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WY LIT
Literacy Is Our Business

by Kay Fabricus and Jen Huelskamp

Association between reading research and instruction often lacking

Editor's note: *The following column is part of our ongoing biweekly series about the importance of science-based reading instruction for children in grades K-3, coordinated by the founders of the local nonprofit, WY Lit.*

Reading is the foundation upon which all educational programs are built. Literacy greatly influences opportunities and outcomes as it is a key factor in the pathway to success. As such, the most important professional assignment an educator can complete is teaching their students to read effectively. In 2016, we began questioning the effectiveness of the approach we were utilizing to address literacy instruction for struggling readers. We thought we were offering an intervention that would help struggling readers in both general education and special education, but despite increased instructional time, intense focus, and fidelity to what we thought was a good intervention program, reading skills of some students stagnated or even regressed. We noted that many students ***appeared*** to be good readers in kindergarten and first grade, but as they got older they struggled to read more complex text and understand grade-level material. It was clear we needed to broaden our own knowledge in regards to the mechanics of ***how*** all children learn to read.

As we began searching for new and more effective interventions for struggling readers, we were fortunate to receive professional development which focused on explicit, systematic, evidence-based literacy instruction. Fabricus reflects on this phase of learning, "The knowledge I gained from the initial training made me question a few of my beliefs about reading and how it should be taught. After I compared my beliefs with some of the scientifically-based reading research, I knew it was reasonable and logical for me to adjust parts of my personal theory and practice. The professional development I have been afforded, and the time spent reading valid research, has transformed my understanding of linguistic acquisition and why some people struggle to read. As I began to

implement what I had learned, the struggling readers with whom I worked increased their reading skills, and for the first time, experienced reading success."

It is not unreasonable to expect that there would be a strong association between daily classroom educational instruction and instruction based on proven validated educational research. Unfortunately, we often find that the desired association between the two is either very weak or entirely absent as many educators do not fully understand or utilize the findings which have been obtained through years of validated research. Much of the research is not easily accessible or readily translatable to the classroom, and the time required for review is prohibitive given the professional demands of classroom educators.

Moving forward we are optimistic, as the cognitive, neurological, and the educational research world is extending their hand to practitioners. In the summer of 2019, we were provided the opportunity to attend *The Literate Brain: Linking Researchers with Practitioners Conference at Haskins Laboratories, Yale University and University of Connecticut.* We worked with some of the most respected reading researchers in the world, including Ken Pugh, Julie Washington, Fumiko Hoeft, Don Compton, and Devin Kearns. During this conference, there was intense focus on the neurocognitive aspect of reading. The consensus was that increasing educator knowledge in regards to how the brain functions while reading, speaking, listening, and writing will better equip educators to provide more effective instruction to all students. Dr. Pugh told us numerous times, *"Reading is parasitic on speech"*. As a speech-language pathologist, Huelskamp knew the importance of foundational speech and language skills for literacy, but this experience deepened her understanding of the connection between speech, language, and literacy and the impact of explicit instruction on the brain.

As Nancy Young explains with her Ladder of Reading, 5% of learners learn to read effortlessly, 35% of learners learn to read relatively easily with broad instruction, but 60% of students need code-based explicit, systematic, and sequential instruction. The distinctions of systematic and explicit instruction are critical to reading instruction in the areas of phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, and vocabulary. When these major reading components are taught well by a knowledgeable teacher, comprehension becomes the outcome. According to Anita Archer, "There is no comprehension strategy powerful enough to compensate for the fact you can't read the words."

Teachers have a profound effect on student learning and have the potential to create and nurture optimal neural pathways through instruction. Excellent, explicit instruction can change the brain, and the more knowledgeable a teacher, the greater impact on student learning.

Since our journey began, we continue to increase our knowledge through learning experiences such as attending numerous district sponsored professional development opportunities, reading valid research from reliable sources, and listening to podcasts like, *The Science of Reading: The Podcast* through Amplify. We initially thought we needed an intervention for struggling readers, but we now know systematic, scientifically-based, explicit instruction can teach all students to read.

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