

Introduction

CONTEXT

In our society in this age one must be able to read in order to reach one's full potential. Not only do you need to know how to read, but you also must be able to do so efficiently and effectively. According to the National Institute of Literacy (part of the US Department of Education), 14% of US adults (or about 32 million) can't read, and 21% of US adults read below a fifth-grade level. This greatly impacts their ability to earn a living wage and adequately provide for themselves or a family.

Currently there are about 74 million children under the age of 18 living in the United States. The National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) estimates that approximately 20% of them have trouble learning to read. This would be about 14 million children. Of these, 3% to 5% have significant reading difficulties (a severe reading disability). This would be between 2.2 and 3.7 million children. But even if one student was struggling to read, that would be too many, especially if that student was your own child. These students are twice as likely to drop out of high school when compared to their peers. As a result, they are more apt to be unemployed, underemployed, and incarcerated. This means they are far less able to contribute to society, provide for their families, spend money in our economy, and pay taxes. Thus, making sure all children learn to read is more than an educational issue; it's a social justice issue.

CODE FIRST OR MEANING FIRST

There are two basic theoretical perspectives related to reading instruction. These two perspectives used to be identified as phonics

and whole language. Some may remember the reading wars of the late '80s and early '90s that pitted phonics against whole language. However, these terms are outdated and inaccurate today. Most teachers who identify themselves as whole language teachers use very explicit phonics instruction in their classrooms. In the same way, most teachers who advocate a phonics-first approach also strive to get students reading whole, complete, meaningful texts to the greatest extent possible. It is more accurate to say that differing theoretical perspectives are the following: a code-first approach based on a bottom-up model that has its basis in behavioral learning theory and a meaning-first approach based on an interactive model that has its basis in constructivism or cognitive learning theory.

Code First

The code-first approach to reading instruction places initial emphasis on decoding. Letter-identification skills of increasing complexity are taught in a specific order (scope and sequence) until students have sufficient command of phonological processes. This approach has been successfully used with many generations of students (including me). Lower-level letter sounds and other reading subskills are taught so that students will be able to engage in higher-level acts of comprehending whole, meaningful text. This reflects a bottom-up or phonological model of reading in which the processing of text is seen to move in a single direction, from letter sounds to words to meaning in part-to-whole fashion. Reading here is equated with sounding out words. In 1983, when I began teaching second grade in River Falls, Wisconsin, I could not imagine that there could possibly be any other way to teach students how to read.

Meaning First

The meaning-first approach to reading instruction places the emphasis on getting students engaged in whole, complete texts first, then teaching skills within that meaningful context. Reading here is defined not as sounding out words but as creating meaning with print. Reading is seen as both a top-down and bottom-up process. This reflects an interactive model of reading. Higher-level cognitive processes interact with lower-level letter identification skills to create meaning during the act of reading. I call this a neurocognitive model

because of the importance of both neurological functions and cognitive structures in creating meaning with print. Explicit instruction is used to teach phonics as well as other word identification skills. However, this instruction takes place in the context of whole, meaningful text to the greatest extent possible so that students are able to simultaneously develop the ability to use higher-level processes as well as lower-level skills.

Top Down

What about a top-down model of reading? Here, higher-level cognitive structures and processes would be used almost exclusively to identify words. Skills instruction of any kind would be minimal. Whole language teaching is often mischaracterized as a purely top-down approach; however, in my experience, very few people (if any) subscribe to a purely top-down approach to reading instruction. Most whole language teachers and scholars believe in very direct and explicit phonics instruction. It's not the "what" of phonics instruction that is in question, it's the "how" and "how much" of phonics instruction.

TOOLS IN YOUR TEACHING TOOLBOX

The thumbnail sketches presented above are by no means completely descriptive of the two general approaches to reading instruction. They are meant simply to provide context for the chapters that follow. As to which one is the "correct" approach, there will always be well-informed people of good character on both sides of this issue. I subscribe to a meaning-first approach based on the neurocognitive model of reading. From my perspective, a vast array of research from many different fields clearly points to the neurocognitive model of reading. However, I recognize that others disagree. Regardless of your theoretical perspective, the strategies presented in this book can be used to enable you to help students develop their ability to create meaning with print. That said, this book does not offer a specific method for reading instruction. It does not provide a recipe for reading interventions. Rather, it contains a variety of teaching strategies and activities that you can use to help struggling readers.

My goal with this book is to provide an array of tools for your teaching toolbox. Like any tool, the effectiveness of each strategy is dependent on how it is used. Thus, I recommend that all strategies

presented in this book, like any strategy or tool, be adopted and adapted to fit your particular teaching situation and to meet the needs of your students. One last thing: The strategies here are designed for and have been used with students from kindergarten through higher education. Again, adopt and adapt. A very important scientific principle is this: If it works, do more of it. If it doesn't work, do less of it.

AUDIENCE

This book was initially written to be a professional-development book for teachers. For this purpose, I recommend creating book clubs or professional-development discussion groups based on this book. Ideally, these groups would meet every two weeks to share the strategies you implemented, how you implemented them, and how they work. If you go to my website (www.OPDT-Johnson.com), you'll find directions for discussion groups, specific discussion group questions, and activities for each chapter. As well, I will be creating online forums for these types of professional-development discussion groups.

I have also found this book to be particularly well suited for use in my literacy-methods courses at Minnesota State University, Mankato, where I teach (bias noted). To make this book more accessible to all, I've tried to keep the chapters short and the language less formal.

Finally, with my audience in mind, I've tried to keep citations to a minimum; however, there are some chapters that describe important theoretical perspectives that tend to generate many questions. You will find these chapters to be heavily cited.