

LITERACY LEADERSHIP BRIEF

Children Experiencing Reading Difficulties

What We Know and What We Can Do

In the last year, there has been a resurgence of articles and reports in media outlets such as *The New York Times*, *PBS NewsHour*, *EdWeek*, and *The Atlantic* about students experiencing reading difficulties. Many of these pieces have created confusion and provided misinformation by oversimplifying both the sources of reading difficulties and how to address them.

Some articles have reignited old debates, often referred to as the “reading wars,” about how to teach children to read and the role of phonics in early reading instruction. Others raise issues about specific types of reading difficulties such as dyslexia. Some critics place the blame for reading problems on teachers and teacher education programs that fail to advocate for a specific type of phonics instruction for all students, even when the available evidence points to multiple contributing factors.

As reading researchers and teacher educators, each with more than 30 years of experience working on the ground in schools, reading clinics, and universities, we are compelled to set the record straight regarding what we do and do not know about reading difficulties.

We are especially concerned because some of the discussions have included emotionally charged personal stories of frustrated parents and use alarmist language such as “early warning signs” and “no cure,” even implying that reading difficulties may lead to outcomes such as depression, imprisonment, or suicide. Such claims are likely to induce unfounded fear and anxiety for families, educators, and policymakers and impede positive actions to improve the prospects for all students to learn to read.

Our goal is to share what we know from decades of research that provides more in-depth understanding of the complexities of reading difficulties and to help families, teachers, and policymakers make sound decisions.

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Understanding the Problem

Certainly, too many children in the United States are not learning to read as well as they might. To begin, we need to be clear about the nature of the reading problems some children face, regardless of their intelligence. Researchers from many fields have concluded that children can have difficulty in any one or more of the areas needed for successful reading and that these difficulties can change over time.¹

Reading difficulties are not inevitable, permanent, or, as some have claimed, “incurable.”

Catherine Snow and her colleagues provided a review of early reading difficulties more than two decades ago in the comprehensive *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children*.² Areas that are specifically important to reading development are phonemic awareness (discriminating individual sounds in words), phonics (linking letters and sounds), fluency (reading words automatically with understanding), comprehension (making sense of text), vocabulary (knowing what the words mean), and writing (composing and spelling). In addition, listening and speaking (oral language development) lay the groundwork for students’ use of language to understand others and communicate meaningfully.

More recently, research has revealed the importance of students’ development of independent, self-regulating behaviors in using both code-based and meaning-based strategies such as knowing when and how to focus attention, how to intentionally use a variety of strategies to read and write unfamiliar words, and how to monitor and regulate the meaning of text.³

Recognizing that interest, motivation, background knowledge, culture, socioeconomic status, and past experiences all play a critical role in learning to read is also important. Differences in any of these areas can influence students’ success. In short, skilled reading is about more than reading the words correctly. It involves both reading the words correctly and making sense of the text ideas while confirming and building knowledge about the world.

The Downside of Labeling

Many labels are used to describe reading difficulties including *dyslexia*, *disabled readers*, and *struggling readers*. Although labels may be useful in some situations (e.g., to qualify a student for additional support), they have not proven helpful in identifying specific learning strengths and needs, nor do they typically indicate exactly what types of support and instruction will lead to successful reading. That information is critical because research shows that reading difficulties can be addressed or even prevented with appropriate instruction and intervention.

Reading difficulties are not inevitable, permanent, or, as some have claimed, “incurable.” In fact, researchers such as Frank Vellutino and Donna Scanlon have shown that instruction that is targeted to the specific needs of individual students can significantly reduce the incidence of reading difficulties.⁴

Appropriate Instruction

Both research and clinical/classroom experience confirm that appropriate instruction can improve the odds of success for all students learning to read. What is appropriate reading instruction?

First, teaching students to read must start with high expectations for *all* students—a belief and understanding that whoever the students may be or whatever their reading difficulties, there are well-documented and effective instructional practices that help children become successful readers.

Second, effective reading instruction is comprehensive. It addresses all the dimensions of reading and is responsive to the strengths and needs of individual students, which include intentional instruction in phonemic awareness and phonics. However, a comprehensive instructional approach also involves oral language development, writing and spelling, and a focus on comprehension—all of which are necessary to support and assist students in becoming independent readers. Despite a widely held belief that a narrow focus on word reading is a necessary starting point, the evidence indicates otherwise. Instruction that focuses on word reading alone contributes to the knowledge gap that is now known to be at the root of later reading difficulties.

As the highly regarded RAND report *Reading for Understanding* revealed,⁵ students who learn to decode words accurately and quickly may, nevertheless, have comprehension difficulties. Within a comprehensive approach focused on word reading, oral language development, writing, comprehension, and self-regulation, students must have many opportunities to practice and apply their developing skills and strategies while engaging in meaningful reading and writing.

Third, appropriate instruction requires a flexible range of instructional tactics. Research by Carol Connor and her colleagues has deftly shown that both teacher-directed and independent work in both large-group and small-group settings are required to meet the needs of diverse beginning readers. How much time is devoted to each depends on a student's strengths and needs, which should be determined by ongoing, informative assessments.

Fourth, effective instruction focuses on both strengths and needs. Skillful teachers adjust instruction on the basis of what students know and can do as well as on what they need to learn

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next. We are concerned that the current emphasis on dyslexia and direct phonics instruction is far too narrow, even when students are experiencing difficulty with phonics. The comprehensive studies of Reading First interventions that had an intensive focus on decoding indicated positive effects for decoding ability but not for comprehension.⁶

Even more concerning is the unsupported claim in some recent articles that all students should receive the same decoding content in the same sequence and in the same way, which is not supported by research. In fact, this practice can actually have negative consequences. Isolated phonics instruction is often justified by the argument that “it can’t hurt,” even when students have already acquired the knowledge and skills being taught.

However, Connor’s longitudinal studies clearly show that when students spend time in instructional programs that are implemented as one-size-fits-all, and not matched to students’ individual abilities and needs, those students can actually lose ground relative to their peers.⁷ Other researchers have found that even “successful interventions” that work for most students can lead some students to lose ground when those interventions are continued when they are not needed.⁸

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Teachers and Schools

Since the early First-Grade Studies of the 1960s, and in many studies since, we have known that teachers are likely to make a bigger difference in students’ progress than any specific program of instruction.⁹ Teachers need to be knowledgeable about all aspects of reading instruction and use that knowledge to adjust their practice, whether they are using a commercial program or school-based curriculum.

Many novice, and some experienced, teachers across the United States are not as well prepared as we would like. Improving teacher preparation should be a priority for all stakeholders. However, this additional rigor needs to be associated with all aspects of learning to read that we have detailed earlier. Professional learning focused only on phonics is misguided at best and dangerous at worst.

However, the responsibility to provide high-quality instruction and intervention does not rest on the shoulders of teachers alone. Recent research suggests that schools—how they are structured and coordinated—powerfully influence student learning.¹⁰ For example, teachers who are well mentored during

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their teacher preparation programs and who are systematically supported by school colleagues during their first years of teaching are more likely to be effective, especially when working with students experiencing reading difficulties.¹¹

Schools that are organized to provide effective instruction and intervention have coordinated processes for following and supporting students over time. They have comprehensive assessment systems that go beyond a single assessment or a specific area of reading instruction, and they have support staff with ongoing professional development so they can continue to learn and build shared understandings.

Today's schools and classrooms are more diverse than ever before. Students' cultural and linguistic backgrounds, family expectations, socioeconomic situations, and personal experiences are all related to success in school—including learning to read. Successful teachers use their deep understanding of students and of effective reading instruction to attend to these important aspects of students' lives.

In sum, learning to read is about more than letters and sounds, more than smooth fluent reading, and even more than solid reading comprehension. It is ultimately about providing students with the academic tools, such as learning to read successfully, that allow them to learn what they want and need to learn and to aspire to the life they want to create for themselves and their communities. To achieve that, we need to use the extensive research base on effective reading instruction available today to ensure that teachers, schools, and students are all getting the help they need.

NOTES

¹ Valencia, S.W. (2011). Reader profiles and reading disabilities. In R.L. Allington & A. McGill-Franzen (Eds.), *Handbook of reading disability research* (pp. 25–35). New York, NY: Routledge.

² National Research Council. (1998). *Preventing reading difficulties in young children*. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press.

³ Scanlon, D.M., Anderson, K.L., & Sweeney, J.M. (2016). *Early intervention for reading difficulties: The interactive strategies approach* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Guilford Press; McNamara, D.M. (Ed.). (2006). *Reading comprehension strategies: Theories, interventions, and technologies*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

⁴ Vellutino, F.R., & Scanlon, D.E. (2002). The interactive strategies approach to reading intervention. *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, 27(4), 573–635.

⁵ RAND Reading Study Group. (2002). *Reading for understanding: Toward an R&D program in reading comprehension*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND.

⁶ Gamse, B.C., Jacob, R.T., Horst, M., Boulay, B., & Unlu, F. (2008). *Reading First impact study final report* (NCEE 2009-4038). Washington, DC: National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education.

⁷ Connor, C.M., & Morrison, F.J. (2016). Individualizing student instruction in reading: Implications for policy and practice. *Policy Insights From the Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 3(1), 54–61; Connor, C.M., Alberto, P.A.,

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⁸ Wanzek, J., & Vaughn, S. (2006). Response to varying amounts of time in reading intervention for students with low response to intervention. *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 41(2), 128–142.

⁹ Bond, G.L., & Dykstra, R. (1967). The cooperative research program in first-grade reading instruction. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 2(4), 5–142; Heck, R.H. (2009). Teacher effectiveness and student achievement. *Journal of Educational Administration*, 47(2), 227–249; Scanlon, D.M., Gelzheiser, L.M., Vellutino, F.R., Schatschneider, C., & Sweeney, J. (2008). Reducing the incidence of early reading difficulties: Professional development for classroom teachers vs. direct interventions for children. *Learning and Individual Differences*, 18(3), 346–359.

¹⁰ Hattie, J. (2012). *Visible learning for teachers: Maximizing impact on learning*. New York, NY: Routledge; Heck, R.H. (2009). Teacher effectiveness and student achievement. *Journal of Educational Administration*, 47(2), 227–249.

¹¹ Risko, V.J., Roller, C.M., Cummins, C., Bean, R.M., Block, C.C., Anders, P.L., & Flood, J. (2008). A critical analysis of the research on reading teacher education. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 43(3), 252–288.

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About the International Literacy Association

The International Literacy Association (ILA) is a global advocacy and membership organization dedicated to advancing literacy for all through its network of more than 300,000 literacy educators, researchers, and experts across 146 countries. With over 60 years of experience, ILA has set the standard for how literacy is defined, taught, and evaluated. ILA's *Standards for the Preparation of Literacy Professionals 2017* provides an evidence-based benchmark for the development and evaluation of literacy professional preparation programs. ILA collaborates with partners across the world to develop, gather, and disseminate high-quality resources, best practices, and cutting-edge research to empower educators, inspire students, and inform policymakers. ILA publishes *The Reading Teacher*, *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, and *Reading Research Quarterly*, which are peer reviewed and edited by leaders in the field. For more information, visit literacyworldwide.org.

