The Settled Science of Teaching Reading – Part 1

By Marisa Ramirez Stukey | Categories: SIPPS, Being a Reader, Thought Leadership, Being a Reader Program

Educators have been discussing the “right” way to teach reading for decades. While “balance” was called for nearly 20 years ago, dissension has reared its head again and arguments are breaking out among educators on social media. At the heart of the disagreement is the dichotomy between phonics instruction (the explicit teaching of letters and sounds) and a whole language approach (a focus on discovery and making meaning). While “whole language” as a term is not often used now, there are many who believe the term “balanced literacy” is simply a substitute for whole language.

In spite of the current discussions, the science on this instructional issue is settled. Castles, Rastle, & Nation (2018) lay out that there is a clear progression to effective literacy instruction. First and foremost, children need to understand the principles of spelling-sound correspondences and to solidify a store of high-frequency words to read words and phrases fluently. Most children need explicit teaching to build this knowledge. After decoding and high-frequency words are established, more attention can be devoted to comprehension with a focus on making meaning. Castles et al. (2018) offer a logical and research-based model. In spite of this research, educators remain without consensus about what is most important—phonics instruction or a focus on comprehension.

Another current topic of discussion is the part knowledge plays in learning to read. While the importance of knowledge has been clear for over 40 years (see Cervetti & Wright, in press), current curriculum conversations have included demands to "build a body of knowledge." In this discussion, often only one way to build that knowledge is acknowledged: using connected text sets around specific topics. Research tells us, however, that there are many ways to build a body of knowledge and connected text sets is only one.

Revisiting and Rethinking the "Fab Five"

Let's start by revisiting the "fab five." The National Reading Panel (NRP) report in 2000 identified the "fab five" of reading. The NRP identified instruction in the following five elements as necessary for proficient reading:

- Phonics
- Phonological Awareness
- Fluency
- Vocabulary
- Comprehension

Unfortunately, the NRP did not prioritize the elements. While each of the five is essential, they are not equal. Comprehension is always the ultimate goal of reading and all of the other elements are *in service* of making meaning from text. Perhaps, instead, the "fab five" should read more like this:

Phonics + Phonological Awareness + Fluency + Vocabulary → Comprehension

Explicit and systematic instruction in decoding (phonics, phonological awareness, and fluency) and vocabulary building are critical in achieving comprehension. Inherently misunderstood in the NRP report is that the purpose of instruction in phonological awareness,

phonics, and fluency is to ensure that these processes become so automatic, students will not need to devote significant amounts of cognitive energy to them while reading. This automaticity leaves the cognitive energy for making meaning from the text.

While reading the words on the page has been a goal of early elementary instruction for some time, the role of vocabulary and comprehension has often been minimized in the early grades. Teachers are often told to teach kindergarten, first-, and second-grade students to "learn to read," and after third grade, students "read to learn." In fact, research tells us that children should be reading to learn from the very beginning of their school career (Houck & Ross, 2012). Building knowledge and an expansive and rich vocabulary are critical elements of comprehending text.

Our goal in this blog series is to wade through the soundbites, Tweets, and blog posts, and outline the settled science of teaching reading. While the arguments rage on, students are impacted (both negatively and positively) and teachers are often left unsure as to how best to teach. We hope to shed light on the issues and offer guidance and instructional considerations—all based on research. While we certainly won't address all the issues, we will tackle two topics in particular that have surfaced recently—explicit and systematic phonics instruction and building a body of knowledge.

How have you been thinking about the current debates in reading instruction? What is the conversation like in your district or school?

Our next installment, Part 2, tackles explicit and systematic instruction in decoding We hope you'll keep reading and we look forward to continuing the conversation with you!

The full article, "The Settled Science of Teaching Reading," was written by Marisa Ramirez Stukey, Gina Fugnitto, Valerie Fraser, and Isabel Sawyer.

References

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