

Answers To Some Specific Questions About Reading Instruction

By G. Reid Lyon, Ph.D.

1. Will state governments prescribe specific components to the K-3 reading program for the state (phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, reading comprehension)? Will this apply to all public schools?

The word "prescription" in this question is the operative term and reflects a common concern among educators that someone is trying to foist ONE method of instruction on teachers and kids. What we have to help people understand is that we must move away from being method driven to basing our instruction on the question: How do children learn to read? What specific abilities and skills must they acquire to become strong readers - good comprehenders?

Clearly the evidence is overwhelming that we know that learning to read requires the development of phonemic awareness, phonics skills, the ability to apply these word level skills to text rapidly and fluently, vocabulary, and the ability to actively relate what is read to background knowledge (including vocabulary) in order to comprehend.

All of these abilities are ESSENTIAL, ARE NON-NEGOTIABLE, but in and of themselves NOT SUFFICIENT. That is, you cannot just teach phonemic awareness or phonics or reading comprehension strategies, etc. and expect the child to learn. All must be taught in a highly integrated and reinforcing fashion. To be sure, many students will already have acquired some of the skills, even in kindergarten and before they reach the first grade through good strong language and literacy interactions with parents, etc. When this is the case, the teacher does not need to re-teach what is known. THE TEACHER, HOWEVER, MUST BE ABLE TO ASSESS THE CHILD'S STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES IN THESE CRITICAL COMPONENT ABILITIES TO DETERMINE WHICH ONES ARE DEVELOPED AND WHICH ONES NEED TO BE TAUGHT.

Thus, the State, just like the Federal government, must ensure that all reading programs are comprehensive and do have instructional interactions that build in mastery of all of the critical components essential to reading. However, schools and teachers would have the flexibility to address the reading instructional needs of their students with the programs they have found to be most effective in an objective way. That is, they must have the capacity to assess the students on a frequent basis, monitor the effects of instruction, and modify instruction for those students not building sufficient skills.

2. Will state governments prescribe specific components to the 4-6 reading program for the state? And a 7-8 reading program? Will this apply to all public schools?

As noted above, learning to read requires the inculcation of several critical and highly integrated abilities. The same abilities apply to students throughout schooling and into adulthood. Just

because students get older does not mean that the need to develop PA, phonics, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension abilities goes away. Students must be taught the essential skills that they have not yet developed. To be sure, however, the educational needs of older students in grades 4-6 differ substantially from K-3 given that they are now expected to read to learn and content information becomes critical. Thus, the instructional task is made more complex with the need to not only teach reading skills to students who have not yet developed them, but to do so in the context of their content demands. This will require highly creative methodologies and instructional platforms that are being worked on now. Again, we cannot distance the instructional responsibilities from the leadership responsibilities that must be in place at the DISTRICT AND PRINCIPAL level.

3. Is there a place for the "whole language" approach/strategy?

Keep in mind that "Whole Language" is a philosophy, not an approach or a strategy. We must begin to help principals and teachers move away from the type of polarization that exists in this question (e.g., whole language versus something else) and have all of us discussing (1) how reading develops and what all children need to know to become good readers. It may sound like a broken record but reading development builds on PA, phonics, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension abilities.

The question here relates to HOW DO YOU TEACH THESE SKILLS? If teachers know what they have to teach and have been provided robust training in how to assess the effectiveness of their instruction, ANY TYPE of instruction would be appropriate IF IT WORKS. All children do not need to be taught reading skills in a highly structured manner. Some kids learn implicitly while others need a more systematic and direct form of instruction. ONE SIZE DOES NOT FIT ALL. But the critical point here is the type of instruction that is provided must be based on the student's response to it. And that can only be determined by the application of assessment and progress monitoring techniques. 4. Do you see colleges of education teaching the specific components (phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, reading comprehension) to all aspiring K - 3 and 1 - 6 teachers as a part of the core curriculum for these teacher candidates?

Absolutely. All of these abilities are critical to reading development no matter the age of the person. However, for teachers instructing at these different levels, the teaching of these abilities will differ given the need to incorporate content into the process and the significant demands that vocabulary places on students from grades 4 through 12.5. Do you see colleges of education teaching more than one reading approach?

Again, we must move away from addressing teacher training as an approach or method driven enterprise. Teachers must know (1) how reading develops; (2) why some children have difficulties; (3) how to identify early students at risk for reading failure and to implement effective early intervention programs, and (4) how to remediate reading difficulties if not prevented.

Colleges of education must provide in depth training to ensure that all teachers know the above. When this happens, the type of approach is predicated on which skills the student has developed, which ones remain problematic, and the type of instruction that makes the concepts most clear to

the student. Thus, it is possible for teachers to be employing less direct, more wholistic instructional interactions with some students who have mastered basic word level concepts, but using more explicit and direct instruction for those students who have not.

WE MUST MOVE AWAY FROM A PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION TO A SCIENCE OF EDUCATION.

6. Please state your definition of a "balanced" reading program vs. a "comprehensive" reading program.

My definition of "balanced" is based on our review and monitoring of over 200 school systems that use this particular term. In the main it refers to a little of this and a little of that. Its definition is based more in political correctness than in instructional quality and typically means that the school/teachers are doing what they have always done, but are more careful in how they describe.

I would replace the term "balanced" with the concept of a "comprehensive reading program" that ensures that all critical reading components will be assessed and instructed with the nature of the instruction based upon the student's response to the instructional strategies that are employed.⁷ Do you see a writing component being added to the reading program as a "given", and do you see its design being in a particular format?

It definitely is a given and is very useful at all levels of reading development. In building word level skills (PA, letter-sound correspondences, writing and spelling serve as outstanding representations for the linguistic concepts the kids have to master. Again, the nature of the writing instruction is dependent on the student's response to it.⁸ What necessary components should the Pre-K reading readiness program have?

The pre-k program must focus on the provision and integration of interactions with the children to maximally build social competence, emotional health, and cognitive and language abilities critical for school readiness. Again, the preparation of teachers to do this in a warm, nurturing, and safe environment is critical. Our studies have found clearly that even the most at risk kids at the preschool level respond well to interactions that are structured and systematic, but in an age appropriate manner. Vocabulary, sounds, letter names, numbers and other cognitive concepts can be learned in the context of play and social interactions.

Consider what children from an advantaged environment typically receive from that environment. They are read to and talked to constantly. They learn to play with the language and to have fun with cognitive things like new words, letters, sounds, numbers and the like. They learn these concepts in a fun and entertaining manner. We need to replicate that type of instructional interaction in all preschools.

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