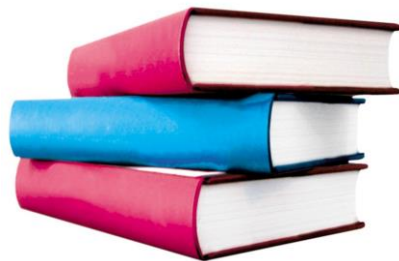


February/March 2020



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## Teaching Early Literacy – Which Approach Is Best?

It's clear that something has to be done to strengthen the skills of our early readers, but what is the solution? Is there just one solution? Coming from a background in secondary ELA, I recognized my own learning deficit when it comes to early literacy and decided to do some research. With such an emotionally, politically, and monetarily charged issue, I found it hard to locate sources that were objective when it came to anything related to the so-called “reading wars.”

An article called [“An Explanation of Structured Literacy, and a Comparison to Balanced Literacy”](#), by Nina A. Lorimor-Easley and Deborah K. Reed, does a good job defining two common approaches to literacy instruction, highlighting the strengths and weaknesses of each. While it is clear that the authors find Structured Literacy to be the preferred method of instruction, they give Balanced Literacy fair consideration, which I appreciate when trying to make an informed decision.

The article defines Structured Literacy as “the umbrella term used by the International Dyslexia Association (IDA) to unify and encompass evidence-based programs and approaches that are aligned to the [Knowledge and Practice Standards \(KPS; Cowen, 2016\)](#).” This approach focuses on systematically and explicitly teaching phonological awareness, word recognition, phonics and decoding, spelling, and syntax and uses primarily leveled decodable texts to do so. Balanced Literacy, on the other hand, is defined as a “philosophical orientation that assumes that reading and writing achievement are developed through instruction and support in multiple environments using various approaches that differ by level of teacher support and child control (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996).” It uses “high-quality children’s literature” to teach reading by having students utilize word analogies, pictures, and context clues to identify words during shared reading, guided reading, and independent reading (Lorimor-Easley and Reed).

Both approaches have their benefits. Most kids will eventually learn to read and write regardless of instructional method, but certain groups of at-risk students and students with disabilities like dyslexia need the “**explicit, systematic, cumulative and multisensory** instruction” provided by Structured Literacy ([“What Is Structured Literacy?”](#)). Because of its diagnostic nature, Structured Literacy also ensures that there are no assumptions made about what a student can do (Lorimore-Easley and

Reed). The benefits of Balanced Literacy include “immersing students in rich literature [which] is beneficial to fostering a habit of reading and exposing students to a variety of vocabulary, ideas, and uses of language” (Lorimore-Easley and Reed).

It’s important to remember to attend to all the foundational reading skills, not just phonics. Of course explicit phonics instruction is important, but we need to teach foundational skills together as “an entry point to complex literacy” ([Mesmer, 2020](#)). According to Heidi Anne E. Mesmer, “Print concepts and phonological awareness support phonics instruction, morphological instruction extends students’ word recognition, and fluency automatizes word reading... These foundational reading skills are truly foundational – an essential ingredient but not the full recipe. Comprehension and writing instruction, which requires a wide range of instructional targets such as vocabulary and world knowledge... round out the complete recipe.”

In my humble opinion, the most important consideration is making sure that all students are getting the necessary foundational instruction to develop the skills and confidence to be successful readers, all the while fostering in them a love of reading that will last a lifetime.

### **A Note on the “Science of Reading”**

In researching early literacy, I found many references to the “science of reading,” with advocates on both sides of the pendulum swing citing it as evidence of the superiority of their approach. In his article, “[Drawing on Reading Science Without Starting a War](#),” Benjamin Riley briefly summarizes some cognitive science related to reading and the need to take a “nuanced” approach to instruction.

While it is true that explicit instruction in phonics is essential, it is just as important to provide students with lots of practice reading different types of text. Additionally, students need vocabulary and content knowledge in order to make meaning of text. Riley says, “Like the polarization infecting American politics currently, polarization around reading science threatens to undermine reasoned deliberation and uptake.” When educators think they have all the answers, they ignore opportunities to take what works well for them and integrate the promising aspects of other approaches.

Science is important. Learning to read is not the same as learning to speak; children don’t learn to read by simply being immersed in text, as is the case with spoken language (Riley, 2020). Reading is not natural, it is a “modern human innovation” and it is helpful to know what cognitive science says about it (Riley, 2020). Still, there is something to be said about an educator’s expertise and the ways in which they implement what is known about reading science. Riley quotes cognitive scientist, Daniel Willingham, saying, “seeking to make a reader out of a child who does not read is an educational goal, not a scientific one” (2017). In other words, use science to inform your practice, not dictate it (Riley, 2020).

## Why Don't Teenage Boys Like to Read (and What Can We Do About It)?

In his article "[4 Ideas for Motivating Adolescent Male Readers](#)," Kenny McKee explains some of the reasons behind the general reluctance of young men when it comes to reading and outlines some suggestions of what to do about it. Among these is the idea of challenging the "boy code" that makes boys feel like reading is not something they are supposed to enjoy. This skewed perception comes from and can be perpetuated by a lack of positive male reader role models, the media's distorted view of masculinity, and the fact that many girls read earlier, so it is seen as a feminine activity (McKee, 2020).

Because the "boy code" labels reading as a feminine activity, and boys don't want to be seen as feminine, they don't read as much. This lack of practice contributes to their lack of reading proficiency, which in turn makes them even more reluctant to read, since it is now harder for them. Having male reading role models, including male teachers, is a way to create equity, and not just along gender lines. "Boys in wealthier districts generally report reading more often and have higher reading assessment scores because their fathers are likely to have jobs where literacy is valued. These boys are more likely to view literacy as a masculine trait (Sadowski, 2010)" (McKee, 2020). This is why it is especially important for male educators to stress the importance of literacy for boys living in poverty and to model its importance by discussing their own reading with their male students.

In addition to male reading role models, there are other ways to encourage boys to read. These include valuing the types of texts boys tend to enjoy and making these types of texts available. "Since many boys do not read teacher-privileged literary fiction texts at home, many of them classify themselves as non-readers, even if they do extensive reading from the Internet, magazines, and newspapers (Cavazos-Kottke, 2005)" (McKee, 2020). Teachers should also differentiate their reading materials and classroom activities and scaffold learning experiences in ways that make boys feel like they will be successful, since the fear of failure can stifle their interest before they even begin.

## Resources

*Read more about this month's topics here:*

- ["An Explanation of Structured Literacy, and a Comparison to Balanced Literacy"](#) (Nina A. Lorimor-Easley and Deborah K. Reed)
- ["Drawing on Reading Science Without Starting a War"](#) (Benjamin Riley)
- [Structured Literacy™: An Introductory Guide](#)
- ["There Are Four Foundational Reading Skills. Why Do We Only Talk About Phonics?"](#) (Heidi Anne E. Mesmer)
- ["What Is Structured Literacy?"](#) (IDA Oregon)
- ["4 Ideas for Motivating Adolescent Male Readers"](#) (Kenny McKee)

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See us at:

<https://education.vermont.gov/student-learning/content-areas/language-arts>

**Activities and Professional Offerings****Articulating the Why, What & How of Your Standards-Based Learning System –**

Emily Rinkema and Stan Williams are facilitating a one-day workshop through CVEDC on May 11 in Burlington, VT. Ensure a smoother transition and more consistent message by developing common language and guiding documents. Bring a team! For more information or to register, visit the [CVEDC website](#).

**Rethinking Instructional Design in a Proficiency-Based Classroom –**

Innovation coach and Rowland Fellow, Gabrielle Lumbra, is offering a three-credit course this spring about rethinking the design of instruction and delivery to foster self-direction and reflection in student learning. Participants will analyze current practices and redesign lessons and units in order to facilitate self-directed, proficiency-based learning experiences that include more personalization, learner agency, and engagement. For more information or to register, visit the [Castleton College website](#).

**Smarter Balanced Item Development –**

The Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium is recruiting qualified ELA educators to support assessment activities in 2020. Smarter Balanced is recruiting for three educator activities: item authoring and review; item review for content, fairness, and accessibility; and range-finding. Fill out the [survey application](#) to apply or contact [Linda Moreno](#) for more information and for eligibility requirements.

**Teen Lit Mob –** Consider accompanying your students to Vermont's only book-related conference specifically for young adult readers. Students from around the state converge and talk about what they're reading. This year, Teen Lit Mob will celebrate teen readers and Young Adult literature on Friday, March 27<sup>th</sup>, at U-32 High School in East Montpelier. Many Vermont authors will also be in attendance. This event is free for all teens and lunch is provided. For more information or to register, visit the [Vermont Department of Libraries website](#).

**Vermont Writing Collaborative (VWC) Conference –** Registration is now open for the VWC's summer conference at Lake Morey Resort in Fairlee, Vermont. This three-day conference will focus on developing a deep understanding of content- and standards-based benchmarks in argument, informative, and narrative writing. Using student work as a base, K-12 educators will be introduced to ideas, tools, and approaches for integrating knowledge, reading, thinking, and writing in order to help all your students become proficient and thoughtful writers. For more information or to register, visit the [VWC website](#).

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