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The “Reading Wars” Are Back: What Are the Implications for Adolescent Literacy?

by Jenelle Williams

Differences of opinion regarding reading instruction are nothing new in education—they come and go as predictably as the ocean tides. A quick Google search on “reading wars” yields about 367,000,000 results, providing evidence that we are once again in the midst of differing opinions regarding how children should learn to read. Top results include “Four Things You Need to Know About the New Reading Wars” (Barshay, 2020), “Inside the Podcast That Reignited the Reading Wars” (Willen, 2022), “Reading Wars and ‘The Science of Reading’” (Gear, 2021), and more. Educators, researchers, for-profit companies, and even politicians are weighing in on this topic. As is the case in most debates, clarity of terms is important, so it is well worth our time to define two terms mentioned often: the Science of Reading and the Simple View of Reading. This article aims to provide clarity on the Science of Reading, consider implications for adolescent reading, and offer research-based suggestions for instruction.

The Science of Reading is a comprehensive body of research from “relevant disciplines such as education, special education, literacy, psychology, neurology, and more” that “[...] provides us with the information we need to gain a deeper understanding of how we learn to read, what skills are involved, how they work together, and which parts of the brain are responsible for reading development” (Ordetx, 2021). As stated in “The Science of Reading Progresses: Communicating Advances Beyond the Simple View of Reading” (2021), authors Nell K. Duke and Kelli B. Cartwright offer that “[t]he simple view of reading (SVR; Gough & Tunmer, 1986) is widely used to explain the science of reading to classroom teachers and others involved in reading education and to guide instructional practice (e.g., Moats, Bennett, & Cohen, 2018; Rose, 2006, 2017)”; this can cause educators to think the two are one and the same. The Simple View of Reading is one framework used to unpack and explain the Science of Reading. The Simple



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View of Reading framework posits that reading is the product of two independent components: decoding and listening comprehension. In other words, reading comprehension is the result of effective decoding and listening comprehension. Educational agencies and school districts prioritizing work around the Science of Reading may consider these approaches to be in opposition to balanced literacy approaches. Barshay (2020) offers this clarification in *The Hechinger Report*:

The concept now called balanced literacy arose in the 1990s as a compromise between the two prevailing camps of reading instruction: phonics and what is known as whole language. Whole language instruction is based on the philosophy that kids will learn to read naturally if you expose them to a lot of books.

In practice, balanced literacy can include elements such as reading aloud, guided reading, shared reading, independent reading, and word study. In some settings, it can also speak to the need to integrate reading, writing, speaking, and listening, and language instruction within a unit of study, as opposed to treating these as discrete skills.

What often results in educational debates such as these is a pendulum shift, abandoning previous approaches and adopting “new” approaches—either/or thinking as opposed to a nuanced “and.” As affirmation, many

Michigan districts are currently re-examining their elementary curricula in light of current debates about reading and considering purchasing new materials that claim to be more aligned to the Simple View of Reading.

Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling, commonly known as LETRS, is one such approach that promotes the Simple View of Reading. Approximately 23 states have contracted with Lexia, the company that houses LETRS, in order to train early elementary teachers. Much of this statewide uptake is based on results from Mississippi’s use of LETRS and subsequent student proficiency gains (Schwartz, 2022). However, in the *What Works Clearinghouse Quick Review of the Report “The Impact of Two Professional Development Interventions on Early Reading Instruction and Achievement”* (U.S. Department of Education, 2009), readers learn that

[p]roviding second-grade teachers training based on the LETRS curriculum (with or without the instructional coaches) increased their knowledge of reading instruction techniques and their use of explicit instruction. However, it did not increase the reading test scores of their students.

The long-term impact of this multi-state uptake of LETRS remains to be seen. In the interim, however, districts would do well to avoid an overemphasis on decoding and listening comprehension at the expense of other research-based instructional approaches that have been shown to support literacy development in young learners. An additional caution is offered to ensure that the methods suggested in the Simple View of Reading are not applied to adolescents, as the research base does not support such an approach. In order to better understand this issue, we turn back to the work of Duke and Cartwright.

Grounding the Conversation Within Adolescent Literacy Research

In their aforementioned article, Duke and Cartwright (2021) unpack the ways in which our understanding of frameworks of reading have evolved over decades of research. They make the case for a new framework beyond the Simple View of Reading—what they term the Active View of Reading. While the article is well worth reading for elementary educators and leaders, it also provides useful reviews of recent research on reading development for adolescents ages 10 to 19.

Figure 1
The Active View of Reading



What can be gleaned from a close reading of adolescent-specific research cited in the article? There is a growing body of research on the role of background knowledge as a predictor of reading ability (Talwar et al., 2018). This means it is extremely beneficial to pre-assess students’ level of background knowledge when preparing for an upcoming unit, as well as analyze texts for “necessary knowledge” required to understand them. When student prior knowledge and textual demands don’t align, we need to build that background knowledge. Related to this is an emerging body of research on how knowledge from one’s cultural experiences affects listening and reading comprehension (Murata, 2007). Helping students develop their executive function and active self-regulation skills can improve reading ability as well. This means that metacognitive (thinking about thinking) approaches are worth our time. Similarly, efforts to implement practices for fostering reading motivation have been shown to improve reading achievement. It is important to note as well that motivation is impacted by texts and activities - by teaching decisions - and is not just a function of student characteristics (Cartwright et al., 2020; Cutting & Scarborough, 2012; Georgiou & Das, 2018). Less surprising but certainly worth noting is research support for effective vocabulary instruction (including morphological awareness), as it can have positive effects on students’ ability to read. Finally, supporting students in developing comprehension strategies related to disciplinary texts has a wide body of research. It is clear just from this brief review of science-based adolescent literacy research that a much more complex framework (beyond the Simple View of Reading) is necessary, especially for adolescent readers.

To further complicate the issue, we must consider the interactivity among components of literacy—reading, writing, speaking, listening, and critically viewing. Conversations about improving reading proficiency among adolescents cannot occur in isolation without consideration of these additional components. This leads us to lean into the *Essential Instructional Practices for Disciplinary Literacy* (see Resources) and related resources curated by Michigan’s Disciplinary Literacy Task Force. In the next section, we explore intersections between

this work and elements of the Active View of Reading, with specific focus on the literacy needs of adolescents.

The Role of the Essential Instructional Practices for Disciplinary Literacy

The Essential Instructional Practices for Disciplinary Literacy, part of Michigan’s Birth through Grade 12 continuum of literacy documents and resources, are a focused set of research-supported instructional practices that have been shown to increase student achievement and/or engagement with academic literacies. Research suggests that each of the sets of ten practices, if implemented in every secondary core content classroom (English Language Arts, Science, Social Studies, Mathematics) at the unit and course level, could make a measurable positive difference in the literacy development and achievement of secondary students in the state. Figure 2 on the next page describes some of the connections between research-supported areas of focus in adolescent reading with portions of the *Essential Instructional Practices for Disciplinary Literacy*.

A review of elements in Figure 2 may remind readers of culturally responsive and sustaining pedagogies. Culturally responsive teaching can be attributed to researcher Geneva Gay, who argues that situating academic knowledge and skills within the lived experiences and frames of reference for students increases motivation, engagement, and learning. Building upon her work and the work of other researchers, Django Paris and H. Samy Alim developed the concept of Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy, which “seeks to perpetuate and foster--to sustain--linguistic, literate and cultural pluralism as part of school for positive social transformation and revitalization” (as cited in Ferlazzo, 2017). Fittingly, the *Essential Instructional Practices for Disciplinary Literacy* were updated in 2021 in collaboration with experts in order to better support such approaches. Reading instruction for adolescents is clearly complex, and reading strategies alone will not be sufficient in supporting their reading development. The research is clear that we must center students’ lived experiences, support active self-regulation and executive function, and attend to effective vocabulary instruction and reading strategies if we are to reach our goals of increased literacy for all adolescent learners.

Figure 2
Important Intersections Supporting Adolescent Literacy

Research-Supported Areas of Focus in Adolescent Reading, as cited in the Active View of Reading	Connections to <i>Essential Instructional Practices for Disciplinary Literacy</i> The teacher is called to:
Background knowledge and Cultural identities and knowledge	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Aid students in seeing themes from literature in their everyday lives and identities (i.e., cultural, racial, ethnic, gendered). (Practice 1) ● Provide access and regular opportunities to work with a wide range of diverse texts, including texts that allow students to reflect on their own interests and identities and also explore interests and identities different than their own, so that they can participate in diverse cultural and social contexts. (Practice 2) ● Help students connect and build on their in-school and out-of-school literacy practices and identities. (Practice 9) ● Honor and engage with the diversity of literacy practices in the school community. (Practice 9) ● Support students to connect and build on their in-school and out-of-school language and literacy practices by identifying language processes and discussing how language is used based on different purposes and audiences, including disciplinary audiences and purposes. (Practice 10)
Active self-regulation and executive function	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Teach and reinforce the habits of minds of good writers. (Practice 4) ● Involve students in the development of success criteria and learning goals, as well as in supported, productive self and peer assessment. (Practice 8)
Motivation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Foster a reading culture that promotes engagement with diverse texts in a variety of contexts. (Practice 2) ● Establish compelling reasons for reading, listening to, and viewing a variety of texts. (Practice 3)
Effective vocabulary instruction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Present vocabulary as language in use (in context) and teach multiple, nuanced meanings of a word across different contexts, encouraging students to use new words in meaningful ways (e.g., discussion of texts, discussions of content area learning, semantic maps). (Practice 7) ● Engage students in morphemic analysis (i.e., analysis of the meaning of word parts) of unfamiliar vocabulary encountered in texts and instruction. (Practice 7)
Reading strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Explicitly name, describe, and model the dispositions, strategies, and patterns of thinking typically applied or used in disciplines connected to English Language Arts. (Practice 3) ● Scaffold reading activities as appropriate using a range of strategies. (Practice 3)

In Summary

While the education pendulum continues to swing back and forth, teachers and leaders can remain steadfast in their commitment to evidence-based practices. The body of research that constitutes the Science of Reading should be guiding educational decision-making, not politicians or for-profit resource developers. Ensuring shared understanding of common terms such as balanced literacy, whole language, Simple View of Reading, and Science of Reading in communication efforts is critical for educators as they navigate this complex topic. Of additional importance is making educational decisions that are evidence-based for the target audience so that we ensure our adolescents are receiving intentional instruction that centers their background knowledge, cultural knowledge and identities, and motivation. The research is clear that developing readers—most especially adolescent readers—is anything but simple.

Resources

[Essential Instructional Practices for Disciplinary Literacy](#)
[EduPaths Disciplinary Literacy Courses](#)
[ELA - DLE Resource Hub](#)

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