EDITOR’S NOTE
Oral language is a pivotal part of reading comprehension. This Spotlight will help you determine where your reading instruction may have holes; evaluate data on academic language, perspective taking, and complex reasoning needed for reading comprehension; analyze the five most-used programs for early reading; gain insights on the ways teachers are incorporating complex phonics through song, dance, and games; and hear from other education leaders on skepticism and labels.

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Oral Language in Reading Instruction
Oral Language in Reading Instruction

Published on December 3, 2019

Data: How Reading Is Really Being Taught

By Liana Loewus

When I first met “Juan,” then a 2nd grader, he knew about half of his consonant sounds and none of his vowels. I was a new K-5 special education teacher at the time, now more than a dozen years ago, and his initial reading assessment results looked pretty similar to those of the other 21 kids I was servicing.

Juan was a handful—brimming with mischief and vigor. He’d been diagnosed with a specific learning disability in reading and placed in special education early on. I figured we had a long, hard slog ahead of us.

I was, in some ways, quite wrong.

Juan picked up the individual letter sounds and digraphs I introduced in no time. He began decoding shorter, then longer, words and reading books with the sounds he’d learned. The reading gains were coming fast for a student who’d stagnated for two years prior.

It wasn’t my pedagogical ability making the difference—my lagging classroom management and unsteady math instruction made that quite clear. But I did have a secret weapon of sorts. Before coming to the public school, I’d spent a couple years working at a tutoring center that taught, among other things, an intensive phonics program to students with reading difficulties. I’d had dozens of hours of training in several different research-based reading programs, and taught close to 100 students how to read.

At the time, I figured most early-reading teachers had, at some point, had similar cognitive science-based training.

But as results from two new nationally representative surveys show, that’s not the case.

In preparing this reporting series, the Education Week Research Center surveyed about 670 K-2 and special education teachers and 530 education professors who teach reading courses. The findings—among the first to look at teacher and teacher-educator knowledge and practices in early reading across the country—tell an illuminating story about what’s happening in classrooms, including what teachers do and don’t know about reading and where they learned it.

It’s all part of a larger project we took on in 2019 called Getting Reading Right, which explores the challenges teachers face in bringing cognitive science to the classroom. We think it’s timely, given that scores on the “nation’s report card” show that just 35 percent of 4th graders are proficient readers—and that the gap between low and high performers has grown.

Our survey showed that 75 percent of teachers working with early readers teach three-cueing, an approach that tells students to take a guess when they come to a word they don’t know by using context, picture, and other clues, with only some attention to the letters.

Similarly, more than a quarter of teachers said they tell emerging readers that the first thing they should do when they come to a word is look at the pictures—even before they try to sound it out.

And yet, as the research primer in this report details, those techniques aren’t backed by science. They’re methods employed by struggling readers; proficient readers attend to the letters.

The survey also showed that 1 in 5 teachers confuse phonemic awareness with letter/sound correspondence. Only about half knew that students can demonstrate phonemic awareness by segmenting the individual sounds in a word orally.

We also asked teachers about their philosophy of teaching early reading. Sixty-eight percent said “balanced literacy,” while 22 percent chose “explicit, systematic phonics (with comprehension as a separate focus).”

Balanced literacy, as many will point out, has no single definition—though there’s agreement among most balanced literacy advocates that comprehension and immersion in authentic texts are key. Yes, students need some phonics, but not too much or they’ll become disengaged, the thinking goes.

And yet a multitude of studies over many de-
cades have shown that systematic, explicit phonics is the most effective method for teaching early readers. And a much-validated framework, known as the Simple View of Reading, says that reading comprehension is reliant on both decoding and language skills. A student cannot understand a text that he cannot accurately decode.

In all, the survey points to a willingness among teachers to spend time on phonics—the majority who responded said they devote 20 to 30 minutes a day to it. But that’s coupled with a commitment to practices, such as cueing, that research has shown can actually counteract good phonics instruction by encouraging students to look away from the letters on the page.

So where are teachers learning what they know about the foundations of reading?

According to the survey, most of this training is happening on the job. Teachers were most likely to say they learned what they know about reading from professional development or coaches in their district (33 percent), or from personal experiences with students (17 percent). Our reporting bears this out, too—a culture of reading instruction is often passed from classroom to classroom. Teachers learn what to do from trusted colleagues and cherished mentors.

Fourteen percent of teachers surveyed said they learned to teach reading from their school-provided curriculum. Teachers also listed the instructional materials they’re using for reading, and an analysis of the top five shows they often push cueing strategies and fail to implement phonics in a systematic way.

Teachers were less likely to say they learned what they know about reading from their preservice training.

Still, a look at the survey results from professors offers insight into where some ingrained literacy practices come from. Nearly 6 in 10 professors said their philosophy of teaching early reading is balanced literacy. And ideas about teaching reading are coming from the professors themselves—most said they have some or complete control over the syllabus for their early reading courses.

Most professors (86 percent) said they model how to teach phonics in their classes. But like the teachers, about 1 in 5 professors confused phonemic awareness with letter/sound correspondence. And 1 in 10 professors could not correctly identify that the word “shape” has three phonemes.

Like the teachers surveyed, the education professors seemed to hold sometimes dissonant beliefs about how reading should be taught. Eighty-one percent of professors disagreed with the statement that “most students will learn to read on their own if given the proper books and time to read them.” But more than half of professors agree that “it is possible for students to understand written texts with unfamiliar words even if they don’t have a good grasp of phonics,” indicating a lack of familiarity with the Simple View of Reading.

Teachers want what’s best for their students—it’s simply not possible to put in the hours and sweat needed for the job if you don’t. But wanting that and having the training, materials, direction, and support to provide it are not the same.

I won’t go so far as to say Juan was misdiagnosed with a learning disability—he did struggle in many ways. But I do often wonder how his trajectory might have changed if he’d finished his elementary years having never been exposed to a systematic, science-based reading program—a possibility we know is very real for many children.
Now is the Moment: Accelerate English Language Acquisition With Edtech

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, 1 out of 10 children in classrooms across the nation are Emergent Bilinguals. As this student population continues to grow, educators and researchers are discovering more about their unique needs and how they can be supported with edtech.

Emergent Bilinguals need:

- **Cultural responsiveness**: Emergent Bilinguals see themselves and their communities valued and reflected in the content they study giving them a sense of belonging while opening up a world of diversity.

- **Expressive oral practice**: Oral language skills play a critical role in literacy success. Edtech with speech recognition technology trained on accents provides a safe software for that practice.

- **Personalization**: Individualized learning paths meet students where they are and help them move forward at their own pace.

- **Proven programs**: Language acquisition programs based on learning science help all students, but especially Emergent Bilinguals. Alignment with language proficiency standards ensures further success.

Now is the perfect moment to reconsider the types of support and tools that educators and families will need to help teach and engage Emergent Bilingual students more effectively. Lexia® English offers a new path forward.
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As students continue to recover from interrupted learning, new approaches to learning are more important than ever. Get your copy of the eBook, **How Lexia English Supports Emergent Bilinguals with Proven Edtech**, and learn more about Lexia English and how it can benefit Emergent Bilingual students, teachers, and families.
What do you do when hear a word you don’t know? In Ashley Palmer’s kindergarten class, you stop. And you talk about it.

Palmer, a teacher at Matthews Elementary School in Missouri’s New Madrid district, was telling a story about a family of toy lions during one morning lesson when she got to the word “lass.”

“That’s one of our vocabulary words,” she told the group of children sitting cross-legged on the rug. Then she led the students in clapping out its one syllable, then segmenting the sounds: /l/, /a/, /s/.

“It’s another word for ‘girl,’” Palmer said. “Sometimes when I line you up for bathroom break, instead of saying girls, or ladies, I can say, ‘If you are a——’”

“Lass!” the students shouted out, as some sat up on their knees. “If you are a——lass—you can line up,” Palmer finished.

The whole process is deceptively simple—it took less than 60 seconds—but this kind of embedded vocabulary instruction is a key piece of Matthews’ overhauled early reading program. Just five years ago, only about 14 percent of the school scored proficient on the state’s annual assessment. The numbers have grown steadily to the point where in 2019, 80 percent of the students met the standard. In 3rd grade, the numbers reached 95 percent.

In the literacy world, there’s a perennial concern that focusing on foundational skills will come at the expense of giving kids opportunities to practice language and enjoy stories. But researchers and educators say that it’s not only possible to teach useful vocabulary and meaningful content knowledge to young children—it’s necessary.

A body of research has shown that once students can decode, their reading comprehension is largely dependent on their language comprehension—or the background and vocabulary knowledge that they bring to a text, and their ability to follow the structure of a story and think about it analytically.

Before students can glean this kind of information from print, experts say, they can do it through oral language: by having conversations about the meaning of words, telling stories, and reading books aloud.

At Matthews, an explicit, systematic approach to phonics instruction has helped drive the big jumps in student achievement—but it’s only one part of the equation, said Angie Hanlin, the school’s principal. The school took on a complete restructuring of its reading program, which included changing the way teachers planned and taught vocabulary and reading comprehension.

“Putting a phonics patch on a reading program or on a school is not going to teach all students to read,” Hanlin said. “It is not going to fix it, and it’s not going to drive up the data.”

This is the premise behind the Simple View of Reading, a framework for comprehension first proposed by researchers Philip B. Gough and William E. Tunmer in 1986, and confirmed by later studies.

The simple view holds that reading comprehension is the product of decoding ability and language comprehension. Kids who can’t decode words won’t be able to read, no matter how much vocabulary they know, or how much they know about the world. But the opposite is also true: If they don’t have this background knowledge, children won’t be able to understand the words that they can read off the page.

Engaging With Rich Content

“Decoding has a really outsized role on reading comprehension in the early grades,” said Gina Cervetti, an associate professor of education at the University of Michigan, who studies the role of content-area knowledge in literacy. “But as students consolidate their decoding, very quickly that equation shifts.”

As students progress into 2nd, 3rd, and 4th grades, texts become more challenging—there are bigger words, harder concepts, and more assumptions about what students already know about the world.

Kids need to start engaging with rich content early on, so that once they are expected to read it on the page, they understand what’s going on. If they haven’t developed that foundation, it’s hard to catch up quickly, said Cervetti.

“To learn words well, you need to encounter them again and again,” said Margaret McKeown, a senior scientist at the Learning Research and Development Center at the University of Pittsburgh, and an expert in vocabulary instruction. As very young children learn words, they start to form connections in the brain—links that join synonyms together, or relate words that are used in similar situations. This gives bigger, harder words a place to land when students learn them, McKeown said.

“The concepts aren’t new,” she said. “They’re
just more sophisticated or refined ways to describe similar things.”

At Matthews Elementary, teachers meet once a week to go through their foundational skills lessons and read-aloud books. The curriculum they use identifies vocabulary words that can be embedded in lessons. But the teachers also look for words in the text that their students specifically might struggle with.

One of those words was “living room.” Palmer had introduced the word earlier that week—a lot of her students didn’t have a space in their homes that they called by that name. In this day’s lesson, she asked students to recall it, asking questions: What kind of room has a couch? A chair?

Matthews is in a small, rural county, where the majority of students receive free and reduced-price lunch. Hanlin said that a lot of books, even for young readers, assume life experience her students don’t have. So teachers build on the knowledge that students do have. For example, Hanlin said, students might not know the word “cathedral.” But they do know the word “church.”

It’s important to do this kind of planning ahead, said Tanya Wright, an associate professor of education at Michigan State University, who studies oral language, vocabulary, and knowledge development.

Before a teacher reads a text to or with students, she needs to read it herself, Wright said. “You’re going to know where you need to stop, where you need to explain.” Ahead of time, teachers should plan child-friendly definitions, or figure out how they might use props or movements to demonstrate the word.

But this kind of planned vocabulary instruction may not be happening in most schools. In a study published in 2014, Wright and her colleagues observed the way teachers discussed vocabulary in 53 kindergarten classrooms. They found a general lack of planned and purposeful instruction—most teachers weren’t talking about a word more than once or selecting words in any systematic way.

There are ways to draw out more conversation about vocabulary words, McKeown said. One strategy comes from an unlikely place: improv comedy groups.

In improv, comedians are taught to say, “Yes, and ... “ to build off of the scenario that their fellow performers create. The same framework can help kids build related vocabulary. Take the word “cautious,” McKeown said.

A student asked to use the word might say that he had to be cautious, because someone was riding a bike fast near him. The teacher can agree, and then expand on that same idea: “You had to be careful because it might be dangerous if someone hit you with their bike.”

“You’re always adding more words that are associated with the [main] word, demonstrating a greater context for words,” McKeown said.

In a read-aloud that afternoon, Palmer’s kindergarten class heard another story about a lion—this time, one that had escaped from the zoo and befriended a little girl. As the lion curled up for a nap in the girl’s house, Palmer paused on the words “lions sleep a lot.” She turned to give the students on the rug a puzzled look.

“Is that true?” she asked. She referenced a nonfiction book the class had read the day before, about lions in the wild. “They like to sleep and lie around 20 out of the 24 hours!” Palmer said.

As she continued to read, she made more links back to the nonfiction text, explaining as she went what was real and what was make-believe, adding in extra details that the nonfiction book hadn’t covered. She made these implicit connections explicit for her students.

Building Knowledge

Still other schools are turning to curricula that are purposefully structured to build knowledge—diving deeply into specific content areas, even in the very early grades. These curricula are based on the theory that all students need a similar foundation in core domains—like literature, the arts, science, social studies, and history—so that they have the knowledge base to support comprehension.

Educational theorist E.D. Hirsch is widely credited as the originator of this idea. His 1987 book, Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know, argued that schools need to expose students to the body of knowledge that authors and speakers will expect them to have. This idea has seen a resurgence in popular conversation more recently through author Natalie Wexler’s 2019 book, The Knowledge Gap: The Hidden Cause of America’s Broken Education System—and How to Fix It, which criticizes U.S. schools for prioritizing skills-based instruction over the teaching of content.

The notion that background knowledge informs understanding isn’t very controversial. But proposals about exactly what knowledge schools should prioritize definitely are. Many teachers reject the idea of a shared literary canon, for example, arguing that it upholds a Eurocentric approach to American education that privileges the knowledge and histories of white Westerners at the expense of people of color.

But Jared Myracle, the chief academic officer in Jackson-Madison County schools in Tennessee, sees providing this kind of background knowledge as an equity issue.

Students from low-income families often don’t come into school with the same depth of academic language that students from higher-income families do, limiting their ability to make meaning from what they read, he said. In Jackson-Madison county, the data bore out this divide: Schools where the vast majority of students received free and reduced-price lunch were trailing the district when Myracle started there in 2017.

Now, students spend an hour every day doing basic skills instruction—like naming and writing letters, practicing phonological awareness, and learning phonics—and an hour on what’s called “listening and learning.” These lessons teach topics through conversation and read-alouds—in kindergarten, they learn about plants, 1st grade is early civilizations, and 2nd graders cover systems of the human body.

Kristin Peachey, an instructional coach at Pope Elementary School in the district, said that talking about complex topics lets students engage at a higher level than they would through text at this early age.

A coherent unit of study also provides opportunities for teaching comprehension, said Cervetti, the University of Michigan professor. “You can’t really reason about things in very sophisticated ways unless you know something about them,” she said.

Students should have the opportunity to discuss questions that are open-ended, without a single answer, during read-alouds, said Wright. “If we’re telling kids to think quietly and only be listeners and not participants in the read-aloud, then that’s not optimal for their learning.”

At Pope Elementary, teachers plan and
talk through the questions they’ll ask during read-alouds, said Peachey. Take a recent 2nd grade lesson about Greek mythology, she said. After teachers read the story “Atalanta and the Golden Apples,” students were asked to reflect on characters’ motivations: Why would Atalanta only marry someone who could beat her in a footrace?

Imparting a deep understanding of subject matter, and teaching children to think analytically—that takes time, said Myracle. “It’s pretty easy to see gains on the foundational skills side, once you implement a systematic [phonics] program,” he said. Knowledge-building is a longer process.

Myracle believes that the payoff will be worth it. But he worries that some districts will try on a content knowledge focus like a passing fad, dismissing it before they have the opportunity to see any effects.

“My biggest fear is that districts that are starting to do some of this work to build knowledge in early grades, that they won’t stick with it,” Myracle said. “The gains are going to be longer in coming.”

Three Skills to Improve Deep Reading Comprehension

By Liana Loewus

Three key skills—academic language, perspective taking, and complex reasoning—can predict how well a student does with the kind of deep reading comprehension required in secondary school and beyond, according to a study.

Typically, reading comprehension has been viewed simply as “the product of decoding and oral language comprehension,” according to the report, which was produced as part of the federally funded Reading for Understanding initiative and published in a special issue of the Journal of Research on Educational Effectiveness. That is, it is widely thought that if students can understand a text that’s read aloud to them, they can also understand it by reading it, as long as their decoding skills aren’t getting in the way.

For this study, the researchers focused on three factors, which they chose by analyzing deep reading tasks and looking at what historians, scientists, and literary analysts do as readers. The factors are:

- **Academic language**, defined as formal written language with features that make it harder to process text. Those include “reduction in use of subject pronouns and action verbs; increase in nominalizations, passives, and embedded relative clauses; and lexicalized discourse, stance, and epistemic markers.”

- **Perspective-taking**, or the ability to “recognize that different actors have different experiences of the same events,” and

- **Complex reasoning**, or “the ability to think effectively about complex issues that have no single correct answer.” This includes students’ ability to reason about concepts such as evidence, truth, knowledge, and conflict.

“These three predictive factors have not previously been systematically attended to in curricular design or instruction,” the report states. The study looked at results for nearly 3,000 students in grades 4 through 7 on the Global Integrated Scenario-Based Assessment, a computer-based test of deep reading skills created by the Educational Testing Service.

The researchers found that all three factors were statistically significant predictors of deep reading comprehension. Academic language was the strongest predictor, “suggesting that this is an important area of focus to prepare students for secondary school texts with their increasingly unfamiliar and challenging language,” the study says.

“Taken together, these findings on the roles of academic language, perspective taking, and complex reasoning in deep comprehension suggest that, for students in grades 4 through 7, we need to consider other models of reading comprehension beyond the SVR [i.e., simple view of reading as decoding and oral language comprehension].”

**Common-Core Changes**

The study notes that “the default in comprehension instruction in the United States
Oral Language in Reading Instruction

is teaching comprehension strategies, the
approach endorsed by the National Reading
Panel” 16 years ago. But curricula and profes-
sional development aligned with the Common
Core State Standards have put more emphasis
on “close reading” and assigning complex
texts, which aim to develop deep reading com-
prehension.

However, simply having students engage
in close reading and use harder texts isn’t
enough, the researchers write. “Our findings
suggest that these practices are unlikely by
themselves to be helpful to students strug-
gling with academic language, perspective
taking, and complex reasoning, and might in
fact lead to frustration and reduced motiva-
tion,” the report states.

“A better understanding of the processes
underlying deep reading comprehension will,
we hope, generate approaches to instruction
that directly address the linguistic and cogni-
tive challenges students face.”

The rest of the issue of JREE, published by
the Society of Research on Educational Effec-
tiveness, is devoted to reading comprehension
as well. You can find three other studies here,
too.

The Most Popular Reading Programs
Aren’t Backed by Science

By Sarah Schwartz

There’s a settled body of research
on how best to teach early read-
ing. But when it comes to the
multitude of curriculum choic-
es that schools have, it’s often
hard to parse whether well-marketed pro-
grams abide by the evidence.

And making matters more complicated,
there’s no good way to peek into every elemen-
tary reading classroom to see what materials
teachers are using.

“It’s kind of an understudied issue,” said
Mark Seidenberg, a cognitive scientist at the
University of Wisconsin-Madison and the au-
thor of Language at the Speed of Sight: How We
Read, Why So Many Can’t, and What Can Be
Done About It. “[These programs] are put out
by large publishers that aren’t very forthcom-
ing. It’s very hard for researchers to get a hold of
very basic data about how widely they’re used.”

Now, some data are available. In a na-
tionally representative survey, the Education
Week Research Center asked K-2 and special
education teachers what curricula, programs,
and textbooks they had used for early reading
instruction in their classrooms.

The top five include three sets of core instruc-
tional materials, meant to be used in whole-class
settings: The Units of Study for Teaching Read-
ing, developed by the Teachers College Read-
ing and Writing Project, and Journeys and Into
Reading, both by Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.
There are also two early interventions, which
target specific skills certain students need more
practice on: Fountas & Pinnell’s Leveled Litera-
cy Intervention and Reading Recovery.

An Education Week analysis of the ma-
terials found many instances in which these
programs diverge from evidence-based prac-
tices for teaching reading or supporting
struggling students.

At this point, it’s widely accepted that read-
ing programs for young kids need to include
phonics—and every one of these five programs
teaches about sound-letter correspondences.
What varies, though, is the nature of this in-
struction. In some cases, students master a
progression of letter-sound relationships in a
set-out sequence. In others, phonics instruc-
tion is less systematic, raising the possibility
that students might not learn or be assessed
on certain skills.

Phonics is “buried” in many commercial
reading programs, Seidenberg said. Teachers
might be able to use what’s there to construct a
coherent sequence, he said, or they might not.

And frequently, these programs are teach-
ing students to approach words in ways that
could undermine the phonics instruction they
are receiving.

Several of these interventions and curric-
ula operate under the understanding that stu-
dents use multiple sources of information, or
“cues,” to solve words. Those can include the
letters on the page, the context in which the
word appears, pictures, or the grammatical
structure of the sentence.

Observational studies show that poor read-
ers do use different sources of information to
predict what words might say. But studies also
suggest that skilled readers don’t read this way.
Neuroscience research has shown that skilled
Readers process all of the letters in words when they read them, and that they read connected text very quickly.

Even so, many early reading programs are designed to teach students to make better guesses, under the assumption that it will make children better readers. The problem is that it trains kids to believe that they don’t always need to look at all of the letters that make up words in order to read them.

Still, teachers may not know that cueing strategies aren’t in line with the scientific evidence base around teaching reading, said Heidi Beverine-Curry, the co-founder of The Reading League, an organization that promotes science-based reading instruction.

Classroom teachers also aren’t usually the people making decisions about what curriculum to use. In Education Week’s survey, 65 percent of teachers said that their district selected their primary reading programs and materials, while 27 percent said that the decision was up to their school.

Even when teachers want to question their school or district’s approach, they may feel pressured to stay silent. Education Week spoke with three teachers from different districts who requested that their names not be used in this story, for fear of repercussions from their school systems.

### Cueing Strategies Persist

Reading Recovery, the 1st grade intervention used by about 20 percent of teachers surveyed, was developed in the 1970s by New Zealand researcher Marie Clay. Thirty-minute lessons are delivered one-on-one, and generally follow a similar structure day to day.

The idea is to catch students early before they need more intensive intervention, said Jeff Williams, a Reading Recovery Teacher-Leader in the Solon school district in Ohio.

Students read books they’ve read several times before, and then read a book that they’ve only read once, the day before, while the teacher takes a “running record.” Here, the teacher marks the words that the student reads incorrectly and notes which cue the child apparently was not used to produce the wrong word.

For example, if a child reads the word “pot” instead of “bucket,” a teacher could indicate that the student was using meaning cues to figure out the word.

During the rest of the lesson, students practice letter-sound relationships, write a short story, and assemble words in a cut-up story. At the end, they read a new book.

The program also requires intensive teacher training, which is administered through partner colleges.

Fountas & Pinnell’s Leveled Literacy Intervention follows a similar lesson structure, but it’s delivered in a small group format rather than one-on-one.

In both programs, text is leveled according to perceived difficulty. Teachers are told to match students to books at a just-right level, with the idea that this will challenge but not overwhelm them.

Students in the lowest levels read predictable text: books in which the sentence structure is similar from page to page, and pictures present literal interpretations of what the text says. One LLI book, for example, follows a girl as she gets dressed to go sledding in winter.

“Look at my pants,” the first page reads, facing an image of the girl holding up a pair of pants. “Look at my jacket,” is on the next page, with a photo of the girl pointing to a jacket.

Irene Fountas and Gay Su Pinnell, the founders of LLI, declined an interview for this story through their publisher, Heinemann. The company also declined to comment.

The main point of disagreement concerns these predictable texts and the teaching methods that align to them. For Williams, the Reading Recovery teacher leader in Ohio, predictable text can be a useful orienting tool when children are still learning how print works. The repetitive sentence structure demonstrates that words have consistent meaning, and the frequent pictures provide a context to link to the words, he said.

He gave the word “hippopotamus” as an example. By pointing out that “hippopota-}

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**Top 5 Reading Materials**

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<tr>
<td>43%</td>
<td>Fountas &amp; Pinnell Leveled Literacy Intervention</td>
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<td>27%</td>
<td>HMH Journeys</td>
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<tr>
<td>19%</td>
<td>Reading Recovery</td>
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<tr>
<td>17%</td>
<td>HMH Into Reading</td>
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<tr>
<td>16%</td>
<td>Units of Study for Teaching Reading Series</td>
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*SOURCE: EdWeek Research Center*
dent errors—rather than progressing through a systematic structure—can leave some gaps, said Kristen Koeller, the educator outreach manager at Decoding Dyslexia California, who used to be a Reading Recovery teacher.

For example, she said, she might have a student who didn’t know the /ow/ sound, like in the words “how” or “wow.” Koeller would work with the student on that sound, but she wasn’t expected to explain the difference between when “ow” makes the /ow/ sound, like in “how,” and when “ow” makes and /o/ sound, like in “show.”

Phonics does happen in Reading Recovery lessons, she said. “But it is not systematic, it is not multisensory, and it depends largely on the teacher’s knowledge base and the book that is selected.”

LLI does include a scope and sequence for phonemic awareness and phonics instruction. But students enter the program at different points, and it’s possible that they might need more practice with skills that are deemed below their level—or that they will exit the intervention before they reach all of the sound-letter correspondences that they don’t know.

The company, Fountas & Pinnell Literacy, identifies two main studies that it claims validate the program’s effectiveness in grades K-2. Both are from the Center for Research in Educational Policy at the University of Memphis, and both were funded by Heinemann, which publishes LLI.

The 2010 paper, which the company calls its “gold standard” study, found that kindergarten, 1st, and 2nd graders who received LLI made greater gains than students who received no intervention. But these gains were only consistent on Fountas & Pinnell’s own assessment, rather than an external validator of reading achievement. Results on DIBELS, a separate literacy test, were mixed. Kindergartners and 1st graders in the treatment group did better than the control group on some subtests, but 2nd graders saw no difference.

Reading Recovery, by contrast, has a much stronger evidence base for effectiveness. Most notably, an independent evaluation of the federal grant expanding the program found that students who received the intervention did better on assessments of overall reading, reading comprehension, and decoding compared to similar students who received their schools’ traditional literacy interventions. But even that study has invited controversy.

Psychologists James W. Chapman and William E. Tunmer published a critique of the evaluation, arguing that many of the lowest-achieving students were excluded from the program, potentially inflating success rates.

The executive director of the Reading Recovery Council of North America did not respond to requests for comment.

Three core instructional programs also made the top five most popular list among teachers, according to the Education Week survey: The Units of Study for Teaching Reading, by Heinemann, and Journeys and Into Reading, both by Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

Units of Study for Teaching Reading was developed by Lucy Calkins, a researcher and the founding director of the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project.

The program follows a “reader’s workshop” model. Teachers give a short “mini-lesson” at the beginning of class, and then students spend the majority of time practicing that skill independently as the teacher monitors them and works with small groups.

“We think about what is it that a good reader does. What is the life that a good reader leads?” Calkins says in a video describing reading workshop on the Units of Study website. “So above all, that means putting reading front and center.”

Calkins declined an interview for this story through her publisher, Heinemann. The company also declined to comment on the program itself.

Units of Study instills these reading habits in children, and teaches them that reading is something to value, said Susan Chambre, an assistant professor of education at Marist College in Poughkeepsie, N.Y. It also introduces a variety of genres and gives students choice in what they read. “The fact that we are immersing kids in literature—that is important,” Chambre said.

But Chambre struggled with Units of Study when she used it as a kindergarten teacher in an inclusion classroom. The program assumed a lot of knowledge—of oral language, of phonics—that students just didn’t have. Chambre would watch children stumble through sentences, making up words by looking at the pictures.

“For those kids who come in [to school] and can learn foundational skills easily, and have a fair amount of general knowledge and a fair amount of vocabulary, they would come out okay,” Meredith Liben, the senior fellow for strategic initiatives at Student Achievement Partners, said of the Units of Study for Teaching Reading.

But a lot of students don’t come into school with that knowledge, and the program isn’t explicit enough to fill in the gaps, Chambre said. Starting in kindergarten, students are taught reading “super powers” that encourage them to “search for meaning, use picture clues, and use the sound of the first letter of a word to help them read,” according to kindergarten sample lessons downloaded from the Heinemann website. One sample lesson encourages teachers to say things like “Check the picture,” “Try something,” or “Does that look right?” when students struggle, which prompts students to
take their eyes off of the letters in a word.

In a public statement responding to science-based critiques of her program, Calkins wrote that asking students to guess or “try it” when they come to hard words teaches reading stamina. She also argued that there is value in predictable texts for young children, who are “approximating reading” when they rely on syntax and picture clues.

Though billed as a core reading program, the Units of Study in Reading doesn’t teach phonemic awareness or phonics systematically or explicitly. “At best it’s a suggestion, and there’s a lot of focus on the three-cuing system,” Liben said.

The Teachers College Reading and Writing Project recently released a separate phonics program, the Units of Study in Phonics. In her recent statement, Calkins emphasized the importance of a systematic phonics program, and said it would be a “wise move” for teachers to include more decodable texts in lessons with emerging readers. Still, marketing materials for the units imply that the company believes phonics should not play a central role in the classroom.

“Phonics instruction needs to be lean and efficient,” the materials read. “Every minute you spend teaching phonics (or preparing phonics materials to use in your lessons) is less time spent teaching other things.”

Menu of Choices

The other two core instructional programs, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt’s Journeys and Into Reading, differ in some significant ways from the rest of this list. Into Reading is the company’s newer product—this is its first academic year in schools. According to HMH, more than 6.7 million students use Journeys in school.

Both programs include an explicit, systematic program in phonemic awareness and phonics. In an emailed statement to Education Week, a representative for HMH wrote that the company suggests teachers follow this sequence, as phonics skills build cumulatively. Decodable texts are available for purchase.

Because these programs are meant to be comprehensive, they include lessons and resources for teaching other foundational skills—like writing letters, spelling, and fluency—as well as explicit vocabulary instruction, anchor texts and student texts, writing instruction, and comprehension instruction.

Seidenberg, who has reviewed the Journeys materials but not Into Reading, said that the amount of materials, lessons, and instructional choices in the program was overwhelming. “It looks like the publisher’s response to all the debate about reading instruction was to make sure that they included everything,” he said.

In the emailed statement, HMH said that teachers can “choose from a variety of resources to make the best instructional decisions for their students and to align with district curriculum requirements.”

When Milton Terrace Elementary in Ballston Spa, N.Y., started using Journeys, teachers were using the materials differently, said Kathleen Chaucer, the principal. (The school is no longer using the program.) For example—even though the program offers decodable books, kids were practicing in leveled texts, which didn’t offer opportunities to use patterns they learned, Chaucer said.

Journeys includes six teacher manuals for its 1st grade program alone, Seidenberg said. “There is so much information in those teacher manuals, it raises serious questions about whether anyone is actually using them,” he said. “And if they are using them, are they just picking through them to find the pieces that they’re comfortable with?” Chaucer said that’s what happened at her school.

A Perfect Program?

It’s hard to find a perfect curriculum, said Blythe Wood, an instructional coach in the special education department at the Pickerington school district, and the vice president of the International Dyslexia Association of Central Ohio.

She’s critical of Leveled Literacy Intervention, specifically, for the focus it puts on looking at words as wholes, and the lack of decodable text. But there are good and bad parts to most commercial materials, she said.

“The knowledge base of the teacher, and being able to identify the needs of the student, are more important than a boxed program,” Wood said. “We’re not going to meet every kid with one box.”

Taking a hard look at curriculum is important—but more important is making sure teachers have the training they need to evaluate practices themselves, said Beverine-Curry, of The Reading League. “Just handing teachers materials or a program or a curriculum is not going to do the job.”

Is Phonics Boring? These Teachers Say It Doesn’t Have to Be

By Sarah Sparks

Want to know if it’s time for phonics in Belinda Williams’s kindergarten classroom? Stand in the hall and listen.

“I love phonics because it’s something that’s so easy to make fun,” Williams said. “We’re always doing something very active and very musical.”

Williams said her Franklin Community Schools in Franklin, Ind., uses a 90-minute reading block each day, of which 35 minutes cover phonics instruction and practice. Yet she said she usually also dedicates her personal flex time later in the day to phonics, too, with different games everyday, using magnets and Slinkies, among other activities.

There’s something to be learned from teachers who end a lesson with singing and dancing students, especially when covering skills some bemoan as the most boring part of early literacy.

“Early reading instruction needs new thinking. Phonics instruction needs to change as well,” said Jeannine Herron, a research neuropsychologist and reading coach in San Rafael, Calif. “Traditional instruction usually presents the skills needed for good reading as isolated skills. First comes phoneme awareness, then phonics, then comprehension and fluency. However, the brain needs to link new learning to something it already knows.”

Herron argues a traditional emphasis on worksheet practice and drills of isolated sounds that are still common in many early reading classrooms turns off teachers and stu-
Oral Language in Reading Instruction

Students. She and other educators favor a faster, brighter approach. While research suggests early readers benefit from learning phonics in a structured, systemic way, young students in particular have been shown to remember more when given frequent activity.

Only 1 in 20 teachers reported learning most of what they know about reading instruction before they started teaching, according to a nationally representative survey by the Education Week Research Center. One-third of teachers reported learning it from professional development or coaches in their district.

When Janiel Wagstaff, the English/language arts coordinator for Windridge Elementary in the Davis, Utah, school district first started teaching, “I felt like it was a worksheet factory,” she said. Every new sound or concept called for practice worksheets, and it was a grind.

“So the kids are working hard, you know, but I was basically doing back flips and handing out M&M’s to get them motivated. ‘Cause if you’re sitting in your seat by yourself doing a worksheet, how fun and motivating is that?” she said.

Worse, Wagstaff said, “What I found was that what [students] did on the worksheets didn’t transfer to real reading and writing, because it was simplified. Kids can do a lot of those worksheets without much actual deep thinking or ... any real application of what they’d just learned. ... It’s gotten better, but that’s still a rampant problem. Look at [the online marketplace] Teachers Pay Teachers; they are selling massive amounts of [worksheets].”

Wagstaff said she now keeps silent, solitary work to a minimum, instead incorporating chants, nursery rhymes, and partner reading, and encouraging students to play with the patterns of sounds in words.

Herron, who works with the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development on literacy programs including one called “Talking Fingers,” recommended that teachers move beyond having students visually identify elements like blends and diagraphs—for example, underlining them—to focus more on feeling the movements their mouths make as they say the sounds.

Over time, these sound analyses can turn into games, said Herron, who works on one program called “Talking: “If the teacher starts with a simple rhyme like /at/, she can play with different sounds to start the word—’What would you add to make this word say ‘cat’, ‘fat’, ‘hat’, ‘sat’?” In a few lessons [the student] has learned to segment four words, identify six speech sounds, and link the appropriate shapes (letters) to the sounds.”

For older struggling readers, “the material may be targeted for younger kids, but it makes no difference as far as it seeming to be too trivial or lacking the ‘wow’ factor. ... When they recognize that they’re being given a lesson on how to read, learning how to read becomes a motivator in itself.”

J. Lee, literacy special education teacher, Bosier City, La.

“If you are acquiring phonemic awareness, you are understanding how sound works in spoken words. ... See, some teachers don’t like students to make noise, [but] for me, phonemic awareness and phonics instruction should be noisy. It should never be quiet.”

Janiel Wagstaff, English language arts coordinator, Windridge Elementary, Davis, Utah

“Vowels! E, i, and u, are the most difficult to learn, across the board, every year. We’ll do chants: ‘I-ih-igloo, e-eh-elephant.’ ... And I also try to give them the visual with the sound of the word, so ‘eh, elephant,’ with the ‘e’ like the elephant’s trunk turning in, or ‘elbow.’”

Belinda Williams, kindergarten teacher, Franklin Community School, Franklin, Ind.
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The Science of Reading Should Make Room for Skepticism (Just Not for Ignorance)

COVID-19 reinforces a clear truth about science: The importance of acknowledging uncertainty

By Claude Goldenberg

The COVID-19 pandemic has provided front row seats to an underappreciated truth about science. I’m not referring to white coats and spinning test tubes. I’m referring to the part of science dealing with uncertainty.

Those who tout the science of teaching—particularly the science of reading—should take note.

In the beginning of the pandemic, uncertainty was all there was. What’s this new virus? How do we stay safe?

Since then, masking and social-distancing regulations have undergone continual changes as variants emerge and data are collected and analyzed. Data and understanding have increased. So have frustration, confusion, distrust, and cynicism.

But—as President Joe Biden might say—he’s the thing: Data offer no guarantee, don’t answer all questions, and are often contradictory.

There are now some well-established facts about the coronavirus. Most importantly, the vaccines are extremely effective in preventing serious disease and death. Masks and social distancing also contribute to slowing the spread of the virus. But there are no guarantees, as the rise of the Delta variant and waning of vaccine efficacy have shown.

Responsible medical professionals say two things: First, they emphasize what we know minimizes the disease’s spread. Second, they acknowledge what we still don’t know and don’t overpromise.

This is what gives science its credibility: the systematic search for answers coupled with a willingness to acknowledge uncertainty.

“All science has uncertainty,” scholars Baruch Fischhoff and Alex L. Davis wrote in the journal Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences. “A healthy scientific community rewards members who raise problems before their critics and penalizes those who overstate results.”

Which brings me back to reading science. In contrast to what we’ve generally heard during the pandemic, the unknowns around the science of reading are rarely acknowledged adequately by reading-science advocates. This can give the “science” part of the “science of reading” a bad name.

In 2004—at a time when laboratory scientists were slowly chipping at the mRNA research that would lay the foundation for the COVID-19 vaccine—education researcher Joseph Torgesen laid out these reading-science knowns and unknowns. Unfortunately, his contribution has not had nearly the impact on the science of reading that mRNA has had in creating life-saving vaccines.

Torgesen and a network of researchers quantified the extent to which early reading failure could be prevented if beginning and early reading instruction focused on “foundational skills.” Most people know these, a bit simplistically, as “phonics” or “decoding.”

Here is what Torgesen said we know or can claim with reasonable certainty:

Early reading failure could be reduced if instruction focused on the foundations of word recognition—letters and sounds, phonemic awareness, and knowing how to use letters and sounds to read words. Children who begin school without good phonological skills and understanding of the alphabetic principle are at risk of developing reading difficulties.

But just how much foundational-skills instruction is needed, how intensely and explicitly, varies. All children benefit from at least some explicit instruction in foundational skills. Some will require very little; some will require a great deal.

Children who are poor readers at the end of 1st grade rarely become at least average-level readers by the time they finish elementary school. Early intervention focusing on foundational skills with children at risk for experiencing reading difficulties in K-2 will increase the likelihood that they become at least low-average readers by the end of 2nd grade.

In six experimental studies that Torgesen reviewed, interventions with either the poorest readers or children at risk for reading failure brought most of the students (56 percent to 92 percent) to at least the 30th percentile (the beginning of the “low average” range) in word-reading skills. If the procedures and conditions used in these studies were implemented nationwide, the failure rate in early reading—the percentage of students who would not reach the 30th percentile on basic word-reading skills by the end of 2nd grade—could theoretically be reduced to between 2 percent and 6 percent.

Finally, much more than foundational skills (language, knowledge, experience) are...
required if we are to prevent reading failure after 2nd grade.

Here is what Torgesen said were the uncertainties:

- How effective are early interventions in the absence of solid classroom instruction (i.e., Tier 1) that effectively taught foundational skills to most students in the studies?

- What conditions need to be in place so that virtually every child can acquire adequate word-level reading skills in early-elementary school?

- How effective are early interventions in preventing reading failure from 3rd grade on?

Torgesen acknowledged that the standard he used to judge success—the 30th percentile on basic word-reading skills—is very limited. The criterion for success at preventing early reading failure, he wrote, must include reading comprehension at the end of 3rd grade.

Torgesen noted that such studies did not exist. The significance of attaining near-average word-reading skills lies in the expectation that doing so will promote reading development and help prevent reading failure beyond 2nd grade. But there remains an urgent need for research looking into the role of language, comprehension, knowledge, and experience in preventing reading failure.

The science of reading is not as clear on fundamental facts as is the science of COVID-19 immunology. Phonics, decoding, and associated skills provide no immunizations against poor reading outcomes. But they do provide a foundation upon which we must build.

More than vaccine skeptics, “phonics skeptics” have some reason to be skeptical. There is more to reading than recognizing words.

Most important, there’s still a great deal we don’t know about how to assure virtually all children become successful readers. As researchers Sharon Vaughn and Jack Fletcher point out, “There are some rather large holes in our collective knowledge.”

Skepticism is an important part of science. As the Delta variant began spreading, a once-skeptical Arkansan who had been avoiding the shots due to false reports that they cause infertility, learned through online research that vaccination was the way to go. She told The Washington Post, “Skepticism is a good thing. But to be ignorant is a different issue.”

Spoken like a true scientist.

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

We begin with some common ground far from the unproductive poles:

- We can all agree that too many children are not reading proficiently in the early years of school, which makes their futures less hopeful.

- Most educators agree that learning to read is not a process in which children simply teach themselves; the great majority of students need good instruction, and all students can benefit from it.

- A strong literacy program must include daily, explicit phonics and word study, and teachers must have excellent knowledge of the alphabetic system and how it works to teach children to read.

- We want our students to become competent, voluminous, voluntary readers who continue to learn from and use literacy all their lives.

We need strong instruction in reading and writing to assure equitable outcomes for each child. It will surely take all of us, working together, to accomplish this challenging goal. Throughout our work with schools, we have observed the way educators work together, even if initially their views on the reading process differ, in the interest of each individual child.

Any approach that overemphasizes one aspect of literacy over another will likely neglect other important areas. Building on the work of
a variety of literacy researchers, we developed our own view of a comprehensive approach to literacy learning. We advocate literacy approaches that avoid emphasizing one aspect of literacy at the expense of another and instead address the orchestration of the elements of effective reading—phonemic awareness, phonics, accuracy, fluency, comprehension, vocabulary, and engagement. We aim to provide instruction that is deeply connected so that school makes sense to children, and they learn how written language is connected to spoken language.

Confusions surrounding approaches to literacy instruction are compounded because commonly used labels are not clearly understood. For example, we have been characterized as advocates of something labeled “balanced literacy.” In our first book, Guided Reading, which was published in 1996, we used the word “balanced” as an adjective when describing a high-quality language and literacy environment with both small-group and whole-group differentiated instruction. Since that time, “balanced literacy” has become a label that can mean different things to different people. Rather than applying a label, we have always advocated for educators to describe their rationales and practices rather than label their approach. We believe labels such as “balanced literacy” serve no one.

Both classroom- and laboratory-based research have proved the importance of phonics instruction, but such research has not identified any particular kind of phonics instruction to be better than others, nor has it identified a need to use a particular kind of text. Our curriculum resources include daily phonics instruction within a comprehensive set of related practices. We believe children need both explicit instruction and the opportunity to apply knowledge while reading and writing continuous text.

Our conclusion is that there cannot be a one-size-fits-all approach. The responsibility to the child belongs to the teacher and not a “program.”

While we do not object to the data and research being put forth by advocates of what is called the science of reading, we do have concerns about the narrow interpretations that may arise from it. We caution against sweeping policy decisions that override the judgment of local educators.

As educators, we serve a highly diverse student population, including many children who come to school with disadvantages. Individuals have different needs and learn in different ways. There is no quick fix, nor is there one way that all children must learn. We do see patterns in children’s literacy development, but expert teachers tune in to individual needs and strengths and thoughtfully adapt the way they teach. This is responsive teaching. These small but constant instructional decisions make teaching powerful enough to make a difference.

The challenges ahead remind us of the vital importance of education leadership at every level—district, school, and classroom. As you adjust to the new challenges this school year is likely to present, lean into the practices you have observed make a positive impact on the emotional, social, and literacy outcomes of students. Those practices, with a tweak here and there, stand the test of time in supporting learners. Also, continue to build and nurture a collaborative, supportive culture that rests on the shared values of your learning community.

Advancing children’s literacy learning and elevating the expertise of teachers has been and continues to be our life’s work. There will always be different views, but we believe our energy should be directed toward collaborating, problem-solving, and thoughtfully examining the curriculum and the teaching to make them more effective for children.

Our message today is that—especially at the start of another challenging school year—if we work together and not against each other, we stand a better chance of ensuring that all children have the chance to live a literate life.

Irene C. Fountas is the Marie M. Clay Endowed Chair for Early Literacy and Reading Recovery and the director of the Center for Reading Recovery and Literacy Collaborative in the Graduate School of Education at Lesley University in Cambridge, Mass.

Gay Su Pinnell is a professor emerita in the School of Teaching and Learning at Ohio State University and a member of the Reading Hall of Fame. In 2018 Fountas and Pinnell were the recipients of the inaugural International Literacy Association’s Diane Lapp & James Flood Professional Collaborator Award.
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