. The group found that in 2020, children ages 8 and under spent on average, 32 minutes a day reading or being read to, up from 29 minutes a day in 2017.

Both print and e-reading increased overall, but e-reading rose particularly for some groups of students. Black students in that age group, for example, have gone from reading 28 minutes a day, including 8 minutes of e-reading and 20 minutes of print in 2017, to 48 minutes a day in 2020, including 33 minutes of print and 15 of e-reading. Similarly, students in families who earn less than $30,000 a year doubled their e-reading from 5 minutes a day to 10 minutes during that time.

Kucirkova said she expects wide variation in how children respond to e-reading during the pandemic, “attributable to the uneven quality of home schooling. I am particularly concerned about children who come from low-resource backgrounds with little history of reading and who do not have the supportive adult at home, who would be interpreting, and at times supplementing, teachers’ instruction,” she said. “The crucial influencing factor for these children is going to be the quality of the reading materials they accessed.”

The research analysis suggested children’s comprehension improved when adults read to them—but adults tended to read digital texts with children differently than print texts.

“Reading to children via Zoom has been happening in many families during the pandemic but anecdotal evidence shows that this was mostly for the most privileged children,” such as those with highly educated parents or grandparents or family members who could afford to spend more time reading with them,” Kucirkova said in an online message. She suggested teachers can help model for parents by holding videoconferenced reading sessions using both print and digital books.

The researchers analyzed the results of studies of more than 1,800 children from birth to age 8, comparing their comprehension and vocabulary learning when reading on paper versus on screens. The researchers also looked at the effects of common e-book enhancements, including spoken narration accompanying the text, design enhancements, and in-book dictionaries.

Some of the most commonly used enhancements didn’t add much to students’ comprehension. For example, Bus noted that audio narration of e-books did little, particularly for children who needed the most reading practice.

“They were the children who closed their eyes and just listened,” she said. In one eye-tracking experiment, for example, “not surprisingly, we found that good readers focus on the text while listening, thus benefiting from this experience. The poor readers did not look at all at the text, just at the illustrations.”

The researchers also found dictionaries did not improve children’s comprehension, but did build students’ vocabularies.

The analysis also found digital texts tended to be less effective than print ones in classroom settings. In part, Kucirkova said, this could be because the group-based reading used in schools may make less use of the interactive elements in digital books.

In videotaped lessons, Bus noted, “teachers [are] reading in small groups, and you can see that children are eager to interact with the book where possible in competition with their peers. However, looking for an opportunity to interact takes so much attention that they cannot concentrate on the story. So teachers have to organize sessions so that children can be sure of their share in the interaction with the story.”

12 Strategies for Encouraging Students to Want To Revise Their Writing

By Larry Ferlazzo

This week’s question-of-the-week is:

How do you get students to want to revise their writing?

Getting students to revise their writing can be a challenge. Often, they have a “one-and-done” perspective.

So, what can teachers do to create the conditions for a different mindset?

That’s the question we’ll be exploring.

Shifts of thinking and practice

Melissa A. Butler is part of the Western PA Writing Project and a writer/educator living in Pittsburgh. She focuses on noticing as an interdisciplinary method of practice, especially the noticing of small ordinary objects in our lives:

The word revise evolves from to see and look again.

To look again, to see anew—such a joyous thing to do.

Yet, in many classrooms, revision becomes a step in a procedure in a subject called “writing” instead of a fluid, playful rethinking that is the core of any creative process. What small shifts might we make for students to delight in looking again at their writing?

Shifts of thinking:

What are your feelings about revision? We teach who we are. If you like revision, if you love the mess of process, this will show up in your teaching. If you don’t, that will show up, too.
Revision is a constant, not a step. Despite how it’s described in many writing programs, revision is not something to do only after a draft is written. Revision happens all of the time in small ways each time we look again … at a thought, a scene, a phrase, a pattern, a word.

Revision is reflection. That’s all it is—seeing anew. Looking at something from new perspectives, fresh eyes. It’s not a heavy process of “fixing something,” it’s a light process of trying new ways to notice.

Reflect on your planning and lesson design. Revision feels like a chore when writing itself is a chore because it is assigned for a grade or rubric. But, when students select their own topics and forms in a Writing Workshop, they have an opportunity to practice their authentic processes for creating, including revision.

Shifts of practice:

Name small moments of revision. Throughout the day, point out examples of flexible thinking, when students change their minds or are inspired by someone’s idea, when one topic of conversation turns into another, or when a student’s drift of thought results in a new connection. Be explicit and name these moments as revision.

Display stories of thinking on the walls. As much as possible, display processes of thinking instead of finished products. Allow students to see how an idea grows over time, how one child’s thinking connects with others, how there is a thick and complex process for how ideas grow.

Don’t introduce erasers. Once students embrace the idea of flexible thinking and easily cross out written ideas to change/add to their writing, erasers are no big deal. But before this happens, why make available something that keeps students wanting to “correct” or “be right” or hide the important history of their thinking?

Play improvisation games. Improv allows students to practice dispositions that help bring joy to revision, such as: add on, speak when you don’t know what to say, look silly, be wrong, fail in public, change directions, follow an idea that’s not yours, be inspired, laugh.

Practice revision with diverse forms and materials. Have students draw, use clay, cook, play physical games, build with recycled materials. Point out how they are playfully revising (seeing anew) throughout such processes.

Start with the “why”

Jeremy Hyler is a middle school English and science teacher in Michigan. He has co-authored Create, Compose, Connect! Reading, Writing, and Learning with Digital Tools (Routledge/ Eye on Education), From Texting to Teaching: Grammar Instruction in a Digital Age, as well as Ask, Explore, Write. Jeremy blogs at MiddleWeb. He can be found on Twitter @jeremybballer and at his website:

“Teaching middle school students to write is always a challenge. It never fails that most middle school students write it and then never want to look at what they wrote again. They would rather wish the writing never existed or they can quickly delete it from their Google Drive.”

Jeremy Hyler
Middle School English and Science Teacher in Michigan

They think “writing is a chore”

Jenny Vo earned her B.A. in English from Rice University and her M.Ed. in educational leadership from Lamar University. She has worked with English-learners during all of her 24 years in education and is currently an ESL ISST in Katy ISD in Katy, Texas. Jenny is the president-elect of TexTESOL IV and works to advocate for all ELs:

Writing fluently and coherently while at the same time keeping your reader engaged and interested in your story is a difficult skill for many students to master. Our English-learners have an even more difficult time because they are still learning the intricacies of the English language while at the same time developing their writing skills.

A lot of my ELs do not like writing. They think it is a chore. It takes most of them so long to complete the first draft that they do not
want to think about REVISING! But revising is an essential step in the writing process.

There are two strategies that I use to get my students to want to revise their writing. One, I share with my students mentor texts that have examples of great writing. Two, I go through the revising process with them by modeling how I revise my own writing.

If you are learning something, you may as well learn from the best, right? What can be better examples of best writing than mentor texts? Especially those published by professional writers and well-known authors.

When we teach students to write, one thing we always tell them is to not tell but to show with words. By using mentor texts to highlight good writing, we are showing our students examples and not telling them how to do it. Mentor texts can be in the form of books of different genres, a newspaper article, a magazine article, an essay, or even a piece of writing that you the teacher have composed yourself. If I’m teaching narrative writing, my mentor text should be a story with interesting characters, a well-developed plot, and meaningful dialogue, among other things. If we are working on informational writing, my mentor text should have all the components that I want the students to include in their writing—examples, descriptions, and statistics, etc. Make sure you choose your mentor text wisely.

An important part of studying mentor texts is to annotate them and identify the elements that make this piece of writing great. Give students time to practice annotating so that they can know what to include in their own writing as they write and when they revise.

Another strategy I use to get my students to want to revise their writing is to break the revising process down into small, doable steps and to model the steps for them with a story we have written together as a class. One day we will work on just the introduction of our story. I will share with them different ways to hook the reader with the introduction. Then I show them how to apply the skill by modeling it with the class story. Lastly, the students will practice with their own story.

On the following days, we will focus on a different skill a day, following the same process of teaching, modeling, and practicing. Breaking the revision process down into smaller steps makes the task less intimidating for the students by giving them just one area to focus on.

Exploring mentor texts and breaking the revision process down into doable steps are two ways that I use to get my students to want to revise their writing. I’ve been able to get beautiful pieces of writing from some of my students. How do YOU get your students to want to revise their writing?

Have students write about “a subject they feel passionate about”

Mary Beth Nicklaus is a teacher and literacy coach/specialist at Wisconsin Rapids Area Middle School in Wisconsin Rapids, Wis. She enjoys teaching students to use reading and writing to positively affect their lives.

Get students to want to revise by steering them to a subject they feel passionate about. A desire to revise stems from love for their subject and a heartfelt drive to communicate their story. A super way to evoke excitement is with a lesson where you formulate and revise writing together! You can work the process with the class on a projected “shared” document using the following steps:

1. Reveal teacher as writer. Watching you become motivated gets them here is an example: I decide to talk about “weird things that happen.” Most are excited to share everyday stories about strange happenings. I tell students about the time I accidentally hang up on a police officer five times because I thought he was a scammer. I call the police department back after coming to my senses. It turns out the neighbors had really called the police. There was a box from a subscription meal service sitting on my steps for over a week. (I was visiting in another state at the time.) People were afraid I was trapped, hurt, or dying inside of the house.

2. Use comments or questions they may have about your subject to begin to write. I begin by narrating my thoughts as we write. My students are happy to advise me. They volunteer adjectives and verbs. We formulate sentences. I pose “I wonder what sounds better” questions: “One time I was sitting in a chair, and the phone rang” or “Last Saturday started out as a very weird and disturbing day.” As the story emerges, I keep asking, “How does this sound?” The students give me their opinions and answer my questions while I am writing. They help me come up with precise verbs to vitalize my action descriptions. They even help me make my writing more concise when I guide them in that direction with my questions. We continue to write until I reach paragraph length. Students can hardly wait to dive into the writing waters. Involving them and asking for help in the messy process all writers go through increases their confidence.

3. Invite students. Students cannonball onto our document underneath my writing and into their own stories. I continue revising while students write. They follow my lead. They ask questions. They ask for opinions which also become opportunities for impromptu mini-lessons. Out of our teacher tool bag come in-context lessons on “there or their” or lessons on using a thesaurus to transform common words. Together, we encourage each other and contribute ideas.

4. Allow the flow to carry you through each other’s writing. We scroll. We pause from our own creating and check the work of others, we get ideas—fleshing out our writing from the bare bones of skimpy sort of paragraphs. Diego writes about getting hit in the head with a football, getting a CT scan that he didn’t remember, and the aftermath of staying in a darkened room for three days while dealing with excruciating migraines. Kaitlyn’s writing reflects the angst of getting separated from her mother at a mall when she was 5 and then finding out years later that her mother thought she had been taken. Our questions like, “How does this part sound?” ”Should I say run here, or would it sound better to say ‘raced’?” morph into discussions on the actual events they are writing about. Students pause, share, and validate each other’s reliving of events. They even may go as far as, “That reminds me of the time we read ...” discussions.

This lesson operates as a single lesson on revising, or you can turn it into a build-as-you-go unit. The chemistry in your class and curricular needs determine the direction. This is an account of an online lesson co-teacher Kaitlyn and I did with students during quarantine this spring. We mean for it to be a one-time lesson, but student fervor stretches it out for over a week. One student even asks Kaitlyn to keep working on his story outside of class.

Thanks to Melissa, Jeremy, Jenny, and Mary Beth for their contributions!

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9
Proof: Lexia Accelerates Learning During the Pandemic

Worried about the impact of interrupted learning? Exciting new research shows that Lexia® Learning not only helped to prevent learning loss in 80% of students, but also empowered 40% of students to actually exceed growth targets. How are results like this possible during a pandemic?

View this infographic from Lexia: Accelerating Literacy Growth During the COVID Pandemic. Find out how Lexia is an invaluable tool for educators working to keep students on track during a challenging year.

Over 40% of students using Core5 exceeded MAP Growth targets.

Download the Infographic
I tried a new writing practice in my 8th grade English class, and it led me to an important realization about writing development.

Like many great classroom moments, this one happened by accident: I rediscovered a canvas bag of my old writing journals that I’d stuffed in a classroom closet when I moved a year ago.

Just before I found it again, I’d been introducing a new writing structure—the “daybook”—to my students. I learned about it in Write, Think, Learn: Tapping the Power of Daily Student Writing Across the Content Areas by Mary Tedrow. She suggests that students have a physical notebook to write in daily for themselves, often guided by their experiences and interests.

In my implementation of the daybook, it is separate from taking regular class notes. Daybook writing can be personal, is graded only for completion, and read only with an invitation. Tedrow shares many ways to build on the daybook idea, such as having students categorize and index their entries, and develop some into longer pieces.

Tedrow, whose methods come from years of teaching, suggests building anticipation for the moment students first write in their daybooks.

Each student brought in a notebook of their choosing; some were composition-style and some were fancier journals. I asked students to open their binders and describe their daybooks—how they chose them, how they felt about them, and their favorite writing utensils. Then they took turns reading aloud from their responses.

The next day, students wrote in their binders about what writing is useful for, when they enjoy writing, and when it feels difficult or unpleasant. Students were eager to discuss these ideas; I could feel the anticipation building toward finally writing in the daybooks.

Somewhere in the mix of this conversation and the visual variety of my students’ journals, it dawned on me that I had a story of my own that connected to this work, and I needed to tell it to my students.

Discovering the Power Of Writing

It happened when I was in study hall as a 6th grader in the early 90s. We were supposed to be silently doing homework, but on this day, there wasn’t much assigned. We tried chatting, but our teacher, Mr. G, insisted on quiet. Some of us started writing notes to friends.

Suddenly, Mr. G got up and began walking up and down the rows. He stopped at Layla’s desk. “That’s not homework,” he said. “Yes it is,” she claimed, red-faced. “Give it to me,” Mr. G ordered. She didn’t. He grabbed the paper and walked back to his desk.

Then he began reading the note aloud.

“Dear Shawn,” it began. We all knew Layla was “dating” Shawn. A lot of 6th graders were dabbling in romantic relationships. There was a rumor around school that Layla and Shawn had kissed at the high school football game last Friday. I would never have remembered this were it not for Mr. G., who went on reading the note aloud, mentioning the Friday game and then stopping abruptly.

Mr. G’s angry face suddenly looked ashamed, too. He balled up the note and tossed it in the trash. “This is study hall,” he said harshly. “No more notes.”

For me, this was a turning point. I was mad in an unfamiliar way. I didn’t know where to turn. I wanted to vent to my best friend a few rows away, but I didn’t dare. So I took out some paper and started writing my anger to no one in particular.

I cursed. I broke my lines up like poetry for emphasis. It was exhilarating. I liked writing my feelings so much, I wrote for the rest of the period. I filled several pages, letting out whatever was on my mind.

That night, I wrote some more. Over the next few weeks, I filled a small stack of paper and then transitioned to a journal. It was like making a new friend.

As I recounted this story to my students, they responded with shock and knowing nods. They know the frustration of injustice, and also the triumph of self-expression.

From that day on, I explained, I wrote almost daily. Writing was a place I could always go and be unapologetically myself.

Journaling as Foundational

Then I had an idea: “Hey,” I said to my students. “Do you want to see my old journals?” Of course they did.
I went to the closet and pulled out the canvas bag. Students ooohed and ahhhed at the sight of so many different journals, and the hundreds of pages in my handwriting. I randomly opened a few and read out the dates—1993, 1996, 2000. “You filled all of those?” someone asked. “Over years, yes,” I said.

“Didn’t you write a book, too?” one student asked. I went to my shelf and got my published book.

This led to another realization. “You know what?” I said, thinking aloud. “I was able to write this book, because I had so much practice writing for fun.”

It seems obvious now, but I somehow never noticed that my extensive practice writing for myself laid a foundation for my academic and professional writing later. The inspiration and structures in Tedrow’s book were the springboard I needed to begin to make that connection for my students.

Finally, it was time. “This year,” I told my students, “you’re going to write. Five days a week. In your own daybook. Whatever you want.”

To my great surprise, students clapped and cheered! They saw the power in it, and they were ready.

Now that we’ve been working with the daybooks for a few months, I can see that they’ve provided many students with a place to voice their thoughts, away from an audience, especially social media. I’ve assigned students at least half a page most days. Some write more. One student is writing a novel.

Since I grade the daybooks only for completion, students get to choose what they want me to do with their writing when they turn them in. They put directions for me on a sticky note: “Read and comment,” “Just count,” “Read this entry only,” or “Please correct mechanics on this entry.” Students choose their level of privacy and attention.

I’m still experimenting, but I’ve felt my students’ excitement, and I’ve learned so much about their lives and their ideas from the writing they’ve shared. Students seem more comfortable writing in general. In fact, the most frequent comment I hear is that daybook writing is relaxing. With all the pressure on adolescents today from all directions, that’s a major win already.

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**OPINION**

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The Coming Literacy Crisis: There’s No Going Back to School as We Knew It

By Comer Yates, Renee Boynton-Jarrett & Maryanne Wolf

As we make strides in halting COVID-19’s lethal course, every parent is forced to consider, “Will my child be safe when they return to school without the repeated interruptions the virus imposed in the past year?”

We already know the answer. Too many schools haven’t been safe for children or their teachers since long before the current pandemic erected further barriers to children’s learning. Therefore, it cannot be an option to return to the same education system that has failed to meet the needs, hopes, and potential of the children most harmed by systemic inequities and racism.

As Frederick Douglass is widely quoted as saying: “Once you learn to read, you will be forever free.” A century and a half later, the converse is equally true for too many children who never attain a level of literacy that allows them to reach their full potential. Only 35 percent of America’s 4th graders read proficiently, and access to educational opportunity and literacy in the United States remains overwhelmingly defined by ZIP code, race, socioeconomics, and ethnicity. As has been well chronicled, children’s reading levels at 3rd grade form one of the most meaningful academic benchmarks by which we can predict, while not perfectly, whether they will lead a life of self-determination or one that is too often decided for them—as measured by graduation rates and the opportunity to earn a livable wage.

In failing to set so many students up for
future success, we have not only cheated our children, but we have failed our teachers. K-12 teachers experience daily stress that is among the highest of the 14 professions included in one Gallup study (measured before the pandemic)—equal only to nurses and physicians—with 78 percent of teachers reporting mental and physical exhaustion at the end of each day. It’s no wonder. They have been fighting a constant battle to help their students thrive in a system set up to fail them, generation after generation. Teaching remotely for many months has not lightened those stress loads nor revised the necessary objectives ahead.

Here’s an urgent two-point plan to fix what’s been fundamentally broken for generations as we think about what classrooms should look like in the 2021-22 school year ahead and beyond:

First, we must change our universal assumptions around how young children learn. Advances in brain science make it clear that we must teach every child “to listen” rather than demand they “be quiet.” Interactive “serve and return” language engagement can foster relationships with adults that make space for vulnerability, support, agency, and healing. These relationships also help children build not only psychological strength but actual brain capacity to learn through the forming of social-emotional neural pathways. These pathways carry students from preliteracy language development, through to explicit reading instruction, to deep reading, and ultimately to the will and ability to make the greatest difference in the lives of others.

Second, we must equip our teachers with the tools necessary to be part of the fight against this cycle of injustice. Elementary and pre-K educators need the social-emotional skills and the necessary training in the science-backed explicit instruction every child needs through 3rd grade to read deeply. Reading deeply allows children to think beyond preconceived ideas and ultimately to act with the freedom to chart their own course. Structural inequities like underfunding education by ZIP code and institutional racism also demand action, but well-trained teachers themselves have a huge role to play in a just future.

It took us less than a year to develop and begin administering a vaccine for COVID-19, but research scientists determined 20 years ago what was required to end our country’s illiteracy epidemic. The unspeakable toll we inflict on children through systemic biases and behaviors amounts to denial of access to that science for those who need it most. Where is the urgency to act—on policies and empirically derived practices—on the science of reading?

Healthy child development quickly crumbles without connections built through language in safe emotional spaces. Building the capacity to engage with the words, thoughts, and feelings of others is a neurological non-negotiable. The fully tested science demonstrates that these connections are crucial—from the last trimester of pregnancy through age 8 and beyond—for construction of the “deep reading” brain. The solution requires early social-emotional engagement, language input and exchange, and development of children’s executive functions like self-regulation in the first five years. In the following five years of every child’s life, we need teachers who understand both the science and the poetry of teaching children to read and think with all their intelligence.

All this amounts to a literacy treatment that we, in the United States, have dispensed to make the rich richer and the poor poorer, instead of distributing it universally. For no population has this inequity and silencing been more devastating than for generations of Black children. At a time when it was illegal to teach enslaved children to read, families risked everything to teach their children in “pit schools” in the middle of the night, drawing letters in the dirt in total silence to avoid bounty hunters, in a perilous effort to attain the freedom of which Frederick Douglass spoke.

Centuries in the making, the silence that was born in slavery remains cruelly imposed upon parents and teachers to shield their children from the mortal dangers of perceived noncompliance or using one’s voice too soon or too powerfully. The truth is that none of our children will be safe and free—not next fall, not ever—until we make and keep Douglass’ promise for all our children.

Comer Yates is the executive director of the Atlanta Speech School, which houses the free and universally accessible Cox Campus. Renée Boynton-Jarrett is a social epidemiologist and pediatrician at Boston University School of Medicine and the founding director of the Vital Village Community Engagement Network. Maryanne Wolf is a neuroscientist, literacy advocate, and the director of the Center For Dyslexia, Diverse Learners, and Social Justice at the University of California, Los Angeles Graduate School of Education and Information Studies, and author of the book Reader, Come Home: The Reading Brain in a Digital World (HarperCollins, 2018).