

LITERACY REFRAMED

*How a Focus on
Decoding, Vocabulary, and
Background Knowledge
Improves Reading Comprehension*

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Preface

Our journey with this book started the moment Gene called Robin and Brian and asked, “Do you have a few minutes? Well, maybe more?” He piqued their curiosity as he began his pitch: “This is about the reading challenges that almost nobody’s talking about.” He was talking about supporting and advocating for a revolutionary shake-up in traditional reading protocols based on re-emerging and newly emerging research evidence. That phone call and exciting news set the journey in motion.

K–12 students in 21st century classrooms face reading challenges that few on the modern school scene are talking about yet. These challenges have only become visible as a consensus of ideas from four voices in education. First, the wisdom of school-improvement expert Mike Schmoker’s (2018) *Focus: Elevating the Essentials to Radically Improve Student Learning* and his plea to prioritize the essentials of teaching and optimize the power of student learning both struck the right chord with the three of us. Second, American educator E. D. Hirsch Jr.’s (2018) tome *Why Knowledge Matters: Rescuing Our Children From Failed Educational Theories* broke new ground and fanned the flame of knowledge as the quintessential ingredient for reclaiming students’ literacy legacy. Third, Doug Lemov, Colleen Driggs, and Erica Woolway (2016) advanced a phenomenal approach to instruction in their book *Reading Reconsidered: A Practical Guide to Rigorous Literacy Instruction*, boosted by, finally, psychologist Daniel T. Willingham’s (2017) *The Reading Mind: A Cognitive Approach to Understanding How the Mind Reads*.

These last two books made us clearly and urgently decide to combine their ideas in ways that matter to teachers. We discovered how their ideas coincide with our aim to revisit common reading instructional practices (which have always included instruction on phonics, or *decoding*, and vocabulary development) and the critical role of content knowledge. This mingling of ideas contains the essence of a newly

formed truth: massive amounts of time for authentic reading are necessary across all subjects in order for teachers to willingly release students to read successfully as a lifetime pursuit.

That's the story of *Literacy Reframed: How a Focus on Decoding, Vocabulary, and Background Knowledge Improves Reading Comprehension*.

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Introduction

It is impossible to overstate the importance of literacy. Yet nothing so begs for clarity in K–12 education.

—Mike Schmoker

Imagine, in a year devoid of major financial market disruption, you dutifully invested twice the amount you did the previous year into your retirement account only to see that your account balance remained the same at year's end. You doubled down on your investment strategy, and it made no difference. How long would you continue that same approach?

Or imagine working overtime hours only to find the bottom line of your paycheck remained flat. Would you question the extra time you put in? Of course you would. Would you work overtime the next week? Likely not.

We want to know that our investments of time and energy pay reasonable dividends. Well, it's time for us to be honest and admit that we have a major literacy problem in U.S. education; we have expended vast amounts of resources and have little to show for it. It appears that our current approach to literacy is flawed, yet we continue to make huge investments that pay little to no returns.

The Massive Literacy Challenge Nobody's Talking About

As we track the evolution of reading instruction, we can think of it as a journey, a long and arduous experience for those educators who have witnessed its iterations since the 1960s. Teachers have earnestly instructed students in the customs of the day, from the earliest days of the one-room schoolhouse and the McGuffey's Readers taught by rote reading and writing; to reading instruction that relied heavily on sight words and the look-say method of published pre-primers and primers on the Sally,

Dick, and Jane sagas; to the upper-level basal texts, often themed for grade-level interests; to the 21st century's newest approach, the science of reading. Yet, in all this time, reading performance has barely improved and at times educators have seen catastrophic results (Joyce, Calhoun, & Hopkins, 1999).

Policymakers and educators alike acknowledge that literacy is the key to all learning, and we know that raising a student's literacy abilities increases scores across the content areas (Cromley, 2009; Martin & Mullis, 2013). This is intuitive and, in addition, English language arts (ELA) and literacy scores have been part of nearly every high-stakes accountability initiative; funding for literacy matches that priority. We educators focus on and fund literacy efforts. But the power of the academic dialogue does not match our results. Why? Perhaps, as Schmoker (2011) suggests, literacy is one of those essential things that we talk a lot about “but we have never fully clarified” or “obsessed over [its] implementation” (p. 9).

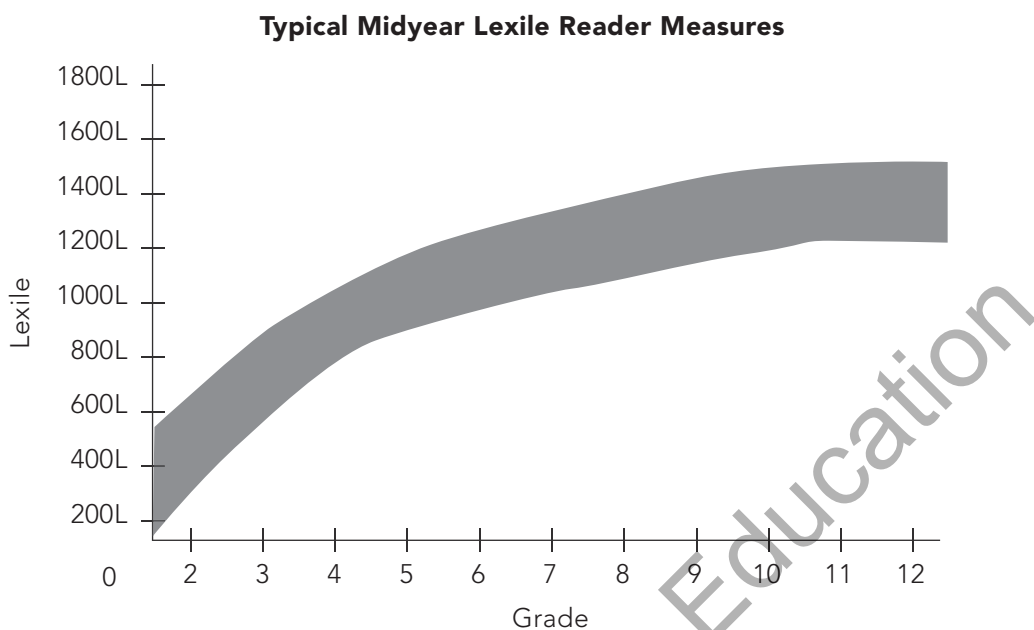
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The perceived remedy was to focus on accountability for poor performance that began in earnest with President George W. Bush's No Child Left Behind (NCLB, 2002) initiative, which reauthorized the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965. In turn, schools have become increasingly focused on an assessment-driven thrust toward reading achievement. In fact, the focus on skill-based approaches—referenced in our work as *overskillified models*—has had a monopoly in literacy instruction. Generous blocks of time for literacy were intentionally scheduled soon after No Child Left Behind to increase reading proficiencies across the grades. Unfortunately, in practice, teachers used these blocks for skill-and-drill workbooks and worksheets, as well as strategy lessons, devouring precious time set aside for improving the complex act of students authentically reading with fluency and comprehension.

The detrimental effects of this focus on overskillification, unfortunately, have been wide reaching. In the following sections, we'll discuss how overskillification has caused literacy development to flatline and how research evidence has revealed a startling solution. People in schools, not just in ivory towers, are beginning to reassess and reframe how they will approach reading in the future.

A Flatlining Pattern

So, what do data say is the worst effect of existing unproductive literacy practices? Succinctly stated, it's stunted reading growth after the late elementary years. One of the most commonly used measures of text complexity, used to evaluate both the difficulty of books and the reading abilities of students on the same scale, is the



Source: MetaMetrics, n.d.

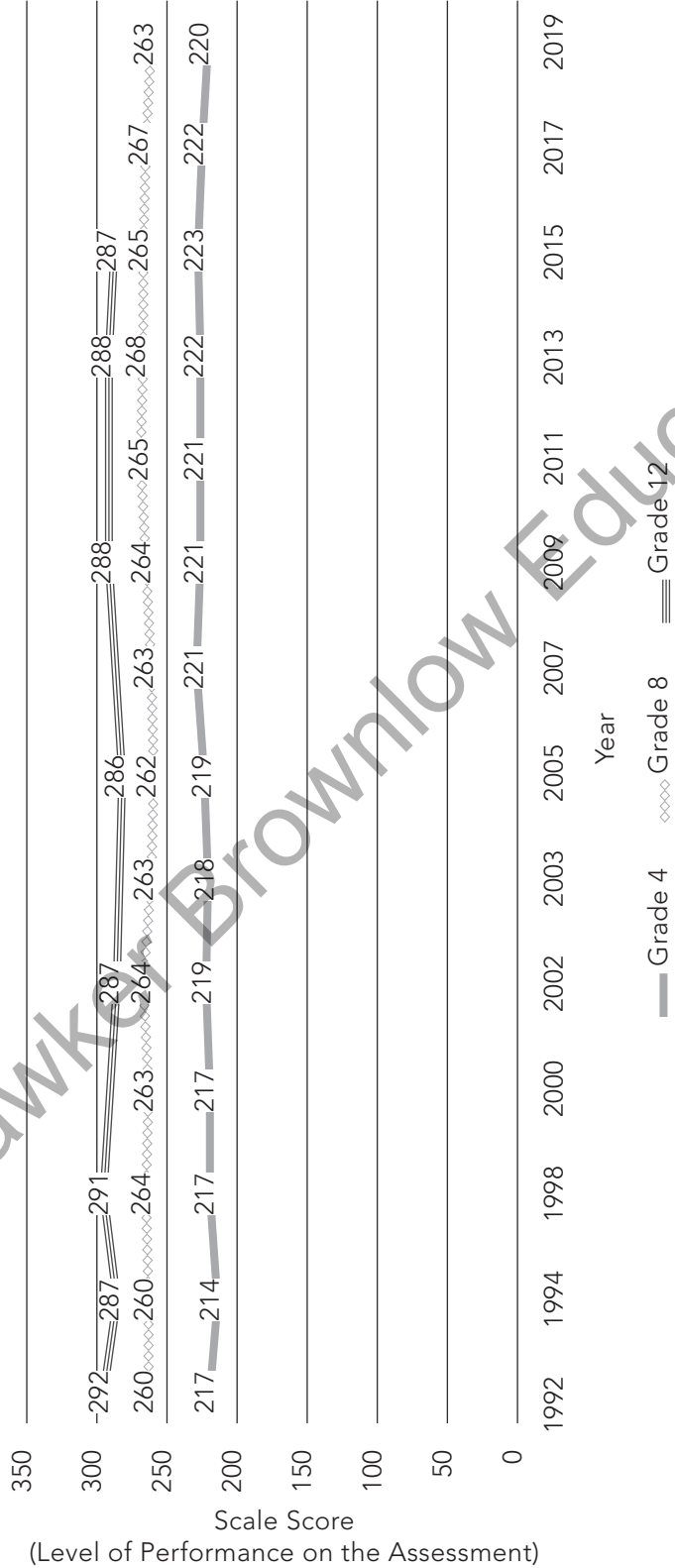
Figure I.1: Typical midyear Lexile reader measures.

Lexile Framework created by MetaMetrics. Figure I.1 depicts typical midyear Lexile measures across grades 2–12 for U.S. students ranging in performance from the 25th percentile to the 75th percentile (MetaMetrics, n.d.). In other words, this figure illustrates how a vast number of our students grow in terms of literacy.

What we see is consistent growth in the early grades that levels off quite substantially in the later grades. To some degree, this is a normal pattern for cognitive development and not necessarily a cause for immediate concern. Students often see very large reading gains in the early years; the difference between a student's reading skills in first grade and his or her reading skills in second grade will always be greater than the difference in the student's reading skills between tenth and eleventh grades. That said, it is a sad state of affairs when the difference in ability between seventh grade and twelfth grade is negligible. These five additional years of schooling typically do not increase most students' abilities to engage with more difficult texts.

Other data sets reflect this flatlining pattern. For example, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) stores the results of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) online where anyone can search (www.nationsreportcard.gov). Figure I.2 (page 4) uses a selection of these data to show stagnant reading proficiency rates across decades according to the years the test was administered (NCES, n.d.a, n.d.b, n.d.c).

National Assessment of Educational Progress Longitudinal Data—Reading



Source: NCES, n.d.a, n.d.b, n.d.c.

Figure 1.2: National Assessment of Educational Progress reading score chart.

In our years of observing these data, we have seen that in most states, the highest rates of proficiency occur on third-grade reading tests, and then fewer students are proficient by the end of fifth grade, and still fewer in eighth grade and tenth grade. Over the years of school, proficiency rates drop considerably, and the gap between the highest- and lowest-performing readers gets wider. On some level, many educators have recognized this pattern, and sadly—whether consciously or unconsciously—they have, in essence, accepted it.

Understanding the predictive implications of whether a student can read on grade level by the end of third grade, more than thirty-five states have enacted programs designed to ensure just that—third-grade students read on grade level before the school year ends, according to Renaissance Learning (n.d.). Some of these programs include significant accountability measures such as retention. For example, Florida is one state that follows this protocol and in fact, does retain third graders who do not meet the ELA standards by the end of the year. If students achieve proficiency in reading in third grade, that's wonderful. But if they then fall behind by fifth, eighth, or tenth grade, the race is clearly not won—that is, they leave our schools noticeably unprepared and lacking the essential literacy skills of reading, writing, speaking, and listening. As Hirsch (2006) notes:

It's in later grades, 6–12, that the reading scores really count because, after all, gains in the early grades are not very useful if, subsequently, those same students, when they get to middle school and then high school, and are about to become workers and citizens, are not able to read and learn proficiently.

We need to frankly discuss the fact that we cannot determine college and career readiness solely with third-grade scores. The illiteracy problem is endemic and demands our undivided attention.

There is another piece of this flatlining story that we must acknowledge. When NCLB was enacted in 2001, many schools reacted by cutting time devoted to science and social studies to increase time for the assessed areas of ELA and mathematics. Researcher Jennifer McMurrer (2007) notes there was a “47 percent reduction in class time devoted to subjects beyond math and reading” (as cited in Hirsch, 2018, p. 61). By increasing our efforts in the name of literacy, did we see any substantive changes in proficiency? No. And this reality should cause us to re-examine everything.

Continually stagnant rates of proficiency when many schools *substantially* increased time devoted to ELA clearly tell us that the way we are currently addressing literacy simply is not paying adequate dividends. Hirsch (2018) suggests that our current