

## Responding to the rhetoric: Perspectives on reading instruction

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### **Abstract:**

As professional, experienced educators, we have gained many understandings about teaching reading based on our work with our students, research and theory, and our beliefs about "what really matters" (Allington, 2001) in reading instruction. We are concerned about the increasing control that is being exerted over reading instruction in some elementary schools in the United States and some of the messages about reading instruction that have been reported in the popular press. Therefore, we would like to provide some of our perspectives on reading instruction in an attempt to help parents, families, and other community members hear from educators on some of the important issues surrounding reading instruction.

### **Article:**

This article stems from ideas discussed among experienced, grades K-12 educators who were enrolled in a graduate school class on reading research, programs, and models, and their teacher. In this article, we would like to share some of the misconceptions or overgeneralizations that we have heard or read about reading instruction, as well as our reaction to these ideas. We are publishing this article in *The Reading Teacher* in the hope that the educators we reach will, in turn, share this information in their local school systems with the parents, community members, and policymakers with whom they interact. We structure this article by making a statement that has been publicized in the media (You may have read or heard that...), providing a research- or theoretically based response to this statement (But...), and explaining what parents, family members, or other community members who work with children can do or need to understand in relation to this statement (So...). We write this article in the hope that the voices of educators who care deeply about children and reading instruction can be heard.

You may have read or heard that...

Teachers don't teach phonics any more in elementary school.

But...

A recent national survey of elementary school teachers in the United States (Baumann, Hoffman, Moon, & Duffy-Hester, 1998) found that 99% of teachers of grades K-2 reported that they viewed teaching phonics in their classrooms as being essential or important. In addition, the vast majority of these teachers taught phonics systematically in their classrooms.

So...

Ask elementary school teachers whether they are teaching phonics, and we feel certain you will find that they are. Just because your child doesn't bring phonics worksheets home doesn't mean that he or she is not receiving phonics instruction; in fact, good phonics instruction does not need to include worksheets and does not need to be boring (Stahl, Duffy-Hester, & Stahl, 1998).

You may have read or heard that...

All children need to read decodable texts (such as "The fat cat sat on the mat") in order to learn how to read.

But...

There is little research on the effectiveness of the use of decodable texts (Allington & Woodside-Jiron, 1999). A recent review of research on the use of decodable texts showed that, although decodable texts may be helpful for some children for a limited time in their reading development, there is little evidence to support their use (Mesmer, 2001).

So...

You want to see your child's teacher using many different texts in the classroom. Children need to read a variety of texts for a variety of reasons as they are learning to read. When your child is reading at home with you, be sure to read many books from various genres (e.g., poetry, biography, folk tales, stories, informational books) to and with him or her.

You may have read or heard that...

"Research-based" reading programs are effective in promoting the reading achievement of all students. One of these must be the "best" reading program, and research should be able to inform the public about which program is the best.

But...

Some programs that claim to be research-based have been researched only by the people who have developed the programs and who may profit from the commercial sale of these programs. Although this research is not necessarily biased, the possibility of bias does exist. Other programs claim to be effective because of gains that students make on limited measures of reading achievement. For example, some programs are purportedly effective because students who have received instruction through these programs can read slightly more words in a given list than students who did not receive instruction through this program. In addition, there are

factors other than the use of a certain program than can affect how well students perform on reading tests, including the quality of the teacher who uses the program, the additional support in reading that students receive at home or school, and the amount of instructional time in reading that students receive.

The reality is that there is no one reading program that is the best. Children learn to read in different ways and differ in the type of instruction that they need to become proficient readers. It is the teacher, not the reading program, who teaches reading. As Duffy and Hoffman (1999) explained, "reading instruction effectiveness lies not with a single program or method but, rather, with a teacher who thoughtfully and analytically integrates various programs, materials, and methods as the situation demands" (p. 10).

So...

Be skeptical of people who make claims that guarantee a certain reading program will ensure that your child will learn to read well. Look carefully and critically at the research that supports the use of certain reading programs. Be aware that a certain reading program, method, or technique that helps one child to improve his or her reading will not necessarily help another child to make the same improvements.

You may have read or heard that...

Administering "high-stakes" standardized tests of reading (i.e., tests that are used to make decisions about whether students are promoted to the next grade or tests that are used to determine whether teachers or administrators lose their positions, receive a monetary supplement, or receive recognition) to all students will hold teachers accountable for their students' reading achievement. If teachers are held accountable in this way, reading instruction will improve and all children will learn how to read.

But...

Although we believe that teachers are accountable, in part, for the reading achievement of their students, they should not be the only ones responsible for students' progress. As the African proverb states, "It takes a village to raise a child." It also takes a village to raise a reader. If we want all children to learn how to read well and to want to read, we suggest that university, school, and community members work together to ensure that all children have access to books that they can read and that they want to read; that all educators have opportunities to develop in their professional knowledge and expertise surrounding reading instruction; and that all families support the literacy development of their children in any ways that they can. The simple mandating of testing will do little to improve reading instruction in and of itself for, as Goodling stated (in Jones et al., 1999), "You cannot fatten cattle by weighing them" (p. 201).

In addition, we are concerned about what have been termed the "unintended effects" of high-stakes testing. As Jones et al. (1999) reported, these effects have included narrowing the curriculum so that social studies, science, and the arts are not taught as often; spending large amounts of time preparing students to take tests; and lowering teachers' morale.

Why are these effects troubling? First, if subjects such as social studies, science, and the arts are no longer taught, students who excel in these subjects may not have the opportunity to feel successful in school or to learn more about topics that are of interest to them. In addition, if the goal is to improve students' reading achievement, not teaching these subjects will limit students' background knowledge of many topics about which they may read. Because having adequate background knowledge is necessary if one is to comprehend or understand what one is reading (e.g., Pressley, 2002), lack of instruction in these subjects may ultimately affect students' reading achievement negatively.

Second, the reading that students do on standardized, multiple-choice tests of reading differs from the "real" reading in which we engage as proficient readers (e.g., Calkins, Montgomery, & Santman, 1998). Thus, the more time that students spend reading passages similar to the ones found on standardized reading tests, the less time that they will have to do real reading, resulting, perhaps, in some students losing interest in all forms of reading. Although asking students to respond to multiple-choice questions about what they read is one way to assess comprehension, there are other ways to assess understanding that are more authentic and more closely aligned with real reading tasks (e.g., Keene & Zimmerman, 1997).

Third, in this era of a national teacher shortage, we are concerned about the effects of high-stakes testing in reading on teacher retention and self-efficacy. We know of teachers who are no longer allowed to really "teach" reading because their administrators believe that, in order to improve test scores, they need to read "teacher-proof," commercially published scripts to their students to deliver reading instruction. We know of teachers who have been told by their administrators that all of the teachers in their schools or school districts should be on the same page of the same reading book on the same day. We know of teachers who are told by their administrators that they must spend time every week administering and grading reading tests for practice. We know of teachers who are considering leaving the profession because they are no longer allowed to use their wisdom and knowledge to teach reading, and we know of people who are interested in becoming teachers who shy away from the education profession or leave the profession shortly after they begin because of the pressures, influences, or effects of high-stakes testing in reading. It is unfortunate that the aforementioned situations occur more frequently in high-need schools that serve large numbers of children living in poverty or who are learning English as a second or other language, pushing teachers who would love to work in high-need schools into other schools where they are still allowed to actually teach.

So...

Do what you can to support your own children's reading progress by reading to and with them, taking them to the public library to check out books, and talking with them about the joys and purposes of reading. If possible, help other children gain access to books. You could donate books from your home library that your child is no longer interested in reading to your child's school or to another school or volunteer to read in your child's classroom. You could make a donation to a high-need school in your area so that teachers can buy books for students who may not have any at home, or you could begin a summer reading program in your community.

Talk with your child's teacher, principal, or school board members about how standardized tests of reading are being used in your child's school and in other schools in your community. Support your child's teacher in helping your child to perform well on these tests, while at the same time helping your child and other children to develop the reading skills and strategies that they need in addition to the desire to read.

### *Concluding thoughts*

We applaud the attention that has been given to reading instruction across the United States, but we are concerned that the perspectives of educators have not always been taken into account. We hope that this article will help educators to work with parents, families, community members, and policymakers to discuss how we can ensure that all children have access to the quality reading instruction that they deserve.

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