

On Teaching Our Children to Read

A Research Precis for the Minnesota Legislature

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- The Simple View of Reading Explained
 - The Basics of Reading Curriculum
 - Minnesota's Reading Performance
- Replication and the Science of Reading
- What's Up with the "Reading Wars"?

With end-noted references

On Teaching Children to Read

Reading is the foundation of children's school and life success. It empowers their future and the well-being of their families, their communities, and our nation¹. Reading extends the reach and permanence of oral language for communication, learning, and thought². But recently there has been a great deal of miscommunication about reading development, instruction, difficulties, and disorders. Herewith, a quick brief on the basics.

What is Reading? The Simple View Explained

In the "simple view," reading involves two sets of mental processes³. First, reading requires that children decipher written marks (on a page or screen) as *word forms*. Identifying word forms is known as **decoding** or word recognition. Decoding skill requires alphabet knowledge, awareness of language sounds, phonics (letter-sound matching), sight word reading, and fluency (speed and accuracy)⁴.

Second, reading requires **language comprehension**: understanding decoded word forms as items of vocabulary (having definitions), grammatically arranged in clauses and sentences, to convey meanings intended by an author. Language comprehension ability requires vocabulary knowledge, familiarity with grammatical patterns, writing techniques, text structures, basic reasoning, and prior knowledge⁵.

Both decoding skills and language comprehension ability are necessary to read well (and to perform well on a standardized, end-of-year reading comprehension test). Neither is sufficient alone⁶.

What Children Need to Read Well

There are different views about how best to teach reading. In the past, many whole language advocates recommended that teachers emphasize "meaning making" (i.e., language comprehension), claiming decoding skills would emerge "naturally."⁷ Today, some phonics advocates recommend an emphasis on decoding, claiming language development will emerge "naturally."⁸ Both views are incomplete. Well-organized classroom instruction by well-prepared teachers advances both children's decoding skills **and** their language development⁹. "Nature" rewards the well instructed.

Current recommendations from research are more nuanced¹⁰. For instance, it is well understood that decoding instruction with phonics works better for most students than decoding instruction without phonics¹¹. But there is little evidence that any one approach to teaching phonics is the most effective¹². And no method is certain to work for everyone. Yet, additionally, research suggests excessive teaching of phonics to the exclusion of language development impairs reading achievement for many students, especially those who come to kindergarten with language development disparities¹³. And research shows both skills training and *meaningful practice* is required for strong student reading achievement¹⁴. To provide this to all students, Kentucky schools need well prepared teachers of reading¹⁵.

In addition to good decoding instruction with phonics, future readers need writing instruction¹⁶, vocabulary development¹⁷, formal oral language use¹⁸, comprehension strategies¹⁹, knowledge about the world at large and the people in it²⁰, engaged discussion with others about what they read²¹, and ample opportunity and *motivation* to practice their reading for school-level learning²².

How Well Do Minnesota’s School Children Read?

The question: “Why can’t our kids read?” is provocative but misleading. Minnesota kids read well. For over 20 years, Minnesota students scored *significantly better on average* than students across the US on the only test that compares Minnesota children to others: the National Assessment of Educational Progress (conducted by the Institute of Educational Sciences, US Department of Education)²³. On the 2022 end-of-year Minnesota Comprehensive Assessment III, over 50% of students across grade levels scored *proficient* in reading, more than on any other subject, in spite of COVID learning lag²⁴. Naturally, some kids learn to read more easily than others, while others have a harder time learning to read; some kids need more time to learn, some need more support²⁵—but this is no surprise—people differ. Beyond that, some students have severe impairments, and some children are poorly instructed. More troubling, income and racial disparities in reading test performance persist for reasons in and beyond the schoolhouse²⁶. Well prepared teachers of reading can address diverse needs for all students, but only given equitable resourcing and inclusion²⁷.

Research Limitations and Policy Track Records

Advocates for particular instructional innovations often cherry-pick promising research studies to “prove” their claims. But scientific research reviews (e.g., meta-analyses) reveal more ambiguity²⁸. Unfortunately, scientific reading research focuses its analyses on only a few easily measured variables (and usually with inadequate subject sets)²⁹. Contradictory findings abound³⁰. The science of learning and development shows student growth is far more complex than a few variables³¹. Meanwhile, the historical record for reading education reform policies—mandates for programmatic, structured, scripted, or systematic training packages matched to standardized state or nationwide tests—have never consistently improved outcomes beyond traditional methods of instruction, despite much greater expense³².

When Simple Answers Are Not Your Friend: “The Reading Wars”

Periodically, news features report on supposed “reading wars” in education³³. It is not clear where these wars are being fought other than in the imaginations of pundits and publicists. There are no reading wars between teachers or researchers³⁴. “War” narratives collapse complex issues to two-sided contests: student-centered vs. didactic instruction, comprehensive learning vs. skill-drilling, balanced approaches vs. singular focus, teachers vs. parents³⁵. Team sports are wonderful, but the complexity of human development cannot be parsed with simplistic binaries³⁶. All approaches hold potential utility in the hands of a skilled teacher³⁷. Effective instruction depends on bringing to bear the methods necessary for effective student learning—and these effective methods will vary by individual and across their lifespan³⁸.

Quick fixes and one-size-fits-all silver-bullet solutions are the fairy dust of educational product marketers. Neither anxious parents nor taxpayers should be fooled. There are no products to “teacher-proof” the classroom. Nor should there be. Experienced teachers and educational researchers know better: Learning to read is easy for some children, occasionally difficult for most, very hard for others. But with sufficient instructional support and time to practice, all children can learn to read³⁹.

Well prepared teachers of reading—and reading specialists for students who need help keeping up with their peers—are Minnesota’s most effective means for advancing students’ reading development. We recommend their numbers be expanded with adequate funding **so they can reach all students**. Our children’s future as thriving readers, writers, thinkers, and citizens rests in the balance.

References:

- ¹ Wolf, M. (2018). *Reader, come home: The reading brain in a digital world*. New York: HarperCollins. Beginning in the late Middle Ages, literacy emerged in tandem with the establishment of universities and trade networks and early capitalism; the cultural and scientific shifts that unfolded thereafter, including the increasing influence of representative governance, especially in the anglophone world, paved the way to the constitutional liberties and freedoms we hold dear today.
- ² Willingham, D.T. (2017). *The reading mind: A cognitive approach to understanding how the mind reads*. New York: Jossey-Bass.
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- ⁴ Ehri, L.C. (2020). The science of learning to read words: A case for systematic phonics instruction. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 55, S45-S60.
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- ¹¹ National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD). (2000). Report of the National Reading Panel. *Teaching children to read: An evidence-based assessment of scientific research literature on reading and its implications for reading instruction*. NIH Publication No. 00-4754). Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.
- ¹² Bowers, J.S. (2020). Reconsidering the evidence that systematic phonics is more effective than alternative methods of reading instruction. *Educational Psychology Review*, 32, 681-705.
- ¹³ Foorman, B.R., Herrera, S., Petscher, Y., Mitchell, A., Trueman, A. (2015). The structure of oral language and reading and their relation to comprehension in kindergarten through grade 2. *Reading Writing Quarterly*, 28, 655-681. It cannot be stressed enough how important strong decoding instruction is to early reading development. But those skills must be learned in tandem with strong language comprehension development and engagement with what is read. In a recent interview (The Missouri Reader, 2022-3, Vol 46), renowned reading scholar Dr. Timothy Shanahan observed: "Is there any reason to believe that teaching phonics first or that only teaching phonics for a year or two is a good idea? If you have phonics stuff to sell, it probably seems like it is. But if you have any interest in the science of reading (that is, you want to base your actions on data rather than sales talks and unintentional media hyperbole), then it's clear those scorched earth approaches are bad pedagogy." He went on to note several major research syntheses making this point over the years, including Jeanne Chall's *Reading: The Great Debate*, 1967; Marilyn Jager Adams' landmark *Beginning to Read*, 1990; Hollis Scarborough's often misinterpreted reading development rope graphic; and the *Report of the National Reading Panel*, 2000, from which we even today get the "Big 5 Pillars of Reading": phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. He then listed off additional and more recent reviews by Reid Lyon, Jack Fletcher, Barbara Foorman, Joe Torgeson; Sharon Vaughn and Maureen Lovett; Conner, Morison, & Katch; Karen Harris and Steve Graham—all renowned advocates of the Science of Reading and structured phonics instruction. All are in agreement: Language comprehension matters just as much as phonics instruction, as does writing, formal presentation, engaging texts of interest to the students, discussion, and other means of promoting students reading practice.

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- ²² Allington, R.L. (2012). *What really matters for struggling readers: Designing research-based programs*. Boston, MA: Pearson. See also Allington, R.L. & Gabriel, R.E. (2012). Every child, every day. *Educational Leadership* 69, 10-15.
- ²³ National Assessment of Educational Progress. (n.d.). 2022 Reading State Snapshot Report, Minnesota, Grade 4, Public Schools. It is worth noting that the US Long-term Trend data for 2022 shows a record-breaking decline in reading achievement due to the pandemic. Minnesota snapshot available at: <https://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/subject/publications/st2022/pdf/2023010MN4.pdf>
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