

Reading instruction is too vast to focus on one part



Todd Reynolds

When parents have children who struggle with reading, they want answers. They want to know what districts will do to help their students.

Unfortunately, some parents turn to groups like WY Lit, or columns like the recent one by

Hesser in this paper. The problem is that those sources tend to convey outdated or partial information, or complete misinformation about literacy instruction.

For example, despite Hesser's claim that it is "widely accepted" that a quarter of the population has dyslexia, current research notes that the variance ranges from 4% to 21% (Elliot, 2020) because "there is currently no scientifically and educationally meaningful way of identifying a dyslexic subgroup within the larger pool of those who struggle with decoding text" (Elliot, 2020, p. S62).

In other words, the difference between a poor reader and a dyslexic reader is one based on arbitrary or haphazard standards, but not universally applied standards.

Additionally, WY Lit refers to "evidence-based" instruction, which is used in arguments and not based on research. It is a made up concept. Instead, the debate is over what evidence counts, which is why WY Lit and its continued presence in this paper can cause so many problems. When we look at evidence, we see that "no matter how sound the studies of neural processing, perception and memory, we must recognize the possibility that they, at least in some cases, could be irrelevant, inconsequential or misleading with regard to teaching" (Shanahan, 2020, p. S239).

Studies of the brain do not necessarily lead to quality instructional methods. Those methods have to be developed, and repeatedly studied. A program that provides "evidence-based" instruction is saying nothing, and could be misconstruing evidence that does not contribute to instructional understanding.

So, what are parents to do?

First, know where the actual experts and quality research are. In 2020, the fifth volume of the Handbook of Reading Research was published, as was a special edition of Reading Research Quarterly, one of the top journals in literacy, on the science of reading. These references, not advocacy groups, set the standard for the field, and are the ones that should be consulted. Ask your schools if they have referenced those sources.

Second, expose rhetorical arguments and prioritize research-based agreements and disagreements. For example, the debate over dyslexia is a red herring, one that has "led to a burgeoning dyslexia assessment industry that disproportionately caters to more advantaged social, racial and economic groups (Homqvist, 2020) while distracting attention from the needs of high numbers of other struggling readers" (Elliot, 2020, p. S71).

In other words, those with means can fight to have their children labeled as dyslexic, and those without those means are forced to see their children labeled as poor readers. Money goes to those labeled as dyslexic, while those without the label suffer. And, since "criteria for the diagnosis remain unclear and inconsistently applied by assessors, who are often directly employed by customers" (Elliot, 2020, p. S71), those who can pay receive the services, and those who cannot are left behind.

Of course, groups like WY Lit will complain about this designation. They do so because they are financially vested in one ideology, and not interested in findings from current research in the field.

Back to parents: what should parents be asking of Laramie County School District 1 teachers?

First, they should ask about the acknowledgment that the act of reading is historically, culturally and socially situated, which means that as readers read, they bring their backgrounds, cultures and perspectives to the texts (Smagorinsky et al., 2020). Reading is more than just a child reading words. Reading includes both decoding and comprehension; claims that instruction should only or primarily focus on de-

coding are misrepresentations and oversimplifications of the research (Cervetti et al, 2020).

Second, parents should ask about indications of the different phases that students go through as they learn to read (Ehri, 2020). These are not grade-specific, but student-specific, and they include the relationships between letters and sounds, but do not stop there. In fact, science of reading should take into account language comprehension, writing, content and background knowledge, as well as the different family literacies that readers bring to the text (Goodwin & Jiménez, 2020).

Reading instruction is vast; focusing on one part at the expense of the others will not be effective. Parents at all levels should make sure that reading instruction is significantly more than just decoding.

Third, contrary to Hesser's contention, parents should ask about differentiation between schools, between classrooms and between students. Indeed, "Identifying the particular literacy strengths and weaknesses of a given struggling reader appears to be the most effective means to determine forms of instruction appropriate to his or her needs" (Elliot, 2020, p. S67).

Fidelity is merely a refuge for those uninterested in the nuance of instruction. Instead of asking questions about whether or not a curriculum is being taught with fidelity, a parent should ask how the curriculum is able to be modified, revised, adjusted or even tossed out, based on the specific needs of the students in the classroom.

Essentially, when companies offer a quick curriculum or fix for the massive, nuanced field of reading instruction, they are only selling something. Instead, refer to the current experts in the field, and know that reading instruction contains multitudes. Do not fall victim to the "rhetorical cudgel" (Shanahan, 2020) wielded by some groups; find the actual experts and advocates.

Todd Reynolds has a Ph.D. in Literacy Education. He has taught English and literacy for 23 years, and is currently an assistant professor in English Education and Literacy at the University of Wyoming.