
Our Approach to Teaching Reading

By Valerie Fraser | Categories: SIPPS, Being a Reader, Collaborative Literacy, Thought Leadership, Being a Reader Program

All of us engaged in literacy instruction aspire to lay the ground for highly literate students who love to read for pleasure and information and are able to understand and respond to what they read at a deep level. We know that there is no easy pathway to this goal, as every reader and text is unique and the interaction between capable reader and text is often an interior process. While there is no easy pathway, our approach to teaching reading acknowledges that foundational skills and making meaning go hand-in-hand, and must be taught in a supportive reading community where students feel safe to learn and share.

Setting the Foundation

In an article in *The Reading Teacher*, "Implications of the DRIVE Model of Reading: Making the Complexity of Reading Actionable," Nell Duke and Kelly Cartwright draw an analogy between reading and driving. Using the DRIVE (Deploying Reading in Varied Environments) model, they illuminate the underpinnings of learning to read and the many factors that contribute to successfully orchestrating the reading process. The DRIVE model moves the discussion around decoding and comprehension in a productive direction—toward the acknowledgement of the messiness of teaching reading. Students need both the foundational skills to decode the texts as well as deeper skills to comprehend, analyze, and synthesize the various texts they encounter.



Readers bring everything they know about navigating decoding, the type of text in their hands, and the topic of the text to make meaning. The goal of reading instruction, therefore, is to provide the foundation from which the reader can step into the world of unmediated reading.

Learning to read is hard because so much has to be brought to bear on the text at hand. In order for students to willingly engage in the hard work, they need to see themselves as readers and experience the richness reading brings. For this reason, foundational skills should be taught in the context of a literate community that shares a love of books and provides a forum for students to share their ideas about the texts.

We know that learning flourishes when students participate in a supportive classroom community where everyone's ideas are valued and where they are able to take risks, make mistakes, give an opinion, hear others' opinions, agree and disagree respectfully. Creating this community and empowering teachers to bring the most basic components of early reading—decoding, shared reading, comprehension, and application to individual reading—together in the context of a specific class, time, and place is critical to student learning.

The foundation on which a reading life is built begins with phonological awareness and develops through phonics, decoding, and fluency. But teaching these foundational concepts in isolation, without surrounding experiences with rich text, will not develop thoughtful readers who engage deeply with what they read. Only participation in a literate community will motivate students to persevere through the challenging work of making meaning from text.

The Three Tiers: Whole-class, Small-group, and Independent Reading

Our research and experience has informed our three-tiered approach to reading: whole-class lessons to foster students' ability to

comprehend fiction and nonfiction and discuss their thinking with others, small-group lessons that meet students' decoding, fluency, and comprehension needs where they are in their own developmental trajectory, and individual reading with teacher conferring.

Whole-class lessons take several forms. During some lessons, the students engage with a big book or poem that they read and reread with the teacher before they address such academic content as phonological awareness, concepts of print, recognizing patterns, and developing a rich bank of literature and literary language that undergirds their decoding. During other lessons, the read-aloud and discussion might focus on a specific aspect of comprehension, such as building world knowledge, visualizing, asking questions of the text, or making inferences to understand character. And in other lessons, the class might dive into learning Tiers 2 and 3 vocabulary through the read-aloud and many opportunities to practice with new words. Because students are able to comprehend text of greater complexity than they are able to read on their own, a whole-class read-aloud and discussion format gives all students access to grade-level content, text structures, and rich vocabulary.

Much of Collaborative Classroom's work is based on a constructivist pedagogy. However, research has shown that explicit, systematic phonics instruction best meets the needs of young readers. To implement this principle, we partnered with Dr. John Shefelbine to develop and publish *SIPPS: Systematic Instruction in Phonological Awareness, Phonics and Sight Words* (2001, 2004, 2013, 2018).

That learning was incorporated into *Being a Reader* (2021) a complete reading program that is part of the Collaborative Literacy Suite. *Being a Reader* incorporates the three-tiered approach, with whole-class Shared Reading and Comprehension lessons, small-group lessons at students' point of need, and individual reading with conferring. Decoding is taught in small groups of students at similar points in their reading development. Lessons follow a continuum of skills, from short vowels and single consonants through complex vowels and consonant blends to sophisticated polysyllabic analysis. Later small-group lessons focus on comprehension challenges such as making inferences, wondering and questioning, determining importance, self-monitoring, and sharing and supporting opinions.

In the quest for highly literate students who love to read for pleasure and information and are able to understand and respond to what they read at a deep level, it is critical that we give students the opportunity to apply all they are learning to their individual reading lives. This independent practice should be accompanied with teacher conferences. Independent reading with teacher conferences is an essential component of moving students to higher levels of comprehension.

At Collaborative Classroom, with generous support from foundation partners, we are continuously learning—from research, from experience, and from teachers and schools—and apply what we learn to our curriculum. We re-imagined a literacy block that is culturally relevant and engaging. A literacy block that authentically integrates academic and social development, ensuring students get the support they need to develop into highly literate, critical thinkers who care for and respect one another. The result of our learning is Collaborative Literacy.

Valerie Fraser is Vice President of Program Development and Publishing Services at Collaborative Classroom.