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### Reading between the Lines: Exploring Literacy, The Science of Reading, and the R.I.S.E. Initiative

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# SENIOR THESIS APPROVAL

This Honors thesis entitled

**“Reading between the Lines: Exploring Literacy, the Science of Reading, and the R.I.S.E. Initiative”**

written by

**Ashly Brooke Stracener**

and submitted in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for completion of  
the Carl Goodson Honors Program  
meets the criteria for acceptance  
and has been approved by the undersigned readers.

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Dr. Kathy Collins , thesis director

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Dr. Amy Sonheim, second reader

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Professor René Zimny, third reader

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Dr. Barbara Pemberton, Honors Program director

Date: 27, April 2020

## Introduction

The human brain was not made to read.<sup>1</sup> The fact that I am able to write and read this paragraph now, that my readers are scanning this, brains and eyes processing and decoding each word, is tremendous in itself. In the grand scheme of the world, reading and writing are relatively young activities, the first written language recorded only dates back to about 5,000 years ago.<sup>2</sup> For the English alphabet, there are 26 letters; learn these letters, how to put them together, and instantly, anyone can read, right? Unfortunately, reading isn't this naturally intuitive or easy. Unlike reading, speech is, typically, a behavior learned through simple continual exposure and listening; the human brain is made for spoken language, but reading must be taught, practiced, and most importantly, encouraged.<sup>3</sup>

Before I could even speak, my parents would read to me nightly, desperately wanting to instill in me the importance of reading. Their strategy worked. As soon as I was walking and talking, I would run up to anyone and beg for them to play with my colorful alphabet flashcards. I would find picture books and make stories up for the text I still could not understand. I still remember the day it clicked for me when I finished my first book about a clown who had a bag, a mat, and a cat. The librarians would become familiar with my face as I checked out piles of storybooks with my visibly used library card (which I still carry in my wallet) and I am still a slow eater to this day because I insisted on reading during all of my meals. I was fascinated with stories, characters, and words and continually challenged myself to grow in my reading — I would devour *Little Women* at the age of 12 and inhale *Gone with the Wind* at about 13 years old. Suffice it to say, I have always loved reading. However, not every child is instilled with a similar

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<sup>1</sup> Bell

<sup>2</sup> Bell

<sup>3</sup> Bell

love of reading. Most of my friends did not understand why I wanted to read so much and several of them abhorred the activity, most likely because they did not have the same background as I did.

Growing up in one household with two parents devoting their attentions to the growth of my education and being homeschooled at a young age was a privilege that not everyone has. From a young age, I was surrounded by books, had several reading role models, and was consistently impressed with the importance of reading, something I took as normal. I would continue to be pretty oblivious to my privilege until joining the America Reads<sup>4</sup> program at Ouachita and later interning with the Chicago Literacy Alliance during the summer before my senior year at OBU.<sup>5</sup> It was at these places where I would discover my passion for literacy and how necessary the skill is. If a child is unable to grasp each fundamental of reading and master each step by the third grade, he or she is unlikely to become a fully successful reader.<sup>6</sup> The U.S. has substantially low literacy levels which are due to a variety of different factors but low literacy skills are inevitable if not addressed by the third grade.<sup>7</sup> I fully believe that literacy is a human right and by previewing some of the statistics of literacy in the U.S., specifically in

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<sup>4</sup> In 1996, President Clinton began a grassroots initiative through the Clinton Administration. He proposed a national literacy campaign that would rely on volunteer tutors who would be able to give children the personal instruction they required (“History”). At Ouachita, America Reads is comprised of volunteers, like me, and work-study students who work one-on-one with first graders at Perritt Elementary. After passing a background check and application process, students can become America Reads tutors. Counselors and teachers find students who can benefit from extra help but do not require professional intervention and pair them with volunteers. Tutors are paired with one to two students and meet with them for 30-minute sessions each for two to three times a week. Since the R.I.S.E. initiative in Arkansas, tutors are now required to attend several hours of tutoring.

<sup>5</sup> The Chicago Literacy Alliance (CLA) is an association of more than 120 organizations that work across different disciplines, age groups, education levels, and neighborhoods in Chicago to create and provide literary services and educational programming with the mission to improve lives (“Home”). They provide physical spaces to meet, professional development, foster collaboration and community, and always strive to increase impact for the organizations they work with. During the summer of 2019, I worked as their communications intern and saw the many educational and literacy needs the different programs in CLA met. I met many adults, children, and teens from all different backgrounds who needed the services there.

<sup>6</sup>Lesaux

<sup>7</sup>Lesaux

Arkansas, my home state, looking into the history of how reading has been and is now being taught, and trying to break down the science of reading, it is easier to understand the significance and importance of literacy.

Before exploring the issue of literacy, a definition and description should be provided; the simple definition of literacy is being literate, having the ability to read and write. This definition is how literacy has been thought of traditionally. However, as technology, education, and societies evolve, so does literacy. Literacy is more than simple reading and writing skills as communication evolves.<sup>8</sup> High literacy skills are required in every daily aspect of life, from filling out medical or legal forms to reading a menu, or understanding road signs; literacy requires cognitive, social, and critical skills. Forming letters into words is not enough. A skilled reader also must hear the difference in sounds and connect them to letters; decode the words; piece sentences together and understand their purpose; retain information; comprehend the text; and evaluate the material as a whole. This process is a very small, basic overview of what successful reading looks like, a skill that must be taught and cannot simply be absorbed over time.

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### **Statistics Speak**

Becoming successfully literate can be a challenging process, one made even harder without proper or adequate resources. While the term ‘low literacy’ may not immediately communicate a concern, approximately 43 million adults in America possess low literacy skills, according to the data from the 2012-2014 Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies.<sup>9</sup> Within these numbers, 26.5 million were classified at level one, with level one

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<sup>8</sup> Bell

<sup>9</sup> Department of Education

defined as functionally illiterate, and 8.4 million below level one<sup>10</sup> They conducted their survey using the definition of low literacy as, “the ability to understand, evaluate, use and engage with written texts to participate in society, to achieve one’s goals, and to develop one’s knowledge and potential.”<sup>11</sup> Unfortunately, research has shown a cruel cycle as “children of parents with low literacy skills have a 72 percent chance of being at the lowest reading levels themselves.”<sup>12</sup> Not only are these children likely to have poor grades, but they are most likely to display behavioral problems, repeat school years, and even drop out of high school.<sup>13</sup> Poverty is also a common companion to those with the lowest literacy levels: 43 percent live in poverty and 70 percent of adult welfare recipients have low literacy levels as well.<sup>14</sup> Low literacy skills can have a huge impact on individuals, often trapping not only the individual, but passing on to their progeny.

However, while these statistics are found nationally, each state has varying literacy levels, some higher and some lower than the national average. Taken from The Nation’s Report Card, the current largest assessment of what American students know and are able to do, in 2017, 69% of Arkansan 4<sup>th</sup> graders are under proficient reading skill levels, compared to the national average of 64%. Over half of Arkansan 4<sup>th</sup> graders are behind in the areas they require to be skilled readers, with only 25% being proficient and 7% at advanced levels.<sup>15</sup>

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## **A Fundamental Human Right**

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<sup>10</sup> Department of Education

<sup>11</sup> Department of Education

<sup>12</sup> “Adult Literacy Facts”

<sup>13</sup> “Adult Literacy Facts”

<sup>14</sup> “Adult Literacy Facts”

<sup>15</sup> “NAEP State Profiles”

“Literacy is a fundamental human right, but there’s no switch that gets flipped from “illiterate” to “literate,” said Ken Biggers, executive director of the CLA. “We can all become more literate. Elevating literacy as a value for all will help the people who need the most literacy support. I also see literacy as a core capacity that addresses several challenges at once. Beyond fundamental goals of education and workforce readiness, it also addresses socio-economic inequality and social justice challenges. It helps us talk and listen to one another in civil society, informing our ability to be democratic citizens and to work with one another to improve our community.<sup>16</sup>” During my time with the CLA, I was able to interact with a class from Literacy Chicago, one of the many adult literacy programs the Alliance works with. One of my managers came up to me and asked if I could drop my work for the afternoon and attend a ceremony that would last most of the afternoon because she thought it would be an enjoyable experience. So, I followed her to one of the big conference rooms and was allowed to see first-hand the impact this program had on its clients. As I sat down, I saw many familiar faces who work with the program’s tutors during the day in the CLA’s open workspace, the Literacenter. They were milling around excitedly and I was handed a small booklet:

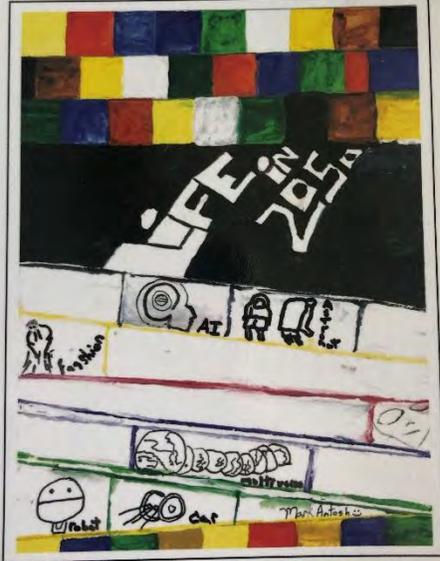
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<sup>16</sup> Weinberg/Newton

LITERACY CHICAGO

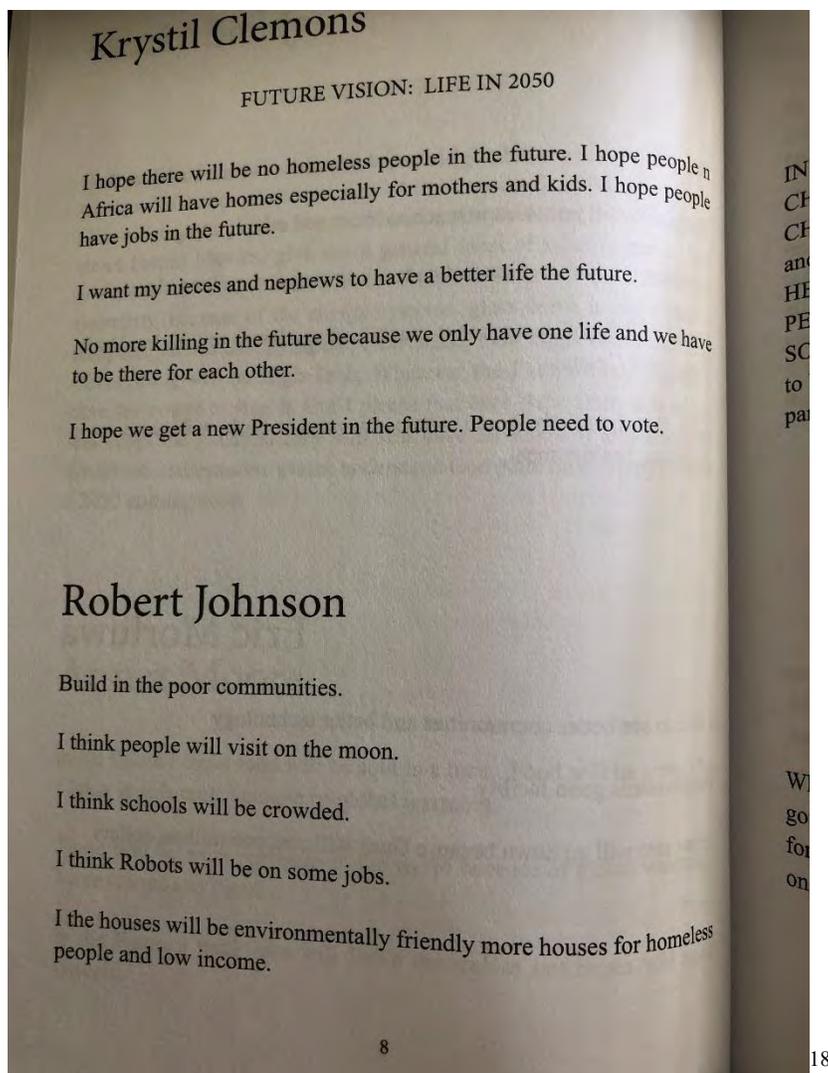
# WORDS ON THE PAGE 2019

FUTURE VISION: LIFE IN 2050



A COLLECTION OF ESSAYS BY  
LITERACY CHICAGO LEARNERS

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Inside were many other short stories like the ones above, all along the theme of “Future Vision: Life in 2050.” All of the authors were students in various stages of the learning process, from GED students, adult literacy students, to ESL students. Students who were able to come that day read the stories they wrote aloud and different speakers were invited to come and share how they have seen this program provide positive impacts. Before the ceremony started, the woman next to me tapped me on the shoulder and asked if I could take a picture of her and after agreeing she opened the booklet to find the story she wrote. She handed her phone over and smiled from ear

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<sup>18</sup> Literacy Chicago

to ear, radiating excitement and pride. She thanked me emphatically and explained she was going to send this picture to her friends and grandchildren. She was so overjoyed to share this accomplishment with everyone, her excitement was infectious as I became overwhelmed with joy, rejoicing in the grand accomplishments of everyone in the room, from directors of the program, volunteers, tutors, and the students most of all. I am so grateful I had the chance to be part of this celebration because I not only got to see the work of the many friendly faces I saw around the workspace, but I was able to see the direct impact this literacy program had on its students: their students were given immeasurable confidence in themselves and their abilities, given job and internship opportunities, and were able to explore their own interests and dreams.

## Angela Davis

When I started working on my GED I discovered books. I began asking for materials that would help me understand being a marginalized person in American Culture.

The Color of Imprisonment and the future of the prison industrial complex is a call for alarm.

I learned that almost two million people are currently locked up in the immense network of U.S. prisons and jails. More than 70 percent of the imprisoned population are people of color. Prison privatization and the fact that prisons are now on the stock market means that prisons will increase in numbers to accommodate rich profiteers. Currently, the stocks of both CCA and WCC are doing extremely well.

It is very hard living in a country where human greed is more important than human need. I would like to see a future where this ideal is reversed, where we, like Norway have a prison system that truly supports equality and rehabilitation.

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Natallia Krasinskaya  
BELARUS

I SAW UFO

In 1979 I was a university student in Belarus. In the summer I was in a sport camp with my friends. One night, we were walking home late after going to a disco. Suddenly we saw a bright fiery object in the sky, slowly coming down.

It had thousands of lights and was far away from us. It moved slowly over Braslar Lake and over the horizon until I couldn't see it anymore. All my friends saw it too, including the director of the camp. He said: "Lets take the car and go look for this object!" But we didn't go. We stood and were silent and didn't know what to say. We were shocked.

When I went back to university, I told all my friends and nobody believed me. They laughed and told me: "to stop drinking", but I don't drink!

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I wanted to include the two stories above because they were my favorite pieces. I saw the incredible range of emotions, thoughts, beliefs, and dreams each of these authors have. I no longer saw just students in the Literacenter, but Angela who is studying marginalization and might one day advocate for prisoners' rights and Natallia who has lived an adventurous life, now working towards her U.S. citizenship, and can make a room full of people laugh along with her. While each student was in the program for different reasons, came from different walks of life,

were at different levels in their learning, and were all affected by their learning differently, they were all working towards the same goal of self-improvement, towards independence. I no longer see the simple statistics of literacy and low literacy, but the faces of the individuals affected by these issues.

As Biggers explains, literacy encompasses more than one simple facet of life and does not truly have an end but is a skill meant to be improved and employed every day. The Literacy Foundation provides a succinct list of exactly how they have found low literacy can affect an individual: there is a limited ability to obtain and understand essential information; “the unemployment rate is 2-4 times higher among those with little schooling than among those with Bachelor’s degrees;” income is lower; jobs available or attained are low-quality; higher education or professional development are limited access; low literacy is often passed down throughout families; low literacy can lead to low self-esteem which often leads to isolation; “illiterate individuals have more workplace accidents, take longer to recover and more often misuse medication through ignorance of health care resources and because they have trouble reading and understanding the relevant information (warnings, dosage, contraindications, etc.).”<sup>21</sup>

However, individuals are not the only ones affected by low literacy. Society as a whole is greatly affected by those with low literacy. There is often a lower level of community involvement and civic participation, especially because without some of the basic tools and skills necessary to achieve certain life goals or achievements, individuals cannot fully participate equally in political or social discourse.<sup>22</sup> In addition, according to the Annie E. Casey Foundation, “every student who does not complete high school costs our society an estimated

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<sup>21</sup> Literacy Foundation

<sup>22</sup> Literacy Foundation

\$260,000 in lost earnings, taxes, and productivity. High school dropouts are also more likely than those who graduate to be arrested or have a child while still a teenager, both of which incur additional financial and social costs.”<sup>23</sup> The job market is also affected by a simple lack of those with specialized knowledge. Literacy is necessary for individuals and states to be competitive in the global knowledge economy, so many positions often remain empty because there is a lack of those with the proper knowledge or training. Even the gross domestic product is affected as the higher rate of adults with low literacy is, the slower the GDP growth rate is.<sup>24</sup>

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### **Looking to the Past**

Free, public, state-sponsored education for all has not always been a given right in the history of the U.S. Though many founding fathers, like Thomas Jefferson, were advocates for state funding of public education, public schools were considered a natural right. It would not be until 1821 when the first public secondary school would be established in Boston and it would be a watershed moment for public education on the long journey towards public funding.<sup>25</sup> Horace Mann, a lawyer, Massachusetts State senator, and first secretary of the Massachusetts State Board of Education, would become a well-known, strong advocate for the advancement of the common school and public education. Mann would publish annual reports on the state of schools in Massachusetts, leading him to promote the idea of standards in education: he believed that teachers should receive professional training and should have a similar standard of curriculum across the board. The first school for teachers would eventually be founded in Massachusetts, leading the state to develop strong school systems which would eventually become a model for

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<sup>23</sup> AECF

<sup>24</sup> Literacy Foundation

<sup>25</sup> Gelbrich

the rest of the country.<sup>26</sup> As education began to become more standardized throughout the country, debates began to arise, however, one in particular has continued to propagate: how should children be taught to read?

“It seems like, in our history, there's always been reading wars and the pendulum swings back and forth; there is a debate between a phonics driven instruction for literacy or a more literacy based instruction with the use of books and whole language,” notes Carrie Sharp a Ouachita Baptist University instructor of education with 25 years of experience in Arkansas public education. Noah Webster, of the infamous Webster dictionary, was a huge proponent of the phonics based approach, whereas Mann was a believer in the word method: this debate has been around for decades, but has not been as prevalent until progressive education became a prominent movement in the 1920s.<sup>27</sup> Essentially, arguments about how curriculum should be taught can be pared down to a simple but contested query: should children begin their introduction to reading with an emphasis on meaning of the text *or* with instruction that stresses learning the code of reading?

Before delving into the history of these “wars,” it would help to understand the differences between the two theories. In America’s beginnings, during colonial days, teaching reading was quite simple: children were taught the alphabet and then given Scripture or, if they were lucky, a primer or hornbook to read.<sup>28</sup> Eventually, the McGuffey Readers would come into wide popularity alongside the common school movement.<sup>29</sup> These readers would utilize the phonics based method by teaching beginning readers about the relationship between letters and sounds, or phonemes. Once students can hear, identify, and manipulate phonemes, they can be

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<sup>26</sup> Gelbrich

<sup>27</sup> “A Tale of Two Schools.”

<sup>28</sup> Fiester

<sup>29</sup> Smith

taught the correspondences between these sounds and spelling patterns, eventually allowing readers to decode new words. Many often refer to this approach as, “sounding out words.”<sup>30</sup> However, the other side of the argument rebuts that this theory merely teaches children how to crack a code, students do so mindlessly and while they may be able to correctly read a sentence, they cannot understand or explain the meaning of what they have read and were not learning to communicate effectively. And so, whole language was born, an approach which teaches students to read by recognizing words as whole pieces of language. Instead of breaking down letters and their combinations by “decoding,” this approach teaches that learning to speak should be similar to learning to read, making the learning more natural: there is, basically, a large stock of words that, once memorized, can be used to make sense and develop meaning of any new words in context.<sup>31</sup> These are the simplified explanations of each approach and while both contain different strategies, applications, and teachings, these are the foundations of each approach.

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### **Science of Reading**

To better understand why these “reading wars” have been waged and why a new initiative has been put in place, it is helpful to acquire at least a brief overview of the science of reading. Research has been the key to discovering the best way to teach reading. Thanks to many experts in the neurosciences and linguistics, the science of reading was developed which explains how the brain learns to read. The five components of reading, according to the science of reading are as follows with subsequent definitions and breakdowns:

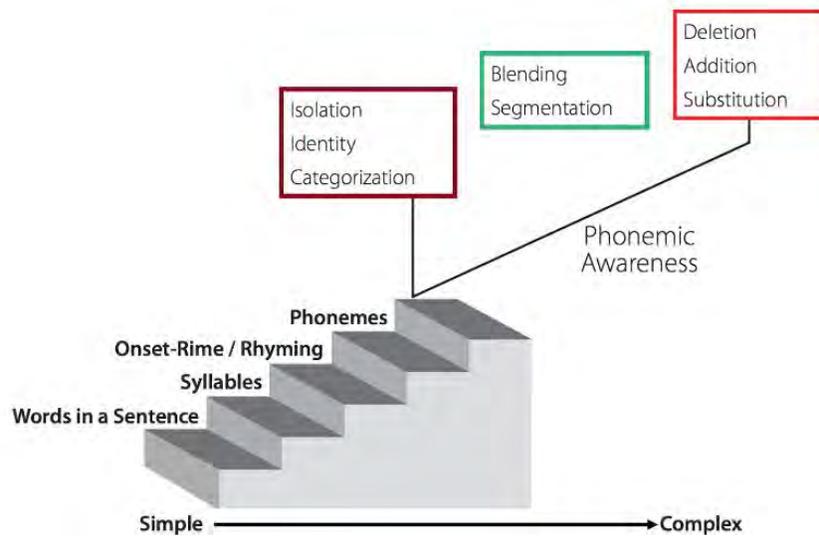
#### 1. Phonological awareness

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<sup>30</sup> National Reading Panel

<sup>31</sup> “Reading Wars: Phonics vs. Whole Language Instruction.”

- a. Phonological awareness is “the ability to notice the sound structure of spoken words.”<sup>32</sup> However, this skill is like an umbrella with many other abilities stemming from this one.
- b. R.I.S.E. compares this to a set of stairs, each ability leading to the next, each skill must be a solid foundation which leads right into the next as the illustration below demonstrates.<sup>33</sup>



Adapted from 95 percent group

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## 2. Phonics

- a. Phonics is “the system for approaching reading by focusing on the relationship between letters and sounds.”<sup>35</sup>

<sup>32</sup>“It’s All About Meaning.”

<sup>33</sup> “It’s All About Meaning.”

<sup>34</sup> “It’s All About Meaning.”

<sup>35</sup> “It’s All About Meaning.”

3. Fluency:

- a. Fluency is “the ability to read a text quickly, accurately, and with proper expression.”<sup>36</sup>

4. Vocabulary:

- a. Vocabulary is “the knowledge of words and word meanings.”<sup>37</sup>

5. Comprehension

- a. Comprehension is “the process of simultaneously extracting and constructing meaning through interaction and involvement with written language.”<sup>38</sup> Once all of the previous four components have been firmly grasped, comprehension can begin to take place, which is the ultimate goal as students will eventually be reading to learn instead of just learning to read.<sup>39</sup>

Dr. Hollis Scarborough created the now renowned model known as the “Reading Rope” to better explain and describe how decoding skills are woven together to create a skilled reader. Scarborough’s Reading Rope consists of multiple upper and lower strands: language comprehension and word recognition. The word recognition strands (phonological awareness, decoding and spelling, and sight recognition) work together as the reader becomes more fluent and increasingly automatic with repetition and practice. Meanwhile, language comprehension (background knowledge, vocabulary knowledge, language structures, verbal reasoning, and literacy knowledge) works together, reinforcing one another and then weaves in the word recognition strands to create a proficient reader. Scarborough would often demonstrate this

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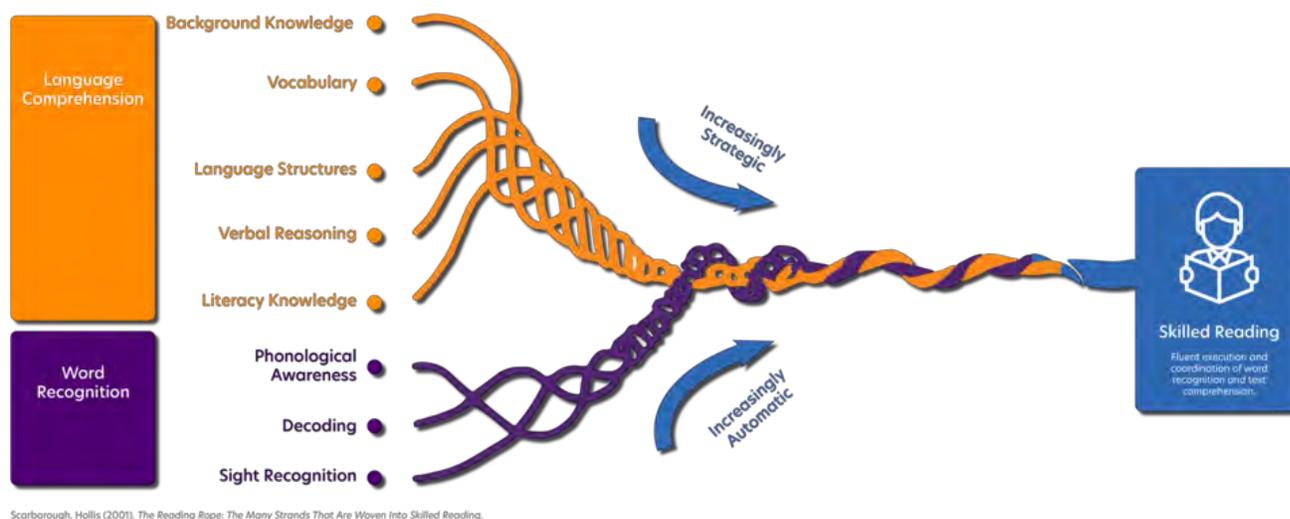
<sup>36</sup> “It’s All About Meaning.”

<sup>37</sup> “It’s All About Meaning.”

<sup>38</sup> “It’s All About Meaning.”

<sup>39</sup> “It’s All About Meaning.”

visual by twisting pipe cleaners together, each pipe cleaner representing a different skill or strand of the rope.<sup>40</sup> A visual model, provided by Literacy San Antonio, can help comprehend this complex process:



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Another simpler visual is the Turner and Gough Simple View of Reading as shown below, thanks to Literacy San Antonio:

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<sup>40</sup> Neuman

<sup>41</sup> “Science of Teaching Reading”

# The Simple View of Reading



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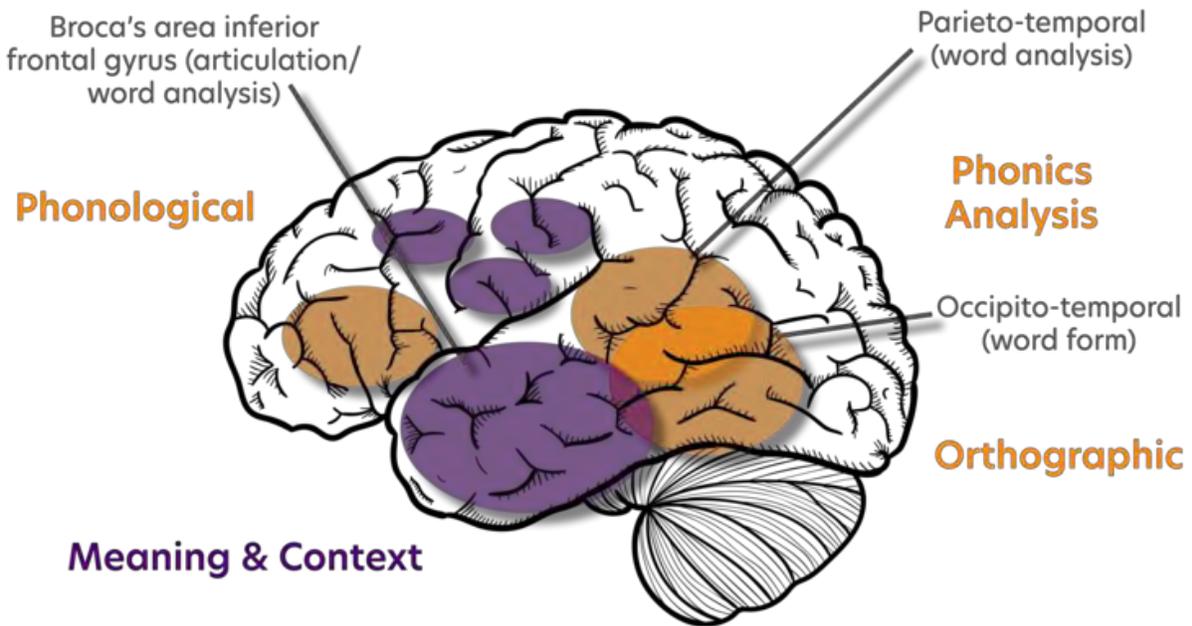
This formula, though it can appear in different visuals and forms, ultimately demonstrates how reading comprehension requires two separate but necessary skills.

Thanks to the research and study of neuroscientists, the former belief that the brain is resistant and inflexible has been contradicted as the brain is actually extremely malleable. Experts now know that consistent and intense practice and instruction can reform the pathways of the brain, changing how it works.<sup>43</sup> The graphic below, courtesy of Literacy San Antonio, demonstrates how much of the brain is affected and how many areas are utilized and must work together to read successfully:

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<sup>42</sup> “Science of Teaching Reading”

<sup>43</sup>Cunningham and Rose



*Brain Systems for Reading (Shaywitz, 2003 p. 78, Fig. 21)*

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While no brain looks identical while reading, the process is consistent and patterns which emerged from studying the brains of strong readers reveal that reading and language are in a mutual relationship in which they balance each other. By finding activation patterns in areas of the brain while reading, it was discovered that these areas will change based on the reading ability of that person. As Dr. Anne Cunningham, literacy expert, and Dr. David Rose, a neuropsychologist, write, “Beginning readers show more activity in the parieto-temporal, or word analysis, region, while experienced readers become increasingly active in the occipito-temporal, or word recognition, region. Like the brain itself, each pattern of activity is unique.”<sup>45</sup>

Essentially, research shows that the earlier a child is exposed to rich language experiences, the sooner the brain will be made receptive to this new acquisition of reading skills. The more the pathways are developed, such as reading to a child, the more well-traveled the

<sup>44</sup> Science of Teaching Reading

<sup>45</sup> Cunningham and Rose

pathways become, laying down a good foundation for good reading skills. The key is the same as building any new muscle, it must be exercised. However, for children who work with learning disabilities or who did not receive those early language interactions which prepare for reading, the patterns of activity in the brain are noticeably different. The patterns are much more scattered and unpredictable than a strong reader has. Even though a child might try just as hard as a strong reader, if the pathways for cognition and language are not properly developed and established, the child will struggle with reading and have to work much harder.<sup>46</sup>

However, thanks to the science of reading, children who do struggle with reading do not have to be simply labeled as “bad readers.” Now that there is a rudimentary understanding of how the brain reads, each child can receive more differentiated and personalized instruction which can boost their strengths and confidence, yet address their cognitive weaknesses as well. By being able to target specific weaknesses, teachers will be able to focus on which skills need more attention. These neuroscience studies have brought not only a wealth of information but new possibilities for the instruction of reading, leading to placing more students on the path towards successful and proficient reading.<sup>47</sup>

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### **R.I.S.E. Initiative**

In 2017, the Arkansas Department of Education (ADE) saw the need for a way to create stronger readers in Arkansas schools. Educators saw that despite low scores in literacy, there was an abundance of potential in students which gave way to the Reading Initiative for Student Excellence, also known as the R.I.S.E. Arkansas reading initiative. The movement is founded in

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<sup>46</sup> Cunningham and Rose

<sup>47</sup> Cunningham and Rose

not only the science of reading but a commitment to transforming the whole of literacy education, no small feat. The movement is characterized by three goals: to sharpen the focus and strengthen instruction, to create community collaboration, and to build a culture of reading.

In order to better understand exactly what this new initiative entails, I sat down and interviewed Sharp as she has a wealth of experience and knowledge in the field throughout the years and now instructs teachers on how to instruct with this new initiative. She discusses not only R.I.S.E., but some of its benefits, progression, and issues:

“R.I.S.E. Arkansas came about because we've been pretty consistent over quite a few years with the scores of the literacy tests which have been extremely low. I think it's 60 something percent of 4th graders were not proficient and the same thing with 8th grade.<sup>48</sup> People who are in the places that make decisions that affect our curriculums and our school districts began to look at that and obviously were very concerned because the methods we (referencing Sharp's past teaching career) were currently using obviously were not having a positive effect on the outcome. We were using whole language, guided reading groups with leveled texts, so there was a concern that the instructional methods we were using to teach literacy were not effective. That's kind of how R.I.S.E. began.<sup>49</sup>

“It's like all of the sudden, the science world is meeting the educational world and we're able to use a lot of this information that we're getting because of technology. A lot of scientists are looking at the neurological component of it. We have fMRIs, which are functional MRIs, so they're able to study and look at what's happening to the brain in non-readers, what's happening to the brain in successful readers, and doing studies where they provide interventions and

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<sup>48</sup> The Nation's Report Card confirms that approximately 69% of Arkansas 4<sup>th</sup> graders are under proficiency and 71% of 8<sup>th</sup> graders are under proficiency (“NAEP State Profiles).

<sup>49</sup> Sharp

checking the brain to see what changes have made place. That information is available and certain sciences of the education people have used that information and what that tells us is that we were not born to read, our brain was not born to read; we were born for oral communication.<sup>50</sup>

“We must train our brain to read. It has to do with all of these different pathways and parts of our brain that we have to create those and through that process we have learned the importance of that systematic explicit phonics program. Schools are having to look at their curriculums and asking themselves, are we providing an explicit systematic phonics program along with vocabulary, comprehension, and how well are we helping our students develop phonological skills which is a foundational skill that students need in order to be successful readers. And so, it's just taking a look at what research has said and then developing a plan for the schools to use that incorporate more emphasis on phonological awareness and make sure we are helping our students master and become proficient with their phonological foundation skills, having systematic explicit phonics programs, and then of course, vocabulary and comprehension are very important components and for students to be fluent in each one of those areas.<sup>51</sup>

“We want them to be accurate with letter recognition, word recognition, but we also want them to become automatic. A word we use consistently in R.I.S.E. is automaticity, because they have to have those skills to automaticity for it to free up the brain. For instance, if you're reading something, if you are so focused on having to decode a word, look at a letter, figure out what its sound is, blend it with the other sounds, that's using up all of your working time. Therefore, it doesn't free up any space for you to think about what is the meaning. So, if they can decode those words automatically, it frees up space in the brain for them to then focus on the comprehension.

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<sup>50</sup> Sharp

<sup>51</sup> Sharp

That's what a lot of the science of reading supports. That's kind of an overview of R.I.S.E. in a nutshell.”<sup>52</sup>

Though I have only worked with America Reads for a relatively short time, I feel that I was able to witness firsthand how these changes truly began to affect my tutees.<sup>53</sup> In the fall of 2019, the Ouachita America Reads tutors were all given training specifically formatted to the R.I.S.E. initiative so we would be able to not only use the new initiative’s approved methods, but would be able to follow along with the teacher, working on the same material she would be covering so we would know what knowledge was being covered. Unlike the year before, the teacher I worked with was able to tell me exactly what my student’s problem areas were and what she needed to focus most on. I was amazed to see her progress evolve and change throughout the year and what was fascinating to me was seeing the differences between my current and past tutees when it came to reading: I saw my current tutee using automaticity whereas my previous students would often work at decoding every word, sometimes attempting to guess depending on context or pictures and I would never know which areas they were struggling in most, nor how to help work with those areas. Receiving the tutoring training was eye opening as well to see these changes being implemented and understanding how complex this process was. We received training from two elementary school teachers in the district who had received R.I.S.E. training in the summer and while they were extremely enthusiastic and passionate about teaching us this new material, I learned why this new initiative might not be quite as welcome for many teachers: for teachers who have been in their field for decades, everything they have been doing previously must change now. Sharp explained how she’s seen

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<sup>52</sup> Sharp

<sup>53</sup> This is of course my own opinion and experience and not indicative of every tutor’s experience.

this new initiative affect instructors and helped me understand how R.I.S.E. is changing how reading is taught:

“While this new change in curriculum sounds well-founded and researched and what is in the best interest of students, there is a lot of work to do. Faculty and teachers who have been in the field for years are now re-learning the process themselves: some are resistant as they are told that everything they have taught previously is wrong according to the new curriculum. It is a state-mandated initiative and teachers are required to learn the science of reading, to participate in one of the Pathways of R.I.S.E. School.<sup>54</sup> Districts are having to implement these instructional methods into their programs and curriculums. Teachers who are graduating from higher level institutions will be required to take a Foundations of Reading test in order to get their certification.<sup>55</sup> And so, they're just wanting to make sure that everybody has been taught the components or information about what works best to use to teach reading.<sup>56</sup>

“I've been on both sides of it. A couple of years ago, I had the super, awesome honor of getting to participate in the R.I.S.E. trainer of trainers training. And so, I went and spent about 3 or 4 weeks being trained on how they want us to move this into the schools. And then I came back that next summer and I trained the K-2 teachers in my district and now I am here working with college students. From seasoned teachers, those that were already out there, parts of it have been very difficult. Parts of it were like, oh my goodness, why didn't I know this before? Parts of it, there were things nobody had ever taught us, we didn't learn them in school or were not part of the reading gurus we looked up to in the educational world who were not telling us these

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<sup>54</sup> It is important to note different teachers must complete different Pathways. While elementary and special education teachers must complete the Proficiency Pathway, all other teachers must complete an Awareness Pathway.

<sup>55</sup> Again, this requirement is only for elementary and special education majors. The state must approve universities' plans for both the Proficiency Pathway and Awareness Pathway.

<sup>56</sup> Sharp

things. There were parts of it that were so eye opening and we were going, this is great, but then there were other parts of it that were more controversial.<sup>57</sup>

“Probably one of the most controversial parts of this was prior to R.I.S.E., we had all been trained that guided reading groups and using leveled text were the appropriate way to teach reading. That’s where you take a small group of children back to a table who are reading about the same level and you do a small group lesson with them using a text that is leveled. R.I.S.E. says that’s not a beneficial way to teach reading and using leveled texts early, K-1, K-2, is not an appropriate way to learn how to read. School districts have spent thousands of dollars on book rooms that house leveled texts that they pull from. What R.I.S.E. is saying is that we should use decodable text and a decodable text is going to be more in line with whatever phonics skill that they’re learning, for instance, if they’re learning about short vowel sounds with a consonant, vowel, consonant, then the books that they should be reading in small group should contain words that have that consonant, vowel, consonant. So they’re practicing with the reading what they’re learning because the science of reading people say that the other method of guided reading, they use the three reading cues system and that prompts children to guess at words. Tell them to look at a picture and then guess at the word and that’s really not a way we need to teach students how to become readers; we need to have them look at the words and be able to know how to decode them. That has been probably one of the biggest areas that was harder for teachers to accept and part of that is because all of our training, probably for the last 20 years, has come from that. And so, that is something teachers, you know, we thought we were doing the right thing, then the science of reading says that may not be as beneficial, and so, that has been the

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<sup>57</sup> Sharp

biggest area of concern for teachers, it's hard to accept. We're asking them to change complete approaches to reading and take on some of these new things. It's new learning for them too."<sup>58</sup>

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### **Conclusion: Why all of this matters**

Abolitionist leader and author Frederick Douglass said, "Once you learn to read, you will be forever free."<sup>59</sup> In my American Literature I class at Ouachita, we learned of Douglass's life: born into slavery, Douglass was never supposed to receive any form of education as it was illegal to teach slaves to read or write. However, a slaveholder's wife decided to defy the laws and taught Douglass the alphabet and after these lessons were discovered he continued to pursue his education, learning from other children in the neighborhood. He would eventually use his knowledge to teach other slaves and after escaping slavery and he would use his education to advance himself and actively advocate against slavery and for many other causes, like women's rights.<sup>60</sup> Another story of deliverance was made popular in recent years thanks to playwright, composer, and lyricist Lin-Manuel Miranda who wrote the hit *Hamilton*. Written about founding father Alexander Hamilton, Miranda used modern story-telling to bring history to life. As the hit grew rapidly in popularity, I became one of the masses who fell in love with this story for a multitude of reasons, but one of the most applicable themes was the story of liberation through education. The song "Hurricane" illustrates this theme beautifully:

I wrote my way out of hell

I wrote my way to revolution

I was louder than the crack in the bell

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<sup>58</sup> Sharp

<sup>59</sup> Wright

<sup>60</sup> Biography.com Editors

I wrote Eliza love letters until she fell  
I wrote about The Constitution and defended it well  
And in the face of ignorance and resistance  
I wrote financial systems into existence  
And when my prayers to God were met with indifference  
I picked up a pen, I wrote my own deliverance<sup>61</sup>

As I listened to this musical on repeat, attempting to memorize every lyric, I was struck by these lyrics as the music swelled and Miranda's voice belted out the lyrics, emotion pouring through: Hamilton used his education to advance, coming to America, literally writing his way out of extreme poverty, affirming the power the pen has. I loved learning more about the history of figures such as Douglass and Hamilton because their stories testify to the importance of education, of literacy, how it can change a person's life. Literacy can open doors to opportunity, inner strength, and determination and can catapult an individual towards success. Education can be a crucial key towards independence and freedom.

During my time spent in the humanities at Ouachita, tutoring with America Reads, and interning at the Chicago Literacy Alliance, I have discovered my passion for this subject as I have seen how education and literacy connects throughout life, fostering community, connections, access and opportunities, humanity, and lifelong learning: I believe wholeheartedly that reading and writing empowers individuals to participate in society and become active citizens, achieve their aspirations, and to uplift their souls as they discover the joy of a good piece of communication, whether it be in a book, newspaper, discussion forum, or line of poetry. However, I have found that many define literacy as the simple act of reading, to be able to form

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<sup>61</sup> Miranda

words from letters, when it is so much more, an entire world of possibilities: everyone deserves equal opportunity to access the world with these lifelong skills. Furthermore, literacy is not just an individual matter, but low literacy affects society as a whole. While it is not necessary to understand how the brain is trained to read and what methods have shown to work best to appreciate the value of literacy, it does provide a new, deeper appreciation, on a multitude of levels: appreciation for educators, scientists, researchers, beginning readers, and ultimately, the human mind for being able to adapt and learn such a wildly difficult task.

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