

Introduction

We will never teach all of our students to read if we do not teach our students who have the greatest difficulties to read. Another way to say this is: Getting to 100% requires going through the bottom 20%.

—Torgesen (2006, p. 1)

Teaching all students to read is both easier *and* more difficult now than it was when the first edition of *Teach Them ALL to Read* was published in 2002. First—the good news. The goal of literacy for all students as spelled out in the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB, 2002) is more readily attainable for two reasons. First, there is a growing body of experimental research to show educators what works. Second, there are large numbers of successful schools against which to benchmark leadership behaviors, curricula, instructional approaches, grouping practices, and assessments (American Institutes for Research, 2008; Chenoweth, 2007; Denton, Foorman, & Mathes, 2003; Fielding et al., 2007; Foorman & Moats, 2004; Luce & Thompson, 2005; McEwan, 2009; Waits et al., 2006).

However, there is also discouraging news—the achievement target keeps moving. Bringing students to reading and writing proficiency today is more challenging than it was even one or two years ago as expectations continue to rise on high-stakes tests. If you and your colleagues want to bring all of your students to grade-level reading proficiency, *regardless of their readiness to read* when they enroll in your school, take these steps: (1) Consider the paradigms that impact reading achievement and be prepared to challenge and ultimately change the prevailing beliefs that are interfering with all students learning to read; (2) become knowledgeable about research regarding the role that each of the reading puzzle pieces play in facilitating high literacy levels; and (3) utilize your unique leadership and instructional expertise to raise literacy levels in your classroom, school, or district.

We begin with Step 1 by examining how certain assumptions, beliefs, and values (paradigms) affect your success in teaching all of your students to read.

SHIFT YOUR PARADIGMS

The solution to the problem [of teaching them all to read] is like most significant breakthroughs in human history—it comes from a fundamental break with old ways of thinking.

—Covey (2004, p. 10)

Philosopher Thomas Kuhn (1962/1996) coined the phrase *paradigm shift* to describe a fundamental change in approach or underlying assumptions that govern the behavior

■ THE ROLE OF PHONEMIC AWARENESS IN SKILLED READING

Effective preschool and kindergarten teachers have always included word play and rhyming games in their lesson plans. Perhaps they have instinctively known that children need these language skills to be successful readers. However, the difference between that kind of incidental instruction and the way we now know PA must be taught in order to catch students at risk of reading failure is huge. Our earlier conception of language skills as developmental in nature permitted us to explain away those students who didn't get it as not ready (Francis, Shaywitz, Stuebing, Shaywitz, & Fletcher, 1996). We believed that students who didn't readily catch on to natural and informal language activities just needed more time to mature. We retained them in kindergarten to give them another year to mature or placed them in a developmental first-grade or an ungraded primary class. Marilyn Adams (1990) reminds us that

The key to phonemic awareness seems to lie more in training than in age or maturation. If these children have not received the proper exposure to print and sound in either their homes or their kindergarten classrooms by age five and a half, what is there to suggest that they will by the time they are six and a half? (p. 331)

The big idea of learning to read is known as the *alphabetic principle*. This principle has nothing to do with knowing the alphabet song or being able to identify isolated letters by name. It is “*the understanding that there are systematic and predictable relationships between written letters and spoken sounds*” (Armbruster, Lehr, & Osborn, 2001, p. 12). When students understand that spoken sounds correspond to letters of the alphabet, they are on their way to becoming skilled readers and writers. As students acquire PA skills, they are gradually led to an understanding of the alphabetic principle (Lieberman, Shankweiler, & Lieberman, 1989). Absent PA skills, students come to a dead-end on the learning to read road.² Students without PA can be found in affluent suburban schools as well as in high-poverty inner-city schools. One cannot assume that any given child has PA skills; that is why early assessment is critical. When eager kindergarten teachers launch immediately into their favorite food phonics activities or begin to teach the letter names along with the sounds, they are literally closing the door to literacy for students at risk.³

Most published phonics programs assume that students already have phonemic abilities, and some students do. However, those students who do not have PA will struggle to make sense of phonics instruction and exhibit difficulties with sounding and blending new words, retaining words from one day to the next, and learning to spell (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998, p. 55). These students will muddle through kindergarten, hit a brick wall in first grade, and shortly thereafter begin to exhibit behavior problems, emotional distress, or even symptoms of physical illness.

If you have ever tried to teach a very bright student who had reading difficulties and you were unable to solve the riddle of why nothing seemed to work, lack of PA may well have been the reason. Because phonological abilities are relatively independent of overall intelligence (Vellutino & Scanlon, 1987; Wagner & Torgesen, 1987), a teacher can fairly assume that if a student with a normal or even high IQ and satisfactory listening comprehension is floundering in reading, one highly probable explanation for the problem is lack of PA skills. The student who cannot hear the individual phonemes in spoken words is unable to take the next step in acquiring the ability to read: learning how these sounds correspond to the letters of the alphabet.

The multilinguistic model of spelling instruction offers teachers a way to help students become more conscious and intentional about constructing MOIs.

Teachers who encourage students to make educated guesses about words based on the first letter or letters of the word (e.g., train, trunk, or trap) or even context when they are unable to quickly identify a word are interfering with students' ability to develop adequate MOIs.

SCIENTIFIC EVIDENCE FOR SPELLING INSTRUCTION

Spelling was considered to be one of the most researched topics in the language arts 30 years ago (Allred, 1977). However, during the first half of the 20th century, research focused primarily on identifying which words should be included in the study of spelling based on how frequently they appeared in written text, analyzing students' spelling errors to determine which words were more difficult to spell, and identifying the best ways to teach spelling.

In the second half of the 20th century, research began to examine the alphabetic, syllabic, and morphological characteristics of words as well as hypothesizing that spelling was a developmental process of stages through which most learners predictably progressed on their way to becoming skilled at spelling. More recently, spelling research has focused on its multilinguistic structure and the impact of spelling instruction on reading and writing. The following brief review of spelling research focuses on that topic.

The Relationship Between Spelling and Reading

As I have mentioned, reading and spelling are closely related skills (Apel & Masterson, 2001; Berninger et al., 2002). In fact, scholar Linnea Ehri (1997) demonstrates how reading and spelling are one and the same, almost. They are the same because they draw from the same linguistic knowledge sources in long-term memory that individuals begin constructing as they learn to read and spell. Reading and spelling are different, however, in the kind of information they draw upon from long-term memory.

If you were asked whether identifying a word or spelling it required the retrieval of more information from long-term memory, you would no doubt choose word identification. After all, everything teachers do in the primary grades is focused on teaching word identification, while spelling is an add-on or an afterthought. Surprisingly, however, the act of reading a word involves only one cognitive response (identifying the whole word) while the act of spelling requires multiple responses (writing several letters in a correct sequence). Although reading (decoding by mapping sounds to letters in order to identify words and comprehend written text) and spelling (encoding by mapping letters to sounds in order to spell and write) seem to be two sides of the same coin, they differ dramatically in the demands they make on our long-term memories.

Spelling is the most exacting and objective measure of the literacy-related skills because it requires careful attention to a word's exact conventional form (Apel, 2008). Consider this personal example: I can always read the words *embarrassment* and *commitment* fluently when I encounter them in text. I never mistake either of them for any other word, identifying both in a split second. In the act of reading, I need not pay close attention to the bedeviling double consonants in these words. *Embarrassment*

Use and Teach Content Vocabulary Daily in a Systematic Way

If the goal [of vocabulary instruction] were to teach words in a way that would improve students' performance on multiple-choice vocabulary tests, the goal could be achieved through many simple and relatively undemanding methods. However, if the goal is to teach words in a way that will improve students' comprehension of text that contains these words, the methods become more labor- and time-intensive.

—Nagy (2005, p. 27)

Systematic vocabulary instruction has three characteristics: (1) it happens on a daily basis, (2) there are routines for how words are understood and practiced, and (3) students have multiple opportunities to cognitively process new words. Upper-grade teachers may think they are teaching systematic vocabulary instruction if they hand out a list on Monday, assign definitions to be copied from the glossary or dictionary to be turned in on Wednesday, and then give a test on Friday. Observations in 23 ethnically diverse classrooms found that only 6% of class time was devoted to vocabulary instruction, and in the core academic subjects, only 1.4% of instructional time was used for building word knowledge (Scott, Jamieson-Noel, & Asselin, 2003). Unless teachers bring words to life by directly teaching and talking about meanings and connections, students will memorize the definitions for the test and promptly forget them. Notch up the amount of time you spend teaching vocabulary, and you will find that students more readily understand and retain content knowledge.

Here's how to systematically teach words for mastery in the content classroom:

- Post the words in your classroom in their syllabicated forms (e.g., math-e-matics) to aid struggling readers who have difficulty identifying and pronouncing multisyllabic words.
- Pronounce *and* spell each new word as you introduce it, as spellings of new vocabulary enhance students' memory for pronunciations and meanings (Ehri & Rosenthal, 2007; Rosenthal & Ehri, 2008).
- Provide a student-friendly definition of the word (avoid vague and circular dictionary definitions).
- Suggest synonyms or antonyms for the word (Simone Kern gives students two to three of each and lets students pick a favorite).
- Put the new word into a context or connect it to a known concept.
- Use the new word on multiple occasions and in multiple contexts (e.g., sentence starters, games).
- Have students prepare word cards to put on a metal ring so they can review vocabulary if they complete other work.
- Whenever you say the word in the course of instruction, run your hand or a pointer under the syllables of the written word on the wall as you pronounce it, quickly cueing struggling readers to associate your spoken word with its written form.
- After you say the word, have the class chorally read and spell the word or ask individual students to read the word to make sure everyone is processing it.
- Place several new words into a shared context by using them together in a sentence that requires students to answer a question.
- Ask questions that contain the new words so students must process their meanings in multiple ways.

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A Reading Culture

A reading culture comprises the collective attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors of all of the stakeholders in a school regarding any and all of the activities associated with enabling all students to read at the highest level of attainment possible for both their academic and personal gain.

We are now ready to put the final piece of the reading puzzle in place: *a pervasive and persuasive reading culture*. Recall that in the Introduction, three steps were recommended for bringing the students in your classroom, school, or district to grade-level reading proficiency, *regardless of their readiness to read or their reading levels when they first enrolled in your school*:



1. Consider the paradigms that impact reading achievement and be prepared to challenge and ultimately change the prevailing beliefs that are interfering with your students learning to read.
2. Become knowledgeable about research regarding the role that each piece of the reading puzzle plays in facilitating high literacy levels as well as what types of instruction are most effective for teaching those literacy skills to all students.
3. Utilize your unique leadership and instructional expertise to raise literacy levels wherever you work.

I hope that you have been thinking about these steps during your reading to this point. Just ahead we see how educators in the Gering, Nebraska, School District followed these steps to create a pervasive and persuasive reading culture. In just five years, they have raised the achievement bar for all students and are well on their way to closing the achievement gap between their Hispanic and white students.