

SPOTLIGHT



A student reads with Minnie, a “learning-companion robot,” at his home as part of a research study at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Source: UW Continuing Studies and University Communications

BUILDING READING PROFICIENCY

EDITOR'S NOTE

Schools are rethinking the most effective ways to build students' reading proficiency. In this Spotlight, learn how new audits are helping schools evaluate reading curriculum, the role of equity and empathy in reading instruction, and how buddy reading can benefit struggling students.

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New Audits Help Schools Rethink Students' Reading 'Diets'

Goal is to provide a richer curriculum

By Stephen Sawchuk

Kale and iceberg lettuce both meet the formal definition of a leafy green, but that's where the similarities end. A new curriculum project is trying to help districts make similar distinctions in the diet of reading materials their students get: Are they complex and maybe a bit challenging—or bland, inoffensive, and not particularly nutritious?

Johns Hopkins University's Institute for Education Policy has been developing its curriculum-mapping project to be sure that over their K-12 careers, students are exposed to enough high-quality literature—as well as nonfiction that illuminates core topics within science, history, and social studies—to give them sufficient background knowledge.

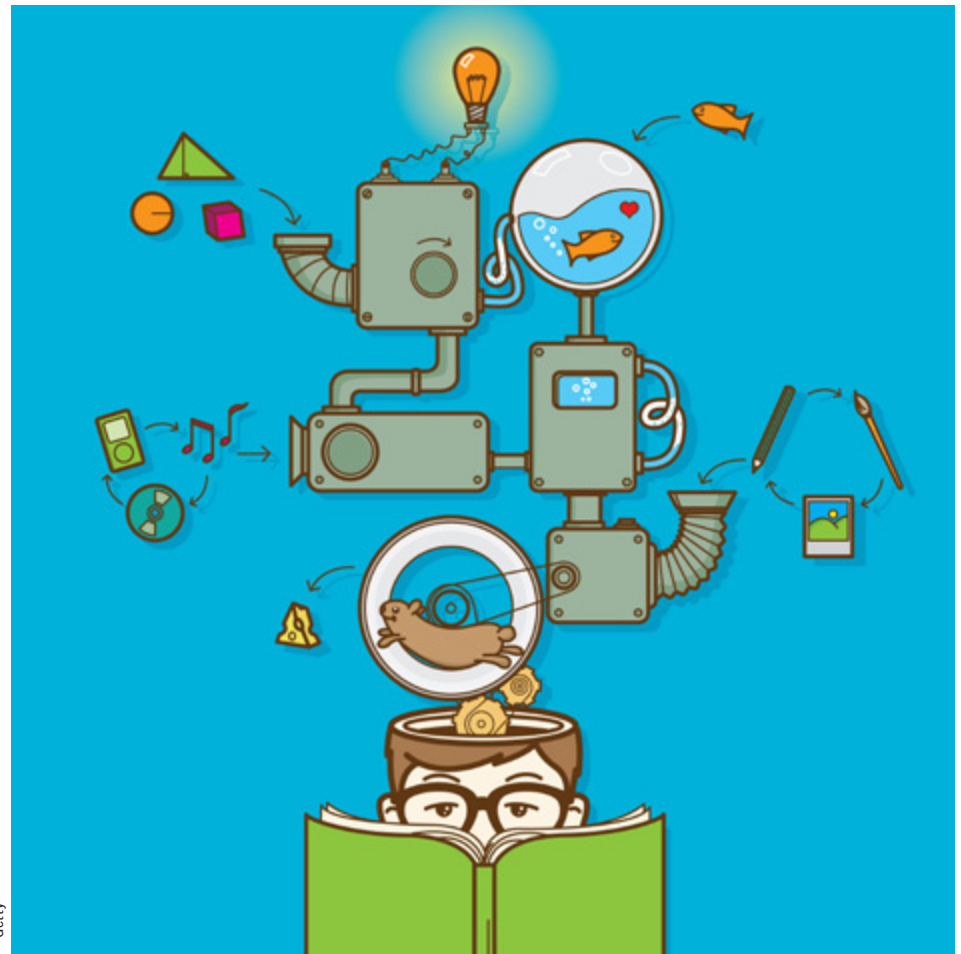
The basic idea of auditing what students learn isn't a particularly new one. Dozens of consulting groups offer services promising insights into what students actually study, but few do so with an eye to a specific sequence of knowledge that young readers need to make sense of unfamiliar texts. The Johns Hopkins project grows from a burgeoning body of cognitive-science research backing up the notion that flat reading scores reflect not weak skills but uneven access to content.

"The premise of all of this is that the achievement gap is really a knowledge gap," said David Steiner, the institute's executive director. "We really start where the question of alignment stops and say: What are we teaching? What is in the curriculum? Does it really build year after year or is it a scatter diagram of random topics?"

Mapping Content

The Hopkins project also comes as another sign of the growing interest in the quality of the everyday learning materials used in classrooms across the nation.

After decades of experimenting with school structure and teacher-incentive



programs, K-12 power players from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation on down have grown interested in the promise of curriculum, drawn in part by research suggesting that some materials help students learn more than others.

Curriculum reform is never without controversy and has in a sense been one of the Achilles' heels of K-12 education for the last century, as education traditionalists and progressives battled over whether to prioritize content or skills in successive waves of policy. The academic standards movement of the past two decades in effect called a truce to that debate: Standards laid out basic end goals for student

learning but left it to districts and often to individual teachers to select the actual content of lessons.

And that's where the idea of auditing comes in. Sequencing content can be done in a coherent way, or it can be done in a slapdash fashion, according to Steiner.

Developed with the help of the advocacy group Chiefs for Change, the Knowledge Map tool, as it's called, is largely informed by the work of E.D. Hirsch Jr., a nationally known proponent of building student knowledge through content. It draws on Hirsch's most recent *Dictionary of Cultural Literacy*, to which Hopkins officials have added phonics in the earliest

grades, an emphasis on cultural relevancy, and children's literature.

How It Works

The tool sets out broad domains—like American literature—and then topics (Native American, realism, dystopia) and subtopics (Langston Hughes, Sandra Cisneros). Then trained teachers go through text by text to see what's covered in which grades, where topics are reinforced, and where holes or weaknesses lie.

So far, the institute has worked with several districts and at least two states; Hopkins wouldn't release their names, citing confidentiality. But leaders in Baltimore and Indianapolis agreed to share insights gained from their own audits.

Worthwhile Texts. When Indianapolis put three commonly used textbook series to the test, it discovered that too many of the core texts that anchored each themed unit were aimed at getting students to exercise a skill, like finding the main idea, rather than focusing on exposing students to knowledge, said Aleesia Johnson, the district's interim superintendent.

"Oftentimes, the stories were pretty short," she said. "We needed to have more

high-quality anchor texts from authentic authors, not just ones that are sort of just written for textbooks."

By contrast, Baltimore's audit found that most of its anchor readings were of high quality. But the secondary readings were generally weaker, said Janise Lane, the executive director of teaching and learning for the district.

Coherence. As any parent whose children have studied dinosaurs year after year can attest, students often get repeated exposure to certain topics while other key areas go missing. In Indianapolis, readings on American history and geography were especially weak or missing, Johnson said.

The review also helped to identify missed opportunities to connect content disciplines together, Lane noted. Baltimore had a 3rd grade reading unit on oceans, but students didn't study marine biology in science until the 5th grade.

Cultural Relevance. Both Baltimore and Indianapolis wanted to be sure that the texts reflected the student population. The audits found that Indianapolis' materials did a good job reflecting its student body overall but didn't have much representing Asian-American students' experiences. In Baltimore, the problem wasn't so

much a lack of diverse texts as it was what they emphasized: Students read over and over about the history of slavery and racism but got next to nothing on the Harlem Renaissance, the Great Migration, or the outpouring of black art and culture that shaped the 20th century.

That finding prompted the district to rebalance topics and to craft a new lessons on the history and heritage of Baltimore, not just what's been portrayed about their city in popular media and in television shows like "The Wire."

"It got us really thinking about how we build backwards so students have part of the hope and triumphant celebration of the rich culture of Baltimore," Lane said.

Baltimore's audit informed its choice of a new English/language arts curriculum last year, while Indianapolis plans to incorporate the findings in its search for a new series in 2020. (It has not yet put out a bid for those materials.)

So far, Hopkins hasn't made its review frameworks public, and the reviews are available only in English/language arts for a consulting fee. But the group would eventually like to make the tool and the audits public so that all districts can benefit from them, Steiner said. ■

Published August 26, 2018, in Education Week

Are Classroom Reading Groups The Best Way to Teach Reading? Maybe Not.

By Sarah D. Sparks

Educators and researchers are looking to update one of the oldest, most popular—and at times one of the most controversial—methods of targeting instruction: the elementary reading circle.

Grouping students of similar reading skills—think “bluebirds” or “redbirds,” for example—has become ubiquitous in American classrooms as a way to target instruction to students’ learning needs, spreading from 68 percent of classrooms in 1992 to more than 90 percent by 2015. But evidence suggests that the practice may be less beneficial than teachers

think: It can exacerbate achievement gaps and even slow reading growth for some children unless the groups are fluid and focused on skills rather than overall achievement.

The spread of modern ability grouping is likely in response to growing pressures to raise test scores under the No Child Left Behind Act's accountability system, said Adam Gamoran, the president of the William T. Grant Foundation and a long-time researcher of ability-grouping strategies. “Many people believe it is possible to use ability grouping as differentiated instruction to maximize achievement

growth,” he said. “It often doesn't work out that way in practice.”

Early grades are particularly likely to group students by ability, because the typical bell curve in a kindergarten or 1st grade classroom is so wide.

In one forthcoming study, Marshall Jean, a research fellow at the Northwestern University Institute for Policy Research, tracked nearly 12,000 students from kindergarten through 3rd grade in more than 2,100 schools, following them through high, middle, and low reading groups or ungrouped reading classes.

He found about half of children who were in the lowest reading group in kindergarten were able to improve to at least the median group by the end of 1st grade. By the end of 3rd grade, 46 percent of those who had previously been in the lowest group in 2nd grade were able to move up. However, Jean found that none of the students initially placed in the lowest kindergarten group ever caught up to the reading level of their classmates who had started out in the highest reading group.

“The structural inertia is considerable,” Jean noted, finding that having been in the highest reading group in an earlier grade tended to protect students from being put in a lower group later, even with significantly lower scores. Students in lower reading groups not only progressed more slowly academically, but while they were in lower reading groups, they were also slower to develop “learning behaviors,” such as varied interests, concentration on tasks, and persistence in the face of difficulty. Those behaviors, in turn, reduced the students’ likelihood to move up to higher reading groups in later grades.

Potential Bias?

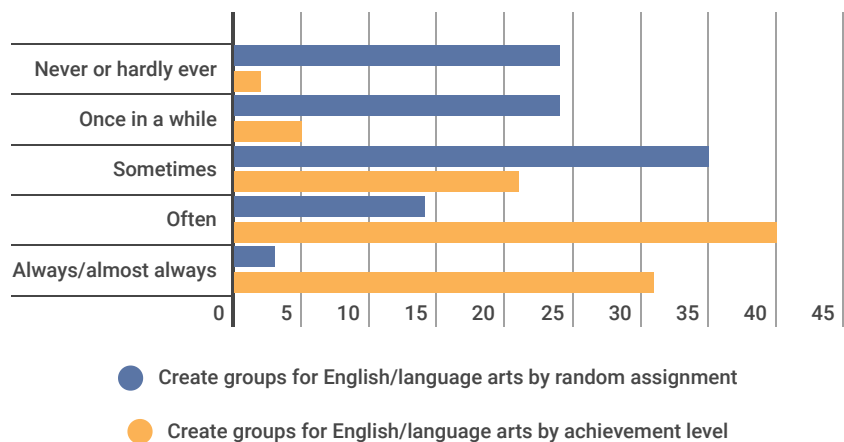
“If you are more motivated and the teacher perceives that about you, you are more likely to be put into a higher reading group,” Jean said. “But there was also some evidence for bias: Even after controlling for prior reading achievement and learning behaviors, students in poverty were more likely to be assigned to lower groups, and their wealthier peers more likely to be tapped for higher reading groups. They were small effects, but they are there and consistent across grade levels and statistically significant.”

Similarly, in a series of three new studies in Switzerland, researchers asked practicing teachers and college students to evaluate profiles of students whose scores put them on the borderline of more or less academically rigorous tracks in high school; the students’ achievement scores were held constant but their backgrounds were altered to make them appear to be either high- or low-income. Over multiple studies, recently published online in the journal *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, both student and practicing teachers were more likely to refer lower-income students to a lower academic track and higher-income students to a more challenging track, even though their scores were the same.

“Because of inequality outside of schools, children from different socioeconomic and racial and ethnic backgrounds often come to school with different levels of preparation. And so by separating the children by their initial reading ability, the teachers are also separating [them] by socioeconomic status or race or ethnicity,” said Gamoran of the William T. Grant Foundation. “And, of course, when teachers have low expectations for their weaker readers, they slow down the pace even more than they would need to, so the low-achieving students fall further and further behind instead of catching up.”

How Often Are Teachers Using Reading Groups in 4th Grade?

Teachers are more likely to place students in reading groups based on ability than they are to randomly assign them. Among the 4th grade teachers who use reading groups, the majority of them report using ability-based groups often or always.



Reading Achievement

High- and low-poverty classes that used ability-based reading groups “almost always” scored lower on average than those that used them “hardly ever” on the 2017 National Assessment of Educational Progress.

	High Poverty Schools	Low Poverty Schools
Never or hardly ever (use ability grouping)	220	228
Always/almost always (use ability grouping)	219	226

SOURCE: National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) 2017 Reading Assessments

Fluid Groups

Besser Elementary School in Alpena, Mich., switched to ability grouping in its early-reading classrooms about three years ago. It's not clear yet how well the practice is working. About half the school's students live in poverty, and their achievement gap with higher-income students has stayed stubbornly wide.

"We were focused on making instruction more meaningful for all students. Teachers need to focus on struggling students, but on the other end of the continuum where students needed to be enriched, those students were being left behind," said Eric Cardwell, the principal of Besser Elementary. "The challenge teachers have seen now is they're having to plan for three to four different groups."

Those high-achieving students have improved, he said, but the groups themselves have remained more stable than he'd like.

"What we frequently see is slight movement of students. You don't generally see them jumping two levels at a time when we only do data reviews three times a year," Cardwell said. "Ideally, there would be more [reviews] so that there would be more fluidity, but time is always the monster that's chasing you: time to review data, time to plan."

Internationally, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development found that countries that predominantly use ability grouping showed significantly deeper performance inequality on the Program for International Student Assessment but no significant benefits for the countries' overall performance. OECD noted that more than 9 in 10 U.S. 15-year-olds attend schools where they are grouped by ability.

"What we know now that we didn't know back in the '80s is that when you group up students, it has to be specifically relative to the content that's going to be taught," Gamoran said. "There're no IQ tests, not even a general reading-ability test that can tell you how to form the groups so that you can meet their needs. You have to form the groups specific to the instruction that's coming and then reassess to form new groups specific to the next instructional unit."

Changing the Calculation

One California program has shown promise in making reading circles more

flexible and less stigmatizing. In Assessment to Instruction, or A2I, teachers give a diagnostic assessment to all students every eight weeks to identify strengths and weaknesses in particular reading skills in four areas of literacy: decoding, fluency, comprehension, and usage. An algorithm based on the assessment tells teachers how much individual, small-group, and independent working time each student needs, and students are grouped for instruction based on particular focus skills rather than overall reading ability.

"What we've discovered is that it's fine to have a group of students of different levels, as long as they all are working on the same learning needs," said Carol Connor, an education professor at the University of California, Irvine, who developed the program. "You can have students of different reading abilities who all need to work on decoding. ... What doesn't work is if you put your kids who already know how to code in a group to learn how to code, again. You receive more behavior problems because they're really bored, ... and our research suggests that it has a negative effect on their growth."

Phoenix Collegiate Academy (now ASU Prep) in Arizona was one of the schools that piloted the A2I program, and Amanda Jacobs, then-principal, said it changed the way teachers and administrators approached differentiating instruction in small groups. Previously, teachers focused on providing equal time with each small group, but "it shifts your perspective from trying to get to every kid in the time you have to being more strategic with how you're spending your minutes with each child."

In a recent longitudinal, randomized controlled study, students who participated in the targeted reading groups over three years performed significantly higher than students in a control group that used standard reading classes. Though 45 percent of the students in the targeted reading groups came from a low-income background, by 3rd grade, all of them had higher reading scores than the national average for their grade, and none had scores below the expectations for their grade level.

"There are no 'bluebirds' being the bluebirds all year long," Connor said. ■

Research Analyst Alex Harwin and Librarian Holly Peele contributed to this article.

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Can Buddy Reading With a Bot Help Struggling Students?


By Sarah D. Sparks

Decades of research show students read better when they read with someone else, be it a parent, a peer, or even a puppy. Now a new study in the journal *Science Robotics* suggests social robots can join the ranks of successful study buddies.

University of Wisconsin-Madison researchers developed a social robot dubbed "Minnie" to guide one-on-one reading sessions with middle school students at home. Over two weeks, 10- to 12-year-old students were assigned to either print-based reading or at-home sessions with Minnie. The robot suggested books the children might like and listened while the students read, occasionally expressing interest, excitement, or fear at different parts of the story and asking questions of the student along the way.

The study found students in both groups read about the same number of days, and students in the print group read for slightly longer time periods. But compared to students just using the print activity, researchers found more students working with the robot reported feeling motivated to read, comprehended their stories well, and were significantly more likely to discuss topics related to their books.

Joseph Michaelis, an education psychologist at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and the lead author of the study, said social reading in general gets students more motivated, "and the hope is that if we can get a robot to behave socially enough, we can reap some of those benefits here. ... We don't really feel that the robot should be replacing human interaction, but it's not always the case that kids have the opportunity, particularly at home, to read with someone else."



Our reading scores haven't changed, despite heavily investing in technology.

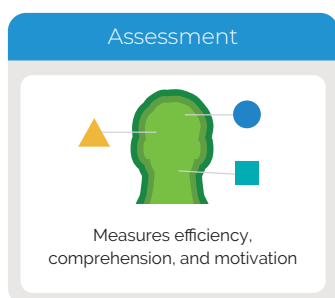
My struggling readers are unmotivated and avoid reading whenever possible.

Many of our students are not reading at grade level, despite all the efforts we've made.

How does **Reading Plus** help educators ensure that every student becomes a **proficient reader?**

A 360-Degree View

The Reading Plus adaptive assessment gives educators a 360-degree view of each student. It provides a data-driven starting point for the personalized instruction and practice students need to become independent readers. Rich data is transformed into a variety of reports that give teachers the information they need for targeted instruction.



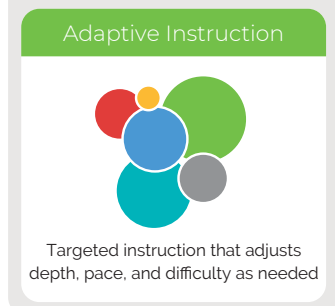
Assessment

- Diagnostic profile for each student
- Data-driven starting point for practice and instruction



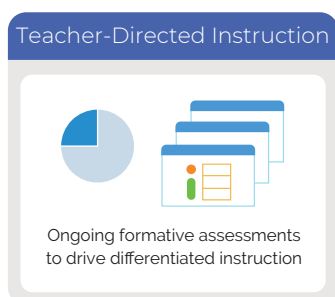
Personalized Practice

- Proven instructional and practice activities
- Builds and strengthens the visual skills needed for efficiency



Adaptive Instruction

- Continuous data collection to customize instructional scaffolds
- Assists students in developing capacity and independence



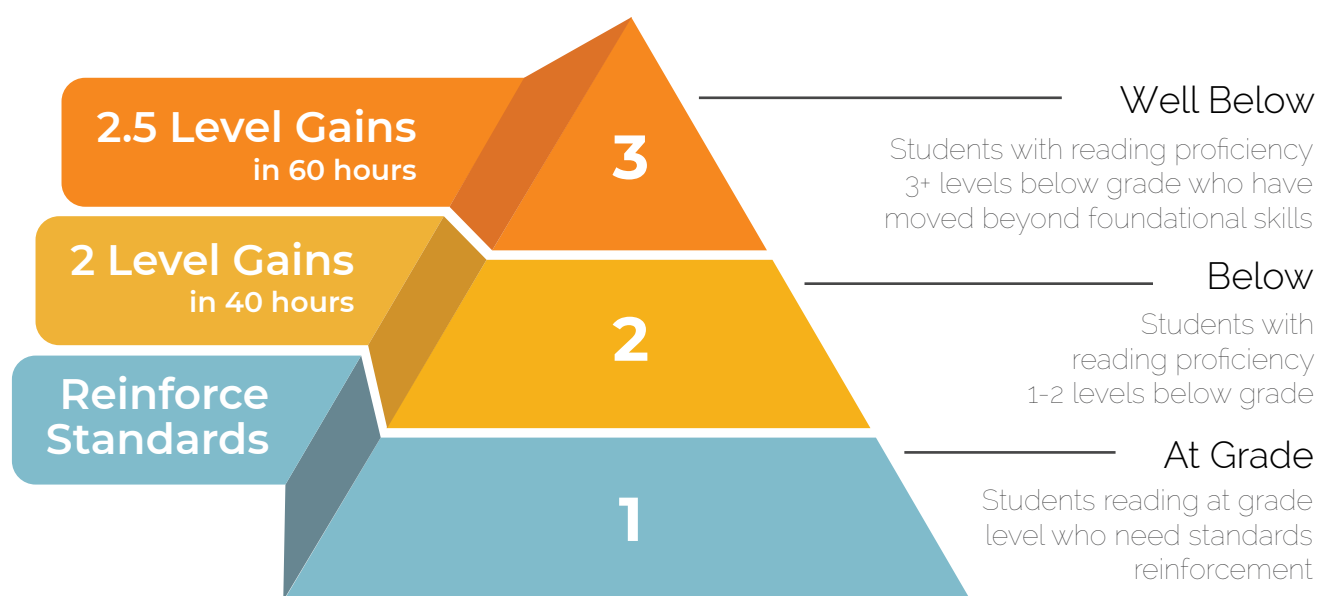
Teacher-Directed Instruction

- Comprehensive online instruction and printable materials
- Tools for direct instruction and differentiation at the class, small group, and individual levels

Support for RTI and MTSS Models

Reading Plus serves the needs of a wide range of students, including those who have progressed through foundational literacy skills but lack the essential comprehension skills and vocabulary to meet grade-level literacy objectives. Students who need minimal intervention beyond classroom instruction can use the program to improve silent reading fluency.

Reading Plus produces
2½ years growth
in just **60 hours** of personalized instruction.



Rapid Results

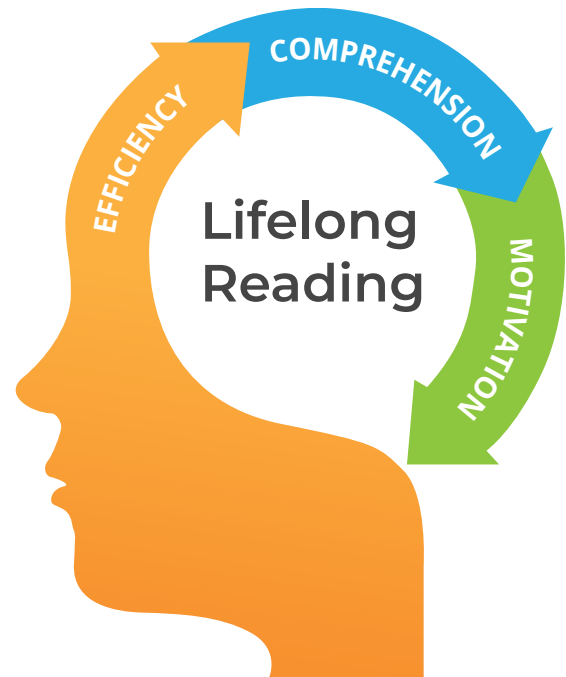
Reading Plus is designed to rapidly accelerate reading proficiency growth in struggling readers to close the achievement gap. Student goals and milestones are customized based on the initial assessment and ongoing instruction. Reading Plus continuously analyzes data on student performance to adapt instruction to fit the needs of every student. In just 60 hours of Reading Plus use, students make significant gains toward grade-level reading proficiency.

The Reading Plus Difference

Research shows that 70% of non-proficient readers and 30% of proficient readers process text inefficiently. Inefficient reading is the hidden hurdle that prevents the development of fluency, comprehension, and motivation.

Inefficient readers struggle to move their eyes smoothly and comfortably over lines of texts at an appropriate rate. These students are often assessed for gaps in foundational skills and comprehension, when the actual hurdle is reading inefficiency. As a result, these readers often receive instruction and practice for the wrong issue and continue to struggle.

Built on decades of research, Reading Plus assesses efficiency, and also measures and increases motivation and comprehension. The program allows students to practice at their own pace and uses adaptive technology in a truly meaningful way.



“Efficiency goes hand in glove with motivation and comprehension. Readers need all three to be able to learn new ideas from books they read. Think of it as a combination of skill, will, and thrill. Efficiency provides the skill, motivation engenders the will, and comprehension leads to the thrill of acquiring new ideas.”

Dr. P. David Pearson

*Reading Plus Author and Advisor | Professor Emeritus
and Former Dean at the Graduate School of Education,
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Prior studies have also found students can understand more of what they learn by “teaching” robots subjects like handwriting, and Michaelis found similar results in the current study. “If you’re reading a book with another person and that person makes a comment about what they see as happening in the book, that not only helps you better understand it, but it colors [the text] in a way that makes it more meaningful and vibrant.”

Struggling readers also seemed to gain more confidence in reading aloud to the robot, which is not programmed to correct mistakes as the student reads. One student even noted a preference for sessions with Minnie because “I have someone to read to who doesn’t interrupt.” (Similar programs in which students read to dogs have shown similar effects.)

Michaelis said the researchers were surprised that middle school students de-

veloped an emotional attachment to the robot even in as little as two weeks. One child even told the researchers they felt motivated to read with the robot more often “to make it happy.”

The group plans to continue to study how the robot could help students improve their frequency and depth of reading, through things like asking more questions and integrating comments other children make when they read the same books. ■

COMMENTARY

Published on March 13, 2019, in Education Week

We Have a National Reading Crisis

What are the reading research insights that every educator should know?

By Jared Myracle, Brian Kingsley, & Robin McClellan

If your district isn’t having an “uh oh” moment around reading instruction, it probably should be. Educators across the country are experiencing a collective awakening about literacy instruction, thanks to a recent tsunami of national media attention. Alarm bells are ringing—as they should be—because we’ve gotten some big things wrong: Research has documented what works to get kids to read, yet those evidence-based reading practices appear to be missing from most classrooms.

Systemic failures have left educators overwhelmingly unaware of the research on how kids learn to read. Many teacher-preparation programs lack effective reading training, something educators rightly lament once they get to the classroom. On personal blogs and social media, teachers often write of learning essential reading research years into their careers, with powerful expressions of dismay and betrayal that they weren’t taught sooner. Others express anger.

The lack of knowledge about the science of reading doesn’t just affect teachers. It’s perfectly possible to become a principal or even a district curriculum leader without first learning the key research. In fact, this was true for us.

We each learned critical reading research only *after* entering district leadership. Jared learned during school improvement work for a nonprofit, while



between district leadership positions. When already a district leader, Brian learned from reading specialists when his district received grant-funded literacy support. Robin learned in her fourth year as a district leader, while doing research to prepare for a curriculum adoption.

Understanding the research has been crucial to our ability to lead districts to improved reading outcomes. Yet each of us could easily have missed out on that critical professional learning. If not for those unplanned learning experiences, we’d probably still be ignorant about how kids learn to read.

There’s no finishing school for chief academic officers, nor is there certification on literacy know-how for district and school leaders. Literacy experts have been recommending the same research-based approaches since the 2000 National Reading Panel report, yet there still aren’t

systemic mechanisms for ensuring this information reaches the educators who set instructional directions and professional-development agendas. Why should we be surprised to find pervasive misunderstandings?

Here are five essential insights supported by reading research that educators should know—but all too often don’t:

- Grouping students by reading level is poorly supported by research, yet pervasive. For example, 9 out of 10 U.S. 15-year-olds attend schools that use the practice.
- Many teachers overspend instructional time on “skills and strategies” instruction, an emphasis that offers diminishing returns for student learning, according to a Learning First and the Johns Hopkins Institute for Education Policy report this year.

- Students' background knowledge is essential to reading comprehension. Curricula should help students build content knowledge in history and science, in order to empower reading success.
- Daily, systematic phonics instruction in early grades is recommended by the National Institute for Literacy, based on extensive evidence from the National Reading Panel.
- Proven strategies for getting all kids—including English-language learners, students with IEPs, and struggling readers—working with grade-level texts must be employed to ensure equitable literacy work.

Educator friends, if any of these statements make you scratch your head, you probably have some unfinished learning.

Educators urgently need a national movement for professional learning about reading. We should declare a No Shame Zone for this work—to make it safe for all educators to say, “I have unfinished learning around literacy.”

Superintendents should ask their literacy leaders if research insights are understood and implemented in their classrooms. They must be prepared to invest in the unfinished learning of their team, from teachers to cabinet. Surely some educators will defend misguided approaches; we all tend to believe we are doing the

right thing, until research shows us otherwise. On this point, we speak from experience. We encourage superintendents to lean into the national conversation about literacy, in order to ask the right questions.

Some may characterize this national dialogue as reopening the “reading wars,” which pitted phonics against whole language. Frankly, we don’t see it. We don’t frequently hear educators in our districts vigorously defending whole language, as such. More often, they’re simply doing what they believe to work, without knowing better. Instead, we primarily face a battle against misunderstanding and lack of awareness.

For example, some express fears that phonics instruction comes at the expense of students engaging with rich texts, yet every good curriculum we know incorporates strong foundational skills *and* daily work with high-quality texts. The National Reading Panel got it right: Literacy work is a both/and, not either/or.

The battle against misunderstanding can be won by pairing professional learning with improved curriculum. Quality curriculum that is tailor-built to the research makes good practice tangible and achievable for teachers. Professional development around implementation of such high-quality curriculum is where it all comes together: Teachers are given

the *what* to use, and professional learning explains the *why* and the *how* of those materials.

Districts today have many choices among research-aligned, excellent curricula, which was not the case even two years ago. These new curriculum options may be the catalyst we need to improve reading instruction. In each of our districts, we have implemented one of the newly available curricula that earned the highest possible rating by EdReports, a curriculum review nonprofit. Districtwide reading improvement followed.

The gap between good and mediocre curricula is vast. And district teams need a collective understanding of how kids learn to read before selecting new materials. The advances we have personally seen from high-quality curricula have led us to call for a national professional-learning network around curricula to foster cross-district collaboration.

We dream of the potential for children if we embrace this moment of unfinished learning. ■

Jared Myracle is the chief academic officer at Jackson-Madison County public schools in Tennessee. Brian Kingsley is the chief academic officer at Charlotte-Mecklenburg public schools in North Carolina. Robin McClellan is the supervisor of curriculum and instruction for elementary schools in Sullivan County public schools in Blountville, Tenn.

COMMENTARY

Published on February 26, 2019, in Education Week Teacher's Work in Progress Blog

Why Educators Need to Make Literacy Accessible, Individualized, and Inclusive

By Jennifer Abramson

Literacy may be the ultimate gatekeeper for students, and all too often, it is an issue that is directly impacted by equity and access.

Although schools fully realize the magnitude of reading failure, which impacts two-thirds of our nation's secondary students, far too many are not receiving the literacy training they need to become proficient readers.

Importantly, the need for reading recovery should not be regarded as a life

sentence that determines future educational and career pathways.

Educators ought to focus on accessing tools and strategies to help struggling readers make more than a year's progress in a year's time so they are able to catch up to grade level; succeed in common, real-world situations such as driver's tests and job applications; and make intentional choices about college and career. At the same time, educators ought to fully acknowledge and make room for the social-

emotional components of literacy, which may determine whether students become confident and capable lifelong readers.

Reading Recovery in a Growing District

I have spent the last 25 years working in the Leander Independent School District in Texas during which time we have experienced explosive growth—we have expanded from five elementary schools to 27 while adding eight middle schools and five more high schools. As a result, Le-

ander ISD has become one of the fastest-growing districts in the state of Texas.

Unfortunately, as the student population grew, so did the number of students in need of reading-recovery work. My colleagues and I noticed that some students decoded well but did not understand what they read, while others were able to decode well and even had strong automaticity, but very little comprehension. Learning to decode at the word level, read fluently, and tackle texts of increasing complexity are essential stages of growth for readers, and our teachers need to be able to accurately diagnose and support readers through each of these stages in a consistent, equitable, and ongoing fashion.

Diagnostic and Fluency Tools

The state-issued STAAR program and the Reading Inventory provide us with a broad-based overview of literacy levels, but to acquire more than a snapshot of reading ability, we felt it necessary to take a more in-depth approach. In the spring of 2013, we adopted Access Code, a blended-learning program developed by Foundations in Learning, which includes the iASK screener and diagnostic.

This program empowered us to gather more precise information on students' specific strengths and weaknesses and implement instruction tailored to their individual needs. Using the Lexile system, a semantic and syntactic measurement that matches students to books they can read independently, students had typically gained 100 Lexile points over the period of a school year. By contrast, students who were using Access Code were able to increase their Lexile scores by 400 points, or four times the yearly anticipated average.

By combining these balanced literacy tools with small-group instruction, individual guided reading, and vocabulary acquisition, we began experiencing exceptional gains in reading recovery and overall literacy. At present, Leander ISD has issued over 500 Access Code licenses across the district for use by a broad range of students in an effort to ensure there are no barriers to access for those who need targeted assistance and instruction.

Equity and Empathy

While addressing reading-recovery fundamentals is vital, teaching readers the interpretive and social-emotional aspects of reading is also critically important. Many thought leaders and educators are beginning to highlight the importance



of social-emotional learning inside the literacy space. Kylene Beers and Bob Probst, in particular, have outlined the equity and empathy aspects of reading in their co-authored book, *Disrupting Thinking: Why How We Read Matters*.

We have strived to implement some of their key ideas at Leander ISD including the notion that students need to become responsible, responsive, and compassionate readers; responsible in that they are able to accurately interpret text and think about what it means for others and society at large, responsive in that they ought to fully engage with and react to what they are reading, and compassionate in that they ought to learn to appreciate a variety of perspectives and develop empathy through reading.

To support these goals, our Curriculum and Instruction Team provides on-campus professional learning via classroom modeling, planning, and co-teaching to ensure implementation of both the foundational and social-emotional components of reading acquisition. In addition, our Secondary Literacy Academy and Workshop Support Group hold monthly professional learning sessions to grow our collective knowledge

and develop an even deeper understanding of our literacy objectives.

A Moral Imperative

Providing equity when it comes to literacy instruction has become a moral imperative as well as a civil rights issue. At Leander ISD, we are focused on delivering appropriate reading instruction that is accessible, individualized, and inclusive. There are groups of marginalized students who have never seen characters in literature that resemble themselves.

Teachers need to recognize this dynamic and challenge themselves to balance curricular offerings to include texts that will resonate with different readers. Moreover, by erasing our preconceived notions of struggling readers and their future pathways, we can concentrate on addressing their foundational literacy needs and help them grow into flexible, empathetic thinkers and readers with the skills and confidence to open up any number of doors. ■

Jennifer Abramson is the secondary English/language arts coordinator for Leander ISD in Leander, Texas.

COMMENTARY

Published on October 26, 2018, in *Education Week*

Why Doesn't Every Teacher Know the Research on Reading Instruction?

Three recommendations for greater reading proficiency

By Susan Pimentel

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

Recently, a remarkable audio-documentary by Emily Hanford went viral, shining a spotlight on such crucial literacy research—none of which is new, but much of which is unknown to today's teachers. Like many in the literacy community, I worry about our failure to bring research into classroom practice. My concern is greatest for teachers who are being sent into classrooms without the tools they need to succeed. I'm hopeful this renewed interest will serve as a catalyst for overhauling reading instruction in our teacher-preparation programs. However, relying solely on better preparation for the next generation of teachers is a slow delivery system to children. The stakes are too high. We need more immediate solutions.

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

I'd like to build on the momentum Hanford's piece has sparked to call attention to additional research-based practices



es that go hand-in-hand with the importance of phonics. As educators experience 'aha' moments about the need for stronger phonics instruction, let's talk about some other literacy practices that need fixing in elementary classrooms. Here's my short list of practices and resources to add to the conversation:

1. Let all kids read the good stuff. The pervasive practice of putting kids into reading groups according to their "just right" reading level has meant that large numbers of students receive a steady diet of below-grade-level instruction. The texts they're reading don't require them to decipher unfamiliar vocabulary, confront challenging concepts, or parse new and complicated language. Noted literacy researcher Timothy Shanahan has written extensively about why this is the wrong approach, documenting that "after 70 years there still isn't any research supporting the idea of matching kids to just-right texts" after 1st grade—yet still the practice persists. This, de-

spite research showing that the ability to handle complex text is the distinguishing characteristic between students who go on to do well in college and work and those who don't.

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

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

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

The implications for literacy instruction are enormous because young children are receiving less time with science and social studies content in their school day. According to a 2007 study, instructional time spent on these subjects dropped by an hour and a half per week since the 1990s. The diminished attention to these knowledge-building topics creates less fertile ground for reading comprehension to flourish and is a significant culprit in our stagnant national reading outcomes. Given that time is a scarce commodity in most schools, the takeaway for school leaders is to incorporate rich content, organized around conceptually-related topics, into the reading curriculum so that students learn new information about the world while they develop as readers. Student Achievement Partners has ready-made resources that teachers can pull into their classrooms.

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

of educator know-how can be remedied by curriculum that points the way.

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

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

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

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SPOTLIGHT



Newly minted teacher leaders from Bancroft Elementary School in Washington go through an exercise during a summer training session on instructional coaching. The summer coaching intensive is a key component of the District of Columbia's Teacher Leadership Innovation program, designed to provide structural supports for teacher-leader roles in schools.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Editor's Note:

Cutting-edge schools are leveraging new strategies to upgrade their teachers' skills through strategic training and more collaborative approaches to professional development. In this Spotlight, learn about ways to personalize teacher PD, tap into social media to transform training, and avoid burnout.

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