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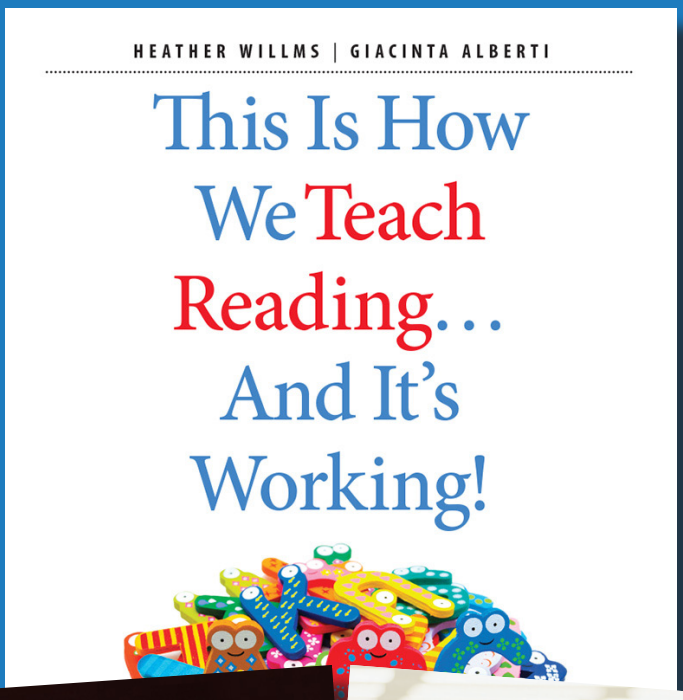

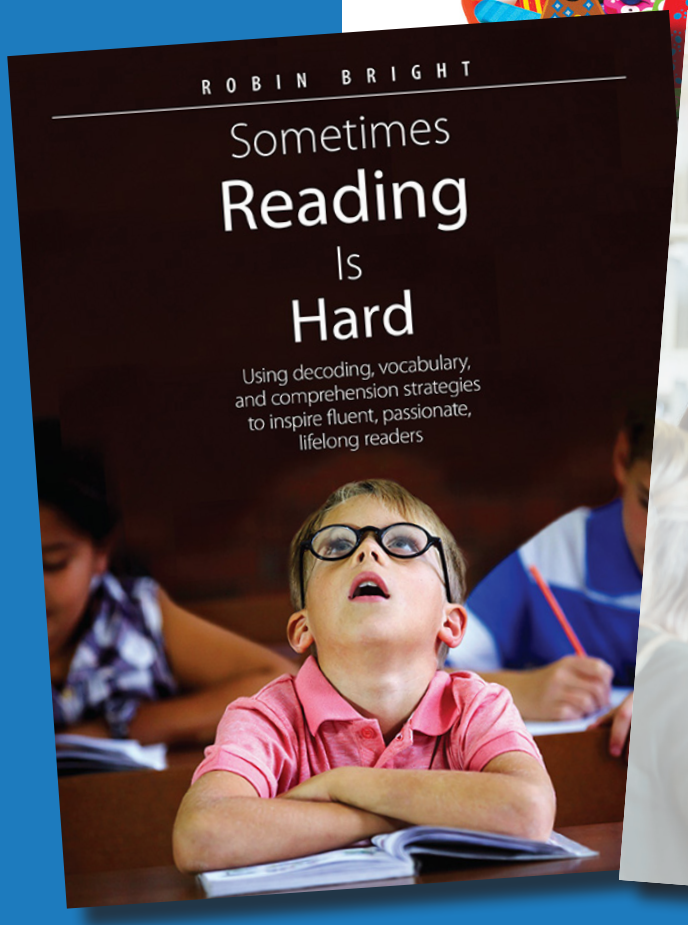

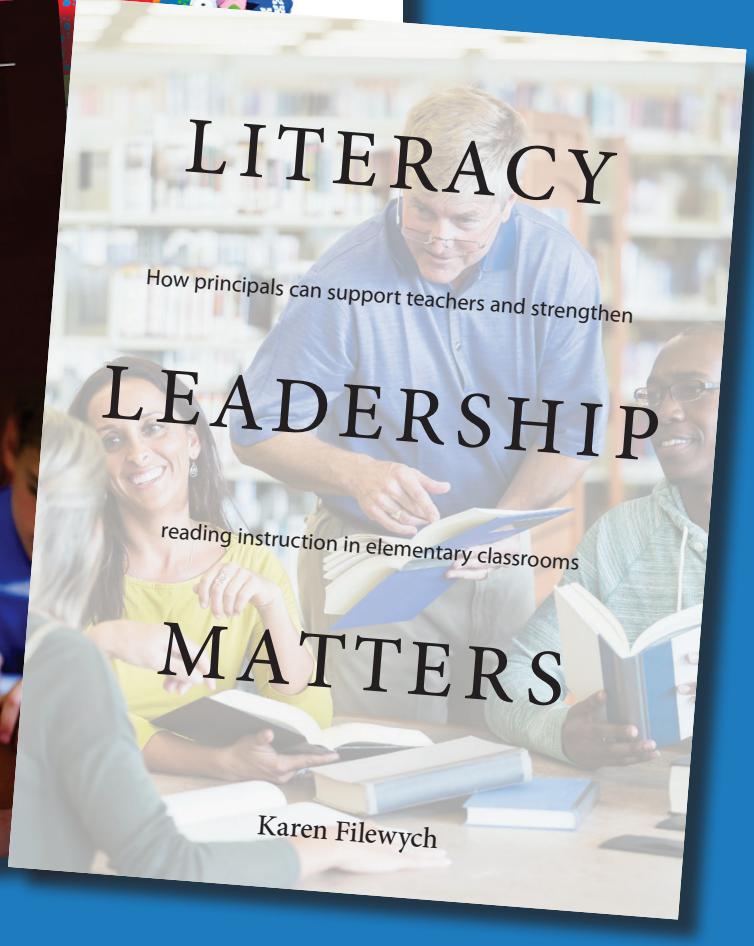

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We are pleased to offer sample chapters from three of our newest and bestselling titles on reading—a peek inside three key resources. This sampler is provided as a PDF, which can be easily read on PC or Apple computers, as well as any number of commercially available e-readers and mobile devices. You can also copy the file to multiple devices, or print the reproducible pages for classroom use.

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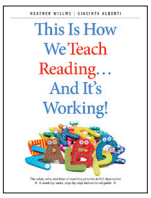

Week-by-week, step-by-step skill progressions, along with the background and information you need for teaching phonics in K–3 classrooms. This blueprint to effective reading instruction includes tools for classroom use: high-impact activities, word lists, phoneme-grapheme grids, word ladders, and more.

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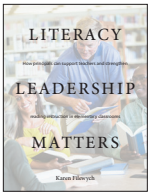

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This Is How We Teach Reading... And It's Working!

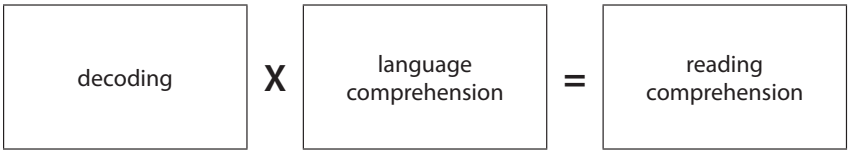
The what, why, and how of teaching phonics in K-3 classrooms
❊ A week-by-week, step-by-step instructional guide ❊

Contents

How Children Learn to Read — The Science of Reading

The Simple View of Reading and Scarborough's Reading Rope

The **Simple View of Reading** (Tumner & Gough,1986) is a very good place to start when it comes to understanding how students learn to read. For students to read **and** understand, they must have the skills to decode a passage and the language to understand it. Both are required to read with understanding, which is our goal.



This model is further expanded in Scarborough's Reading Rope (Scarborough, 2001), which shows the micro skills that make up language comprehension and word recognition. Under language comprehension, Scarborough addresses micro skills such as background knowledge, language structures, and vocabulary, and under word recognition, she includes phonological awareness, decoding, and sight recognition. Hollis Scarborough created the rope as a visual to explain to parents the skills students need to become proficient readers. Her early models were made out of pipe cleaners so that parents had a clear visual of how the rope is built and strengthened.

From an intervention perspective, this model is very helpful. If a child is struggling with reading, finding out if it is a decoding or language concern can help direct supports that are needed. If you are teaching English Language Learners (ELLs), it is critical to explicitly teach both decoding and language comprehension to support both their language development and emerging literacy skills.

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A Look at the Big 5 of Reading

After the Simple View of Reading (SVR), it is important to know and understand the Big 5 of Reading (phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension) and their role in reading instruction. As you work with the phonics lessons and activities found within this book, you will notice that we are constantly enfolding the other Big 4 into our phonics lessons. This is very intentional as a rich interplay between the Big 5 contributes to powerful, effective instruction and growing strong readers.

Phonemic Awareness

You may have heard the terms "phonemic awareness" and "phonological awareness" used interchangeably when talking about reading instruction, but they are not the same thing. **Phonological awareness** is an umbrella term that addresses the ability to recognize and manipulate the spoken parts of sentences and words. It includes rhyming, onset and rime, syllables, and phonemes.

A phoneme is the smallest unit of speech (e.g., /s/, /ă/, /ch/) and therefore **phonemic awareness** is the ability to recognize and manipulate the smallest units of a spoken word (the phoneme). The English language is made up of forty-four phonemes and it is important that children can identify and manipulate them in order to match these sounds with letters on the page. Explicit practice with phonemic awareness, activities that require students to isolate and manipulate phonemes and ultimately attach them to graphemes (letters), builds a strong knowledge base for decoding and an understanding of how words are put together for encoding (spelling). Strong phonemic awareness skills enable readers to isolate and flex sounds when they come across new words and seek to match them with the words they have heard and/or spoken.

Phonics

A simple way of describing phonics is that words are made up of sounds, and letters represent those sounds. When addressing phonics, students begin by learning the names of the twenty-six letters of the alphabet and their sounds. Since there are forty-four phonemes and only twenty-six letters, we deal with some of the extra phonemes by combining letters to represent sounds. This is an oversimplification, but it makes sense to students and helps them to understand the code of our English language.

When children learn to read by matching sounds to letters and begin to decode, we often say they have "broken the code." They have made the connection that the marks on the page (which represent sounds), can be combined to match the words that they speak (the **alphabetic principle**), and that's really what reading is all about. A grade 1 colleague shared with us that a student exclaimed, "The letters are talking," when they realized that the letters matched the words they spoke. They clearly understood the connection between speech and text.

While some children may learn to read with broad literacy instruction, a deep understanding of how our language is put together comes from explicit instruction in phonics (which benefits all learners). Reading and writing are linguistic work, as students are learning the English language system that they use every day.

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Vocabulary

Vocabulary is the recognition and understanding of the meaning of words. Students who recognize, understand, and can use a large bank of words are considered to have a large or broad vocabulary (orthographic lexicon), whereas students who have a small or limited vocabulary recognize, understand, and use a small bank of words.

There are three tiers of vocabulary:

Tier 1: words students use and understand in day-to-day speech (e.g., "house," "man," "you")
Tier 2: words that are used across curriculums (e.g., "contrast," "drenched," "flitting")
Tier 3: words that are curriculum-specific (e.g., "metamorphosis," "sphinx," "assassination")

As educators, we want to intentionally build Tier 2 vocabulary, so that students recognize and understand these types of words when encountering them across content areas, in speech, and in texts.

Strong phonics instruction will include lessons and activities that explore and teach the meaning of words. The larger a student's lexicon, the more words they will be able to recognize in print. This contributes to a greater understanding of the text.

Fluency

Fluency is the ability to read quickly, accurately, and with expression. When students read with expression, it indicates that they understand what they are reading. Strong fluency skills are an indicator that all is well in the decoding and comprehension world for a student.

Students who read fluently can see through the text to the story behind it. Students who are not fluent end up using so much mental desk space to decode that they are not able to see through to the story beyond the text.

The bank of stored words that a student brings to a text (their orthographic lexicon) impacts their fluency skills. For students to move beyond constantly decoding as they read, it is critical that they have a bank of stored words that they recognize accurately and instantly. This is not done by memorizing words by sight but through orthographic mapping (see below).

Comprehension

Comprehension, or understanding what a text is communicating, is the goal of reading and is the reason we read. While there are several important pieces that contribute to comprehension (for example, background knowledge and knowledge of the text structure), the other Big 4 are also building blocks of comprehension. It is not uncommon for teachers to choose to teach comprehension skills (main idea, inferring, sequencing, etc.), which have been found to have minimal impact on reading comprehension (Shanahan, 2018), without realizing that a lack of fluency, decoding skills, and vocabulary may be the factors that are impeding a student's comprehension.

If students cannot hear that words are made up of sounds, they will not be able to recognize them in text. If students are not able to decode, they will not be able

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to understand what is on the page (phonics). If students do not understand the words they are reading, even though they can decode them, they will not be able to comprehend (vocabulary). Finally, if students are not able to read quickly and accurately, they will have trouble moving past the text to the message the author is trying to convey (fluency).

Orthographic Mapping

Ortho = straight **Graphy** = writing

It is important to look at orthographic mapping (OM) before we move on, because it plays a significant role in word storage and retrieval. If this is your first introduction to OM, you may want to look at other reliable sources that provide more detail (Kilpatrick in Reference Section, page 264).

OM is the process of forming sound-to-letter connections in order to combine and recall the spelling, pronunciation, and meaning of words (Kilpatrick, 2016). It is a process where children learn to read words at a glance, spell from memory, and develop and store vocabulary. As children store words for instant retrieval, they build a bank of words they can instantly draw from — an orthographic lexicon.

Respected reading researcher Linnea Ehri (2014) states, "Orthographic mapping (OM) involves the formation of letter-sound connections to bond the spellings, pronunciations, and meanings of specific words in memory. It explains how children learn to read words by sight, to spell words from memory, and to acquire vocabulary words from print." In other words, strings of letters are attached to sounds, which form words, which have meaning.

Words are stored in memory: orthographically in spelling; phonologically in pronunciation; and semantically in meaning. Once students begin to map (matching letters to appropriate sounds for meaning) and store words, their reading ability takes off. With this process in place, they can map and store new words through one to four exposures in text.

All of this is to say that practice with decoding, manipulating words, and word play contribute to the storing of words. This is quite different than previously held theories that proposed reading as a visual process. In fact, words are not stored visually, but are stored in the much larger oral filing system (Kilpatrick, 2016).

This brings us back to fluency. As a student engages with texts and practices using the phonics concepts that have been explicitly taught, their brain begins mapping and storing words. This reading growth allows them to move to much more complex phonics concepts because they are building on the knowledge of words and their concepts that have been previously stored.

Many reading support teachers work with older students (grades 4 and up) who are still decoding every word on the page. A sign that orthographic mapping is not in place is when a student decodes a word in text and then needs to decode the same word on the next page, and then again on the next. These students may not need a specialized intervention program, but more practice with the evidence-based activities that are listed in this book — more additive blending, more manipulating of letters and sounds, more reading practice with decodable texts — so that they begin to build the neurological pathways that lead to the mapping process. While typically developing readers may need one to four

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exposures to a word in order to map and store it, struggling readers may need eight, twelve, or even twenty exposures. This does not mean the work cannot be done, it just takes more time and more exposures to a word.

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ROBIN BRIGHT

Sometimes Reading Is Hard

Using decoding, vocabulary, and comprehension strategies to inspire fluent, passionate, lifelong readers

Contents

1

What Do You Mean I Have to Teach Reading?

A large fundamental mistake is the assumption that reading is natural to human beings and that it will simply emerge "whole cloth" like language when the child is ready.
—*Maryanne Wolf,* Reader, Come Home*, 2018*

Have you ever had the pleasure of teaching a young person how to drive? I see you smiling there. My husband and I took turns teaching our two daughters how to drive, shouldering the responsibility (and anxiety) together but also sharing the joy in helping them learn a new skill that would lead them toward independence.

New drivers need to have some basic skill knowledge about vehicles and driving to begin the process. This includes knowing the importance of the parts of the car, such as the steering wheel, ignition, gas and brake pedals, headlights, windshield wipers, turn signals, hazard lights, horn, and parking brake. New drivers also need to know the rules of the road.

The real learning, though, takes place once the new drivers start driving. That's when they learn how to adjust the seat, mirrors, and steering wheel to accommodate their position. They figure out how to start the car and put it in gear, how to ease down on the gas pedal, and how to switch instinctively to the brake pedal when needed.

You don't simply get into the car and start driving. But you also do not spend all your time in a classroom learning the parts of the car and the rules of the road. There must be time for real driving practice and lots of it.

Learning to read works the same way, as a combination of acquiring knowledge and practice. And what gets this major snowball rolling? Motivation.

Children engage with print in a way that involves not just perception and cognition, but the total self that includes motivations, interests, beliefs, and values.
—Researchers James Hoffman, James Baumann, and Peter Afflerbach, 2014

Even before the lessons began, our daughters were motivated—they *wanted* to learn how to drive! As they practiced, they built up their confidence, which contributes to motivation. At first, the new drivers were tentative as they practiced their driving skills, but with practice their confidence grew. Their confidence fed their motivation, which led to more motivation and more practice.

In the beginning, our daughters had to think about every aspect of the driving process. Over time, they developed into skilled drivers able to drive effortlessly and even without considerable deliberate thought. They learned to coordinate the many processes involved in driving until it all became automatic.

That's not the whole story though. My husband and I know that, regardless of how skilled you are at manoeuvring a car, there will be times when you encounter situations that will challenge and test you. So we made sure that our daughters

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become strategic drivers, able to negotiate the unexpected. Like drivers, readers must be strategic. Reading strategies, like the ones in this book, are tools students can use when they encounter text that is challenging.

I will never forget the look of jubilant excitement on our daughters' faces when they each began driving. I am reminded of that when I see children learn to read.

The Whole Is Greater Than the Sum of Its Parts

Beginner readers, like beginner drivers, need to learn both skills and strategies. Experts agree that skilled readers are those who can fluently decode text so effortlessly that reading becomes automatic. Strategic readers can employ effort and deliberation as they encounter difficulties or barriers in a reading.

Those are the skills and strategies. But what of motivation in reading? If we spend all our time on reading skills and strategies, students might not feel the *why* of learning to read. If we always push texts onto students that they must struggle with to decode or make sense of, we are wasting their time and they will become frustrated and lose their confidence as readers. Just as new drivers need time to practice, students need time to practice what I would call "real" reading—the fun stuff.

Real reading is sparked because someone wants to learn something new and gain knowledge. Or they're just interested and enjoying the experience. Curiosity, interest, and enjoyment are motivational factors that must accompany learning to read. Perhaps most important, real reading is about connecting with others and feeling. It's impossible not to identify with Oliver in the picture book, *Where Oliver Fits* by Cale Atkinson. He feels like an outsider until he finds a place where he belongs. A child reading about Oliver will connect. Real reading builds both interest and confidence. Teachers and students need to do a lot of it! More reading means more opportunities for students to further develop their skills and strategies.

Reading, like driving, requires synergy. The synergy happens at the intersection of reading skills, strategies, and factors of motivation because—and this is the important part—"the whole is greater than the sum of its parts." Some teachers describe the synergy as when something "clicks" for the reader, the point when it all comes together and it works.

There is nothing quite as exciting as watching a child read a book like Mem Fox's *Time for Bed* and say, "I read it all by myself."

There is nothing quite as exciting as watching a child read a book like Mem Fox's *Time for Bed* and say, "I read it all by myself," or a teen who tells you that he has never before read a book like *Long Way Down* by Jason Reynolds and asks you, "Does he have other books?" Students deserve to experience the same kind of jubilant excitement of learning to read that my daughters experienced while learning to drive.

In Mackenzie's Classroom: "When Do I Get to Read Real Books?"

Teacher Mackenzie told me a story of working with Jorge, a student in Grade 3 who was not yet reading at the Grade 3 level and appeared to struggle with certain sounds of letters. She was working with Jorge on sound-symbol relationships, particularly digraphs (that is, the /sh/, /f/, and /ch/ sounds).

Mackenzie did what many of us do: She showed a short musical video on digraphs. She then chose a short book with those particular sounds in them, and then, together, the teacher and the student found the words with digraphs

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in them. Then the student printed the words in three columns depicting each of the digraph sounds (/sh/, /f/, and /ch/). Mackenzie and Jorge read the words aloud together and finally went back to the book to reread the text.

All this sounds like a well-presented guided reading lesson, doesn't it? But, at the end of the 15-minute session, Jorge looked at his teacher and asked, "When do I get to read real books?" While Jorge had dutifully participated in learning the skills he needed to read, his perception that this wasn't the real thing had to be addressed.

How many students are not as courageous as Jorge and don't ask this question? How many don't even imagine there is something more?

Underlying Considerations in Teaching Reading

In 30 years of working in education, I have been privileged to work closely with talented, caring colleagues, teachers, and pre-service teachers. It only made sense to include them in my research and writing. To prepare to write this book, I asked a group of enthusiastic and successful teachers of reading, with years of experience teaching in elementary, middle, and high school as well as at the post-secondary level, to talk with me about what matters in teaching reading.

My group of trusted subject-matter experts exchanged many emails, had long phone calls, and met regularly on video calls to talk about reading. And they never complained. Just the opposite. It was hard to get us all to stop talking about the joys and challenges of teaching reading. After much lively and thoughtful discussion, I was able to narrow down our views about what matters in teaching reading to a list of nine considerations. Have a look at this list. Do these considerations reflect your teaching philosophy about teaching reading? Do they expand your views? Do they challenge your views?

1. Sometimes reading is hard.
2. Structures of language support reading instruction.
3. The components of reading need to be taught daily.
4. Every teacher is a reading teacher.
5. Meaningful relationships are key.
6. Students need good reasons to read.
7. Teachers must be readers.
8. Reading engagement leads to the goal: capable, passionate, lifelong readers.
9. Reading skills and motivation factors are synergistic.

I will expand on these considerations. For each one, take the time to think about your own classroom, your students, your reading practices, and the books and resources you bring to the learning environment you create for students.

1. Sometimes Reading Is Hard

It is a misconception to think that learning to read is easy. Or that struggle in reading should be avoided. Neuroscientists tell us that reading is neither natural nor innate. Through something called neuroplasticity, we must force our brains

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to form circuits that allow us to read. The process is a long one, and the struggle should be viewed as natural and necessary. Everyone who is a reader has had to *learn* to read.

Notice the difference between these two statements: "Sometimes reading is hard" and "Maria is a struggling reader." When we say the first statement, we help teachers and students understand that challenges are a normal part of reading and that these challenges do not mean there is something wrong with the reader. When we acknowledge that sometimes reading is hard, the implication is that teachers and students can work together to figure out what to do next.

Sometimes we don't tell students that they will face more complex reading as they move up the grades, or worse, we don't prepare them for the challenge.

If struggle is necessary to learn to read, you can maintain the struggle without overwhelming students by applying John Hattie's Goldilocks principle (2012). We must make sure the reading we ask students to do is "not too hard and not too easy." This, Hattie says, will help to inspire confidence and provide a safety net. Most students must learn between 3000 and 4000 words every school year. It can be daunting for students to face so much new and difficult vocabulary, challenging concepts, and complex expository text structures all at once. It can result in a decrease in motivation for reading altogether. Finding a balance between reading success and reading challenge is key.

Sometimes Teaching Reading Is Hard, Too

The simple view of reading (SVR) is making a comeback these days, and its very name implies that teaching reading is easy. On the one hand this view upholds the undisputed importance of helping students develop specific reading skills, particularly the systematic and explicit teaching of decoding for the purpose of comprehending text. Few teachers would disagree that these skills are crucial. On the other hand, SVR negates the experience many of us have had in teaching reading to hundreds of students over the years that not every student learns to read in the same way.

The pushback on SVR has been rising. The idea that learning to read is a simple combination of decoding ability and linguistic comprehension, defined as listening comprehension, has been around since the mid-1980s. Today, however, researchers and teachers tell us that SVR is an incomplete answer. They assert that additional factors must be considered. According to researcher Michelle Hagerman, for example, the SVR does not account for variables such as student motivation, interest, background knowledge, knowledge of comprehension strategies, text structure, and the reading context.

Teachers know that not all children and youth come into reading in exactly the same way or at the same time. So there cannot be just one universal, easy-to-roll-out recipe for teaching reading. I am persuaded by research that supports the observation that, "the differences among individuals and groups, their practices, their interactions, and the unpredictability that accompanies being human disrupts the possibility of narrow and universally applicable solutions for helping all students become readers" (Compton-Lilly, Mitra, Guay, & Spence, 2020).

I believe it makes sense to adopt a nuanced and expanded approach of SVR that acknowledges the complexity of reading, the diverse nature of the students we teach, and the complex nature of comprehension in learning to read. It may make teaching reading more of a challenge, but, in my view, it also brings more success.

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2. Structures of Language Support Reading Instruction

You do not need to be a language expert to appreciate that reading is all about getting a handle on the structures of language. Knowing even a little bit about the structures of language will help you to understand teaching reading more deeply. Looking back on it now, I realize that I was lucky to begin teaching Grade 1 with a background in modern languages. I still felt lost in those first few months when I was teaching reading, but it started to dawn on me that how I learned my second language was remarkably similar to how those six-year-olds in my class were learning their first language. My students were learning the structures of language without necessarily being aware of it, and without me knowing it for a while, too.

What I have discovered is that when teachers know the structures of language, they are able to see the "why" behind certain instructional practices and strategies. Let's have a look at these structures to see exactly what our students are learning about language when they learn to read.

- **phonology**: study of the patterns of sounds in a language
- **semantics**: study of word meanings
- **syntax**: study of how words are ordered to convey meaning
- **morphology**: study of the structure of words
- **pragmatics**: study of how language is used in specific situations

We know that language has a **phonological structure**, which simply means that languages are based on recognizing patterns of sounds. These distinct units of sound are called "phonemes." So, to learn language, children must become aware of the sounds around them (in oral language and in print). They must become familiar with these sounds, use them, and learn what those sounds symbolize and mean. A young child singing a nursery rhyme like "Baa, Baa, Black Sheep" is learning to hear and make the /b/ sound and to associate that sound with the words *baa* and *black*. This type of oral work with language is important before and during the introduction of written work. A child who has experience hearing and making the sound /b/ will more easily be able to associate that sound when he or she is introduced to the symbol for that sound in print: the letter *b*.

As teachers, we are also aware that all language has a **semantic structure**. This refers to the meaning that language holds for speakers and listeners. Children, before coming to school, learn about language and meaning. For instance, a toddler makes an utterance that the parent or caregiver assumes means "cracker" and offers the child a cracker. The child shakes his head no, and repeats his utterance, and again a cracker is offered and declined. Finally, the child makes a third attempt, and this time points to the cookie jar and is rewarded with a cookie. It has taken a bit of time, but the child has learned to use body language to make his meaning known. Given more time—and a parent who uses the word *cookie* repetitively but meaningfully—the child will learn to say the word *cookie* to achieve the same purpose.

Children come to school using language to make their needs known in a world mostly comprised of talking. At school, they learn to make sense of written language. But just pointing at a word, like pointing at the cookie jar, will not bring success with learning written language. The teacher, like the parent, must work with the child to make meaning of early reading experiences. The teacher says,

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"Look at the first letter. Let's make the sound that goes with that letter." The child makes the /b/ sound. "Let's blend it with the next sound." The child, together with the teacher, blends /b/…/i/…/g/, slowly increasing the speed until the child recognizes and says, "big." The teacher follows up by saying "Show me something that is big." And the child might point at a picture of an elephant or stretch their arms out wide to show they know what *big* means. Just as in oral language, it has taken a bit of time. But the child has learned to make meaning from print.

All language has a **syntactical structure**. This refers to how words and phrases are put together to create meaning. For those of us who learn a second language, we figure out quickly that sentences in the second language are rarely put together, or structured, in the same way as our first language. For instance, I might say this sentence in English, "I live in the green house." But, when I speak French, I say, "J'habite à la maison verte." The word *green* comes before the word *house* in English, but *verte* comes after *maison* in French. That is what is referred to as the syntax, or grammar, of language.

A component of syntax is **morphology**, which is the study of word parts. Morphology refers to the internal structure of words, often referred to as morphemes or word parts. It should be noted that morphemes are the smallest unit of meaning in language. The word *cat* is a morpheme but so are *re-, -ed*, and *geo-*. The suffix *-ed*, for example, conveys past tense. Students are encouraged to figure out new and unfamiliar words by looking for word parts such as roots, prefixes, and suffixes to help with meaning and pronunciation.

Your students need to learn how sentences are written, how words are ordered to make sense, how word parts change meaning, and how punctuation is used to convey different meanings. By teaching students these conventions, you help them comprehend what they read.

Why does syntax matter in teaching reading? Intuitively, you know the rules of language, but your students are still learning these rules. They need to learn how sentences are written, how words are ordered to make sense, how word parts change meaning, and how punctuation is used to convey different meanings. By teaching students these conventions, you help students comprehend what they read, whether it is a science textbook, a short story, a recipe, a poster, or a play.

I will add that having knowledge about the differences of syntax from one language to another is immensely helpful when working with students who are English language learners (ELL). When you know what language a student speaks or hears at home, you can better identify what aspects of English syntax might be unfamiliar.

Lastly, language has a **pragmatic structure**. The language we use shifts according to circumstances. For instance, you may speak to your teaching colleagues more formally in the context of a staff meeting than you might when you go out for dinner together. Speakers adjust their language to suit their surroundings. Just as listeners understand a speaker best if they consider the context (staff meeting or dinner party), so do readers understand text best if they take into account the genre or purpose of the text.

It is valuable for you to know the language structures so that you can support your students' reading development with a greater understanding of the task they face each and every day in your classroom.

3. The Components of Reading Need to Be Taught Daily

When I ask successful reading teachers what they emphasize in teaching reading, virtually all say that they plan their program and lessons around decoding, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. These four critical areas are referred

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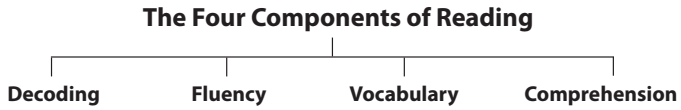
to as the "components of reading" by the National Reading Panel report (2000). The report identifies these as the four essential components of effective reading instruction, adding that there are many different approaches to teaching them.



The four essential components of reading were first described by the National Reading Panel in the United States.

It is not uncommon to see posters and charts in classrooms listing the reading components that guide teachers' instruction. I have seen them sometimes in the image of a flower, with one of the reading components printed on each petal, sometimes as a pyramid, and sometimes as the pillars of reading instruction. They remind me of the poster we often saw in classrooms called "The Writing Process"—a visual reminder of what matters in teaching writing. Of course, posters without action are not helpful. The first step is knowing what the components of reading are, why they matter, and how they are essential to teaching reading.

Decoding. Decoding involves two major skills: phonemic awareness and phonics knowledge. Phonemic awareness is the ability to hear and play with sounds in language. Phonics knowledge is understanding of letter-sound correspondence—which letters or letter combinations correlate to which sounds. Decoding involves putting together phonemic awareness and phonics knowledge to read words. This component is the focus of Chapter 2.

Fluency. Fluency is the ability to read "like you speak." It refers to the accuracy, rate, and expression of reading. Fluent readers decode words automatically, a process sometimes referred to as sight reading. Fluency provides a bridge to comprehension: when students give the majority of their cognitive attention to decoding words (which takes a great deal of time and effort), they are less able to devote attention to understanding what they read (comprehension). Fluency is the focus of Chapter 3.

Vocabulary. Vocabulary refers to the collection of words that students can read and understand. As students build their vocabulary repertoire, they are more likely to read fluently and with understanding. This component is the focus of Chapter 4.

Comprehension. Comprehension is the ability to understand and interpret what is read. It may lead to action on the part of the reader. This component is the focus of Chapter 5.

Although the reading components are separated one from the other for the purpose of discussion in this book, they are nonetheless inextricably woven together. Although they stand alone, each one supports the others. For instance, when a Grade 2 student expands her vocabulary, she can read more fluently, which lets her focus her attention more readily on what the text means.

4. Every Teacher Is a Reading Teacher

Once they are school-aged, students are asked to read every day, both inside and outside of school. On the very first day of school, students are often prompted

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to find their names on coat racks, on desks and tables, and on attendance-taking charts. From there, the need to be able to read increases exponentially.

Victor Hugo once wrote, "To learn to read is to light a fire; every syllable that is spelled out is a spark." That's the job of all teachers.

We need to recognize that for some of our students, the demand to read brings emotions like stress, fear, and worry that escalate throughout the year because the demands of reading only increase. Without support, these students may not develop good reading skills. These students may make their way through the grades and continue to find reading hard. There is hope, however, if every teacher they encounter is a reading teacher, regardless of the grade or the discipline they teach.

Even when we are unaware that we teach reading, we still do. Print is so pervasive that teachers cannot help but pass along messages about reading to their students. No teacher is exempt.

- The band teacher displaying posters of labelled musical instruments throughout the music room is teaching new vocabulary.
- The physical education teacher who creates instructional posters at individual stations, with terms like *strength, circuit, abdominal, aerobic*, and *agility*, is using reading to support instruction.
- In science, mathematics, and social studies, teachers help students navigate textbooks, maps, instructions, digital tools, and other resources, all of which require the skill of reading.

Reading in any discipline adds to students' knowledge. If we remember that, as teachers, we are all in the knowledge-building endeavor together, we can support each other and our students to develop both the skills and the factors of motivation to become better readers. Two teachers describe the situation in many higher-level mathematics, social studies, and science classrooms.

> We all know that reading is important and transfers to all subject areas and it is an important life skill. Most teachers aren't "trained"—at least they don't think they are—so they don't know where to start. So they don't.
> *—Grade 6 teacher Jason*

And,

> Many teachers at my school are concerned that students' lower reading abilities are getting in the way of accessing content in courses like social studies and science. Students who don't know how to read textbooks or whose reading levels are too low to be able to comprehend the text are problematic in content-driven courses.
> *—Grade 8 teacher Holly*

The good news is that reading development never really ends. In grade school, high school, college, or university, we all continue to develop our reading skills, expand our reading interests, and find new reasons to read well into adulthood. I asked my senior-level pre-service teachers the question, "Are you a better reader now than you were in your first year of university?" They invariably and emphatically say, "yes." I follow up, "How do you know?" They say, "In my first year, I didn't maintain a reading schedule and I fell behind. Now I schedule time to read every day." Or "I learned to reread sections and use note-taking and write out questions to help me understand my reading." And "I keep a file on my computer with the new vocabulary I learn in each course. Then I can review it before

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exams." These students are motivated to do well in their courses, and they use the components of reading without even realizing it. Their responses show that reading continues to develop through effort and intention.

Teachers at all levels can turn the tide by making sure that their classroom environment, their resources, and their instruction motivate students. If you have not thought of yourself as a teacher of reading up until now, it is not too late. I am not suggesting that biology teachers need to throw away the microscopes and leap onto a desk, as Robin Williams did in *Dead Poets Society*, and shout "Carpe Diem!" But the teacher in this film did say, "No matter what anybody tells you, words and ideas can change the world." Teachers of all disciplines and grade levels can get behind that. Better readers lead to better learners.

5. Meaningful Relationships Are Key

No meaningful learning occurs without meaningful relationships. My trusted subject-matter experts all agreed that, as reading teachers, we all need to have meaningful relationships with our students if we expect they will learn from us and from each other. Cast your mind back to recall your favorite teachers. You may remember someone who helped you learn to play an instrument, or someone who suggested a book that you might like, or even a teacher who said you were a talented writer. Jaana Juvonen's (2007) work on social motivation tells us,

> Of school-based social relationships, teacher support is probably the most salient. When students feel supported and respected by their teachers, they are presumed to comply with the expectations and norms set by instructors and engage in the behaviors endorsed by these authority figures. When students lack a bond or do not get along with a teacher, students are presumed to disengage themselves from school-related activities and the institution. (p. 200)

Teachers know that if they want to teach reading, they have to get to know their students. And they have to help their students get to know them.

Teachers know that if they want to teach reading, they have to get to know their students. And they have to help their students get to know them. Doing so pays massive dividends in reading improvement. Positive relationships build trust, psychological safety, and motivation. They even improve student behavior. As a teacher, I am able to motivate students as readers when I know what and how they are thinking. For instance, when I find out that ten-year-old Lucas filled out a reading-interest inventory saying that he loves hockey, I can follow up with him by saying, "I know you like hockey, Lucas, and I thought you might like to read this book called, *Rocket Blues* by David Skuy. Maybe you could read the first five pages and let me know what you think about it." This approach lets Lucas know that I learned something important about him and adjusted my instruction to make reading more interesting to him.

A word about working with older students is warranted here. Adolescent readers may be afraid that their teachers or their peers will judge their reading weaknesses harshly. Many students cannot help but compare themselves with their peers, so they recognize the differences in reading capability. Those dealing with reading difficulties will simply avoid reading. Building trust with adolescent students is essential. Students need to know that they will not be singled out in class or embarrassed as readers. Popcorn reading—or however it is referred to in classrooms—should be tossed out. In this practice, students take turns reading aloud. The *only* time it could be used is when students have a chance to practice what

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they will read aloud beforehand. Reading aloud is explored further in upcoming chapters.

One-on-one conversations to develop positive relationships are the answer when working with teens; these sessions help teachers and students get to know one another in a genuine way. I have enough experience working with adolescents to know that most are reticent to share anything about themselves if they detect superficiality. But brief conversations in the hallway before and after class can be used to build trust and gather information. You can then help steer them to reading material that might better match their interests. Finally, by understanding where students are at, you can help them to focus on their own improvement. For example, you might recommend small-group instruction with opportunities to talk and discuss texts to better meet some students' reading needs. You could only know to make this kind of instructional decision if you know your students as readers. Getting to know your readers, therefore, is a priority.

6. Students Need Good Reasons to Read

Now let's consider, as my subject-matter experts did, what happens when the components of reading are woven together with the factors of motivation needed for reading: confidence, interest and enjoyment, choice, dedication, and collaboration.

Every teacher, at some point, wonders, "How do I teach reading?" Hovering in the background is another question: "How do I cultivate a love of reading?"

When I say that every teacher, at some point, wonders "How do I teach reading?" hovering in the background is another question: "How do I cultivate a love of reading?" This question is just as important as the first because you cannot create readers by simply giving them the skills to read. Students need to want to read. They need to see reading as purposeful, valuable, and enjoyable.

When you talk to the book lovers in your classroom, what do they say they love about reading? Ajla Grozdanic from the Save the Children organization asked elementary-aged children from around the world why they love to read. Here are some of their responses, which identify them all as motivated readers:

- "I love to read because the pictures and stories help me to imagine that I am somewhere else."—Nevaeh, 7
- "I like to read because there are new adventures all the time."—Brandon, 11
- "Because my mama likes to read."—Kayla, 8
- "I love to read because it helps me learn."—Hayden, 8
- "It is fun, and I learn my ABCs from books."—Emilee, 3 (Save the Children, 2013)

When students say that reading is boring, difficult, or overwhelming—or they just can't find a good book—they just won't read. So motivating students to want to read is as important as helping them develop the skills to read. When students want to read, their levels of engagement improve. Motivated readers remember how a book moved them, made them feel, or connected them with others in some way. They will put in the effort, persist, and be enthusiastic about reading, even when the reading gets hard, as it will do at some point in every student's life.

Teachers attentive to factors of motivation watch their students closely and monitor their feelings toward reading. They ask questions such as the following while watching their students.

- Do my students choose to read when they are given free time?
- Do they talk to me about what they are reading?
- Do they avoid reading?

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- Do they show negative behavioral or emotional reactions to reading?

Teachers' answers to these questions help them determine how they work with their students' unique reading strengths and challenges.

Students Who Do Not Like to Read	Students Who Do Like to Read
When you see one or more of the following, you have a student who *does not* like to read. • The student does not have strong reading skills and does not use strategies to self-monitor her understanding or self-correct when text doesn't make sense. • The student appears uninterested in what he reads. • The student finds the reading material too hard or overwhelming. • The student views reading as a task to do when assigned. • The student does not see a reason for reading. • The student has many activities that compete for her attention, and reading does not measure up.	When you see one or more of the following, you have a student who *does* like to read. • The student is good at reading and can self-monitor their understanding by pausing while reading to use letter-sound relationships, to use context clues, and to chunk root words. • The student has confidence and self-belief in their abilities. • The student connects with what they are reading. • The student likes to learn about topics by reading about them. • The student notices when others they admire read a book. • The student likes to talk with others about their reading.

In Kim's Classroom: Finding Just the Right Book

Teacher Kim shared with me her experience of observing Shay, an affable and active ten-year-old in her Grade 6 class. Shay loved to tinker and make things with found objects: pencils, erasers, elastics, anything he could get his hands on. Shay also seemed uninterested in reading until one day when Kim read aloud to the class from Philip Roy's *Submarine Outlaw*. The main character is Alfred, who, with the help of the owner of a junkyard, builds his own one-person submarine. Alfred's antics while building the submarine and being on the ocean are suspenseful, hilarious, and unexpected.

It is not surprising that Shay could identify with Alfred and his need to make something new and unique. Luckily for Shay, *Submarine Outlaw* was the first book in a series of eight by Roy. After being inspired by his teacher's read aloud, Shay was motivated to read more. He began reading the rest of the series on his own.

7. Teachers Must Be Readers

I remember the day in my Language and Learning in Teacher Education course when I made a statement to a group of pre-service teachers: "All teachers need to be readers." There was a moment of shocked silence and then, slowly but surely,

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the students began sharing stories of losing interest in reading, of replacing reading with other activities, of struggling as readers and avoiding it whenever possible, and of finding reading increasingly less interesting and more difficult for them as they moved through the grades. In other words, they did not find reading either worthwhile or inviting—and certainly not something to do for fun.

I had to change this. By addressing the benefits of reading for them and for their students, I began to shift their perceptions about the value of reading. They came to understand that teachers who read for pleasure are great reading role models for their students. If they read, then they can credibly speak about how they read, what and when they read, and, most importantly, how they handle reading challenges. They are able to share strategies they use to help them as readers and to talk about what they are learning from reading.

Teachers in all disciplines should be readers by example.

I assert that teachers in all disciplines should be readers by example. They can help students find books they want to read and help them pair up with reading friends (others who have similar reading interests). I am thinking of Grade 4 art teacher, Krista, who loved the book *Smile* by Raina Telgemeier. Krista loved the book so much she shared it with her students, and several of them became friends specifically because they shared an interest in the artwork of the book. For teachers, reading is a way to learn, to find connections between their reading and their teaching, a way to relax and to address their own wellness, and, perhaps most important, to show students how reading can matter, personally.

What Have You Read Lately?

A few years ago, I started all my new courses for pre-service teachers and professional learning workshops with the question, "What have you read lately?" I always follow up by saying, "Anything goes. It's just a way for us to see that we all read every day and that we have reading interests just like our students do." I am clear that no one will judge anyone's choices. Whenever I did this, I found that the energy in the room increased. Whether I was working with pre-service teachers or teachers, they became animated and talked excitedly about the reading they had been doing. These conversations continued throughout our time together.

Talking about reading served three purposes.

- It energized the group.
- It allowed connections to be made between and among us.
- It reminded us that reading generates good feelings.

Imagine if administrators began staff meetings, teachers started the school week, and students began group work with the question, "What have you read lately?" What would be your reply?

We are all readers. And teachers are more aware than most of their own reading strengths and challenges. Why not use those real experiences to be role models for students? Students need to know that there are all kinds of readers and that this is as true for adults as it is for them. You can tell your students what kind of reader you are and what kind of reader you have been in the past, so they can see that it is not a stagnant condition. It is good for students to know you have overcome—or still struggle with—reading challenges.

Let's look at an example. I remember being an avid reader right up to Grade 6, and then one day in school my teacher quizzed me in front of the whole class about a part of the story I had just read. I froze and couldn't remember details

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from the story—I hummed a bit and tried to make a joke, but ultimately, I think, my love for reading died right then and there. I read for school and university in the ensuing years, but I did not see myself as a real reader until much later. It was only after I became a teacher, when I would watch and help my young Grade 1 students learn to read, that I became a passionate reader again myself.

I recall when a new teacher confided in me that it had been years since she had read a book for pleasure. She was just beginning her career as a Grade 4 teacher. She told me, "I do read what I need and want to read. I read recipes, magazines, and favorite social media sites, but a book? Never." I told her not to see her lack of reading a novel in the past as a barrier to teaching reading but as a starting point. The first step for this teacher was to identify her interests and then to find books that she could read on her own (and later with her students) to help her engage in deep and meaningful reading again.

Another enthusiastic and caring high school teacher, Jose, told me he was a reluctant reader growing up. But he had been a talented soccer player. Jose confided in me that if a teacher, any teacher, had suggested he read a book featuring soccer or one of his soccer heroes, he probably would have wanted to read that book. Jose said that he only rediscovered reading once he started teaching and that he now reads constantly with his students and his own children.

Teaching Tip

Take your own reading pulse. Ask,

- How often do I read aloud to my students?
- How often do I read on my own for pleasure?
- How often do I read professional learning resources?
- How often do I talk to colleagues about professional learning resources?

It is quite possible that as a teacher you may have struggled as a reader in school, leaving you unenthusiastic and a bit fearful about teaching reading. Jennifer was one such teacher and she says that it took years for her to develop a positive reader identity. She viewed teaching, however, as a way to find, use, and teach reading strategies to strengthen the reading skills of both her *and* her students. Today Jennifer tells me that she sees her students experiencing some of the same challenges that she experienced as a child. Jennifer is honest and straightforward in telling her students about her reading challenges, an attitude that helps her students meet their own challenges with a healthy attitude. Teachers at all levels can turn the tide by making sure that their classroom environment, their resources, and their instruction motivates students.

8. Reading Engagement Leads to the Goal: Capable, Passionate, Lifelong Readers

Reading engagement means full participation in the act of reading; it involves knowing what you are doing, why you are doing it, wanting to do it, and giving it your all.

Students engaged in reading are

- **involved**
- **connected**
- **hooked**
- **interested**
- **deep in thought**
- **captivated**
- **engrossed**
- **focused**
- **intent**

What does reading engagement look like? You probably see it happen in your classroom every day. When students are genuinely interested in what they are doing, they put in the effort to do the work, they respond enthusiastically to the task, they eagerly interact with one another, and they persist in the task without being reminded to do so.

Engagement is also described as flow, meaning it is a kind of non-stop activity characterized by absorption, enthusiasm, and, importantly, success. We all know what it feels like to be completely focused and immersed in an activity. That's flow.

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In My Classroom: Eliciting Classroom-Wide Reading Engagement

Although I now primarily teach pre-service teachers at a university, I truly enjoy the opportunity to be a guest reader in grade-school classrooms for special events like World Read Aloud Day in February, International Literacy Day in September, and One Book, One School initiatives.

After reading a story or an excerpt from a story, my favorite question to ask students is, "What did you think of that?" The question is deliberately open-ended, seeking students' immediate responses about anything related to the reading. It's a perfect question to elicit students' engagement with the story.

On one such occasion, I read the picture book *Perfect Man* by Troy Wilson and Dean Griffiths. It is the story of a super-hero named Perfect Man who gives up his title and status to seek "another way to save the world." Readers of this wonderful book begin making inferences and predictions early in the story that Perfect Man will become the main character's third-grade teacher. The book does not divulge any certainty around this question, and students' comments and questions clearly show the connections they are making with the story.

One student said, "That IS Perfect Man! He stops the bullies in the playground." Another added, "No, he is just a good teacher." (That's me smiling at that comment.) One student asked, "How did he know that Michael wanted to be a writer?" Another student responded, "Look at the page where the teacher says he is his biggest fan."

The conversation continued for several minutes until all students had shared their questions and comments. One student added, "I think he is going to go back to being Perfect Man … 'cause he could fly then!" Students were fully engaged in this conversation about the book. With just one genuine question, I had prompted students to share with me and one another their feelings about the characters, what happened in the story, and the wonderings they had. They even offered alternative endings when they were not pleased with what occurred in the book. To me, that is what reading engagement looks like.

Reading engagement might look different in a mathematics class than it does in a home economics class, but the best way to find out if your students are engaged in reading is to ask yourself the following questions. Share the questions with a colleague and talk together about how to support reading engagement with your students. Sharing ideas can help you make reading engagement the goal of your reading instruction.

What Does Reading Engagement Look Like in Your Classroom?

Think of a time when your students appeared fully engaged in reading something in your classroom.

- What was happening?
- Why do you think this activity was engaging for your students?
- How were students showing their use of the skills of reading?
- How were students showing motivational aspects of reading?

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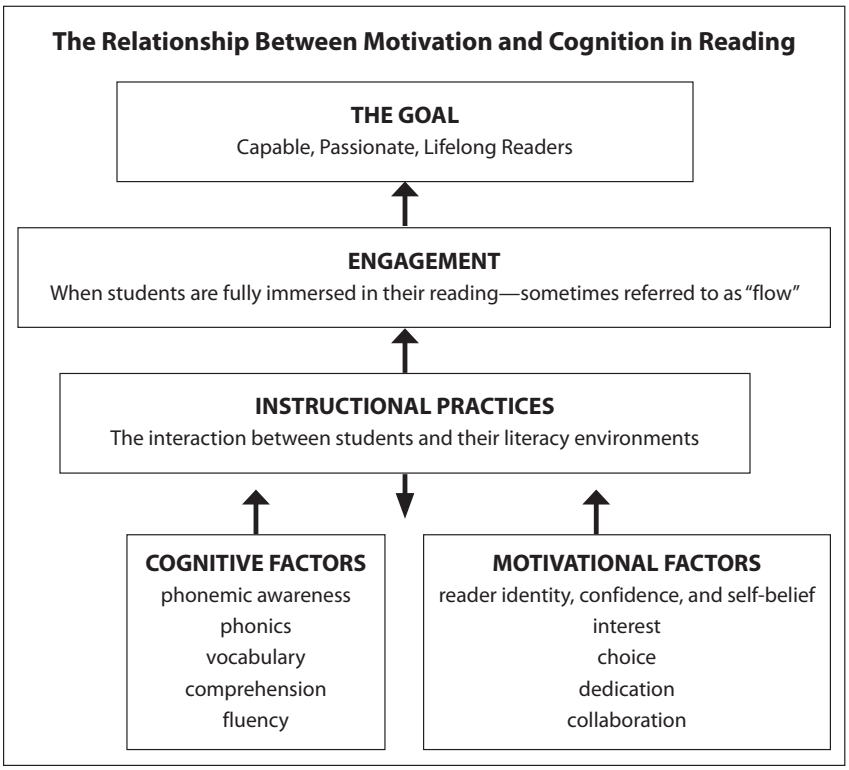
Think of a time when your students appeared less engaged in reading than you would have hoped.

- What was happening?
- Why do you think this activity was less engaging for your students?

Engagement: The Key to Achieving Your Goal

It is only by sparking reading engagement that we have a chance to light the fire that is a lifelong passion for reading.

Why do so many teachers strive for reading engagement? Why do they take such satisfaction in witnessing engaged reading? Perhaps because they like to see evidence that their instructional practices to develop students' reading skills and levels of motivation are working.



The pathway from instruction to engagement creates lifelong readers.

9. Reading Skills and Motivation Factors Are Synergistic

Motivation to read and reading skills make a magical combination. Nancy Frey, John Guthrie, and other researchers tell us that we have known for a long time about the interconnected relationship between reading skills and motivation factors for reading. Unfortunately, knowledge about teaching reading skills and motivating reading have been kept distinct, each in its own silo.

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Frey says that, if we are to successfully engage students in reading, we must address these together, from day one. No more silos. While teachers are familiar with what is meant by the term *motivation*, they know less about how exactly to support it in the classroom. What are the motivation factors that make a real difference to readers?

John Guthrie tells us that engaged readers can overcome barriers related to achievement, parental education, and family income. Teachers invest their time and effort teaching reading skills, so students become capable readers. But if they neglect the development of motivation factors, their efforts may be for naught.

The factors of motivation I explore in this book for students as readers are

1. **Confidence**: "I know how to read."
2. **Interest**: "I like to read about _____."
3. **Choice**: "I like to choose my books."
4. **Dedication**: "Sometimes it's hard, but I just try to figure it out."
5. **Collaboration**: "I like to talk with my friends about books."

Because the factors of motivation interact synergistically with the skills of reading, it makes sense to provide reading instruction that supports both motivation and reading skills at the same time. Otherwise, we may fall short of meeting students' expectations. I believe this is what Janet Emig, Professor Emeritus at Rutgers University, meant when she said that it is "magical thinking" to believe that what is taught is what is learned. She is referring to the gap created when our instruction does not meet the learner's needs. When that happens, despite all our best intentions, students do not benefit from our reading instruction.

To learn and apply reading skills, your students need to know that they can learn to read and that *you know* they can learn to read.

To learn and apply reading skills, your students need to have confidence in themselves as readers. They need to know that they can learn to read and that *you know* they can learn to read. Some students grow up believing they cannot learn to read. Without a belief in themselves, they may behave in ways—mostly out of fear, anger, and insecurity—that make it impossible to provide instruction that will help them.

You have likely observed students who will pretend to read. Perhaps they work with others who carry them through an assignment, or they avoid reading in other ways. Perhaps they act out in class. Any one of these behaviors, let alone a combination of them, make it hard to teach these students reading. But in my experience, all does not have to be lost. We only need to remember that reading skills and factors of motivation are two sides of the same coin. When students want to read and they enjoy it, their reading skills improve. As their reading skills improve, they want to read more.

As adults, we read what interests us. We make our own choices about what to read and we decide when to read and for how long. When I make these decisions, I devote my time and attention to reading the books I buy or borrow. But students don't always buy or borrow the books they read. More often they have little choice about what they read. Teachers will always be assigning readings in school, but if we want students to value reading, we have to provide opportunities for them to find books that interest them. If they choose the book, they are more likely to follow through and read it.

During my years as a professor of education, I have had the opportunity to prepare, interact with, and observe the work of hundreds of pre-service teachers working in classrooms during their practicums. One of my pre-service teachers, who was working in a middle school, recently tweeted this message to me, "I

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read this book, *Punching the Air* by Ibi Zoboi and Yusef Salaam, when I was on a hunt for a book that I could recommend to one of my students. He was really uninterested in reading, but he loved music and was always dancing at his desk. I suggested he read this book like a rap, and the next time I saw him there was a bookmark in the middle of the book! He told me it 'changed reading for him.'"

So, how do you avoid the silos, and instead address reading skills and motivation factors concurrently? How do you support your students to be passionate, lifelong readers? First, as my trusted subject-matter experts advised, you must possess a clear and profound understanding of the components of reading. This knowledge will translate to practice every single day. It means that you will know

- that **what** you teach is important to reading
- **why** you select certain reading materials and resources
- **how** to choose skills and strategies to emphasize with your students

Second, you need to examine your teaching philosophy, classroom environment, and teaching strategies. You must constantly ask yourself, "Does my practice provide real reasons to read?"

You can marry these two approaches into one, to help your students develop a reading capability for both learning and pleasure.

Your Key Takeaways

Here are the key ideas we explored in this chapter on teaching reading.

- Reading must be learned.
- You can learn to teach reading.
- The components of reading are decoding (phonics and phonemic awareness), fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension.
- The motivation factors for reading are confidence, interest, choice, dedication, and collaboration.
- Teaching reading requires a synergy between the components of reading and the motivation factors.
- These nine major considerations provide a strong foundation for teaching reading:

  1. Sometimes reading is hard.
  2. Structures of language support reading instruction.
  3. The components of reading need to be taught daily.
  4. Every teacher is a reading teacher.
  5. Meaningful relationships are key.
  6. Students need good reasons to read.
  7. Teachers must be readers.
  8. Reading engagement leads to the goal: capable, passionate, lifelong readers.
  9. Reading skills and motivation factors are synergistic.

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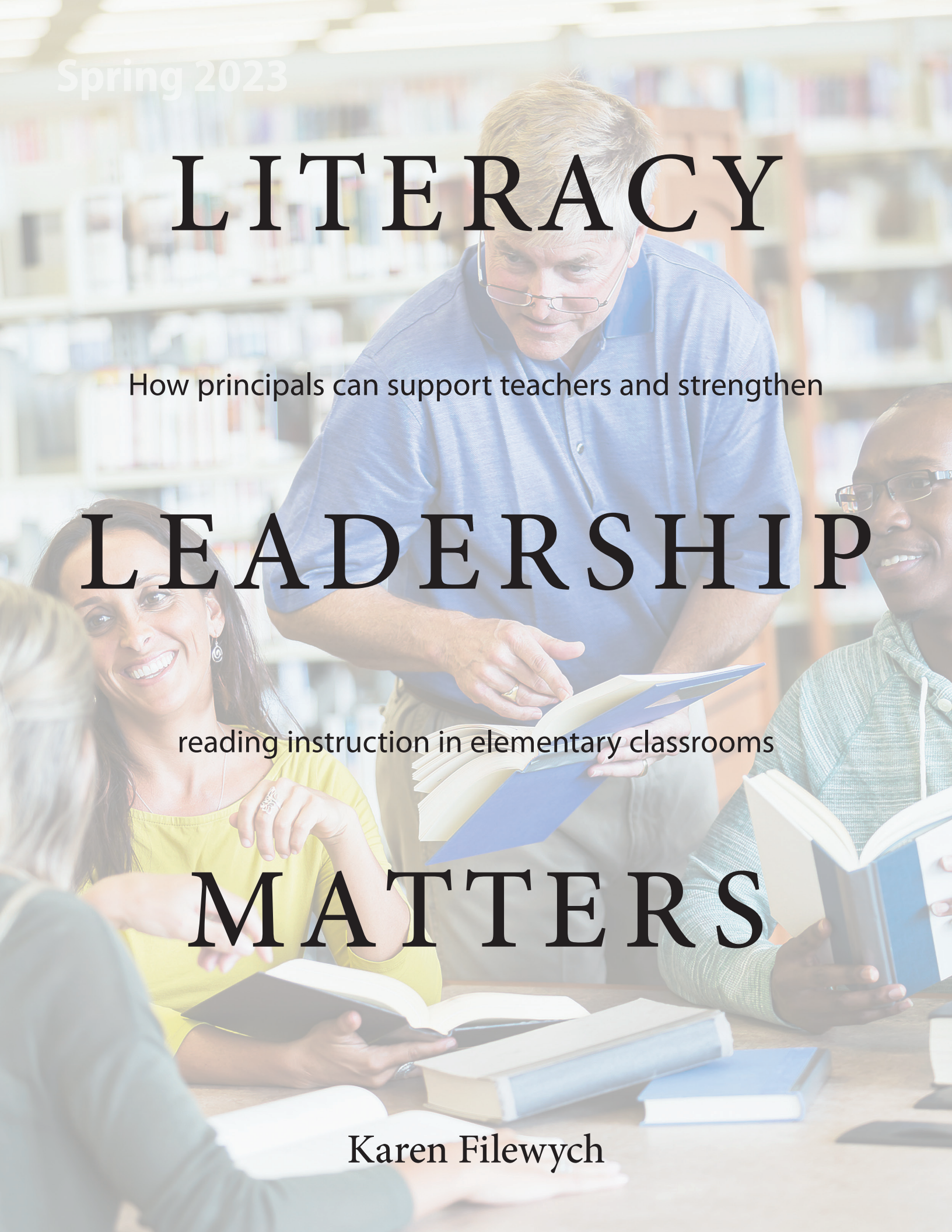

Spring 2023

LITERACY LEADERSHIP MATTERS

How principals can support teachers and strengthen reading instruction in elementary classrooms

Karen Filewych

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Creating a Shared Literacy Vision

"Leadership is the capacity to translate vision into reality."
— Warren Bennis

Leadership Matters

Strong leadership in a school is essential. Your role is essential. You set both the tone and the direction for what goes on within your building. I recently had a conversation about two schools with identical architectural blueprints. Despite having the same physical layout, these schools offered me two vastly different experiences. Why? Leadership. In one, the principal created an environment where everyone—students, staff, and guests—felt valued and welcome, where learning was exciting, and where everyone seemed willing to work hard. The other school was quite the opposite: feelings of mistrust, negativity, even judgment permeated the environment. Sadly, staff did not seem especially happy to be there. The identical buildings provided significantly different learning environments.

If we are to create an environment where literacy learning is valued by both staff and students, we must remember that our leadership matters. If we do not have experience or education with literacy instruction, knowing where to begin can be daunting. This chapter addresses important considerations to help with the creation of a shared literacy vision: approaching headlines about literacy instruction, creating an environment of trust, establishing common goals, focusing on pedagogy, using common language, reconsidering school-wide practices, building capacity, becoming literacy leaders in our schools, and finding the funds.

Fumbling Through the Headlines

One of the challenges of leading an elementary school, with the foundations of literacy at the core, is figuring out what makes literacy instruction most effective. You may have noticed an influx of headlines and news stories about reading instruction as of late. The term "the Science of Reading" is used with increasing frequency. Everyone seems to be weighing in on the argument about what

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is considered best practice for literacy instruction, especially when it comes to reading. The Ontario Human Rights Commission put out the *Right to Read* report. The Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario submitted an official response. Across the country, there have been significant curricular shifts in literacy instruction. The public debate has brought many stakeholders to the table with a varying amount of experience with, research into, and understanding of the topic. For elementary teachers who pride themselves in the teaching of reading, the conversation can sometimes feel personal, like an attack on their teaching.

In their book, *Shifting the Balance*, Jan Burkins and Kari Yates (2021) outline some of the current prevailing opinions:

> Some argue that there is a disconnect between research and classroom practice. Some argue that things are out of balance in the balanced literacy classroom. Still others argue that the methods in many classrooms are making learning to read harder rather than easier, especially for the children most at risk of reading difficulties. (1)

It can be challenging to keep up with what we hear and read, and also to make sense of it all.

Another term that is gaining popularity is *structured literacy*. As Louisa Moats (2020) explains,

> Recently, the International Dyslexia Association (IDA) adopted the term *Structured Literacy* to refer to the content and principles of explicit teaching that works best with students who must be taught how to read. (20)

Moats, a well-known researcher in the field, suggests that a more comprehensive term would be *Structured Language and Literacy* to acknowledge all components involved. She goes on to say,

> Ideally, a comprehensive program balances skill development with daily writing and reading that is purposeful and engaging. Reading and language instruction should occur within a rich, substantive, knowledge-building curriculum. (20)

Just like the students in our classrooms, our teachers have their own strengths and challenges, understandings and experiences. We cannot make assumptions that every elementary teacher has the tools necessary to teach language arts with expertise; teachers often do not want to reveal their weaknesses, especially to their administrators.

As you will see throughout this book, this comprehensive program is what we strive for. A radical change of practice is likely not required in most classrooms. What is necessary, though? What is necessary is an attempt to understand the research and opportunities to reflect on and discuss current practice, leading to intentional adjustments to planning and instruction. The intent of this book is to guide you and your staff through this process.

Creating an Environment of Trust

"The gardener does not make a plant grow. The job of a gardener is to create optimal conditions."
—Sir Ken Robinson

The teaching of reading often brings with it long-held and passionate beliefs of teachers. Some teachers are quite confident in their methods. On the other hand, there are some teachers who feel insecure about teaching reading because of the limited coursework they received on the topic. Because of these realities, as administrators or literacy leads, we are not wise to abruptly enter the conversation and impose our own learnings or beliefs. Doing so could well accomplish the opposite of what we intend. Instead, the dialogue surrounding these

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topics should be open, intentional, reflective, and collaborative. This is much more easily accomplished in an environment of trust. If our teachers feel like we are dictating what is to be done—which might be contrary to what they've done for years—we will likely encounter resistance. Instead, consider how you might embark together on this learning journey to improve literacy instruction: sharing research, asking questions, and inviting collaboration, respecting all voices at the table.

In most books, blog posts, or courses about leadership, there is a focus on building a community of respect and trust. We recognize the importance of this environment if we are going to be successful in working toward common goals. Yet this environment is not always an easy one to create. Effective leaders know that to accomplish the big things, they have to be intentional about the little things along the way: a painter has a vision of the end creation but must focus on each small detail to create the overall effect.

"Leaders need first to take on the role of supportive coach before taking on the role of evaluator." (Routman 2014, 199)

My former colleagues have told me that it was one of the little things I did as an administrator that had the biggest impact on them. I wrote short notes acknowledging something I noticed in their classrooms—a stunning bulletin board, a gentle manner with a challenging student, excellent classroom management, an intriguing lesson—and left the notes in their mailboxes. By doing this, I was recognizing their strengths, and I was building community in the process. Teachers appreciated this and many mentioned that they saved my notes over the years. This simple practice helped teachers understand the purpose of my instructional walks, developed strong relationships, and made future conversations about anything from challenging students to classroom instruction much easier.

Writing notes to your staff may not be your preference. Consider your strengths and your end goal. What will you do to establish trust and show that you value your staff, as colleagues and as people?

I was intentional about these notes. In fact, I kept a staff list at my desk. Every week I would try to write five or six notes, working my way through the staff list. I didn't start at the top and work my way down; I completed the list organically. As I noticed something in a particular class or with a particular staff member, I would write that note and check the name off my list. When everyone had one note, I would start again. My staff didn't know how intentional this was. The list on my desk not only reminded me to write the notes but also ensured that I wrote something to everyone. I also tried to be attentive to the circumstances and needs of my staff. If I knew someone was having a tough week (because of a challenge in school or a home circumstance), that individual would be sure to get a note. Writing these notes was a little thing to me, but perhaps it was a big thing to that person in that moment.

As a teacher, I have worked on school staffs where I felt valued as a teacher and where I know others felt valued in their roles, too. In these situations, productivity and motivation were high, and everyone was willing to put in the extra effort because we felt valued. Professional reading and discussion? Absolutely. We saw the benefit for our students and were willing to take the time and make the effort to learn and improve our instruction.

In their uplifting book, *Dear Teacher*, Brad Johnson and Hal Bowman (2021) say this to teachers:

> While you do have high expectations for your students and want them to give their best, remember that they are human first, and when you focus on things like building relationships and patience, they will actually work harder and be more successful. Students work harder for teachers they like and who like them. (3)

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The same holds true for you and your teachers. Building relationships, valuing the gifts of those on your staff, respecting them as human beings, remembering that they have lives outside of school, and creating a community of trust are essential. The little things—okay, maybe they're not so little—enable us to create common goals and have meaningful conversations about best practice, ultimately leading toward our larger goal of effective literacy instruction, affecting our students' lives forever.

Establishing Common Goals

At the beginning of the school year, I ask teachers their goals for the year. Some schools (or school districts) require this formally of their teachers; however, the reflection and dialogue around goal-setting can also be accomplished informally in the setting of a staff meeting. In elementary schools, almost every teacher mentions—unprompted—something about their students as readers and/or writers. I would be concerned if they didn't; after all, literacy instruction is vital in our elementary classrooms.

Most school districts require schools to outline their goals for the year (and the strategies they plan to use to meet those goals). Before deciding on your school goals, facilitate a conversation about teacher goals first. That discussion will naturally feed into the conversation about school goals. If your school district outlines specific areas for you to target (equity and inclusion, for example), these areas can then be discussed as they relate to the goals of your teachers.

Administrators have sometimes asked me to assist them in creating their literacy goals. My suggestion is always to consider both staff observations about students and the data from previous years. Data is often the driving force of our goals and also how we measure success. When creating your literacy goals and the strategies you will implement, consider the specific needs within your school.

- Does your data show that students are competent at decoding but need more support with comprehension?
- Are there an inordinate number of students requiring literacy intervention?
- Do you see the need for more intentional teaching of **phonological awareness** and **phonemic awareness**?
- Have you been successful in improving student reading but now need a more intentional focus on writing?
- Does your staff have the resources needed to implement your goals?

See the Glossary on page 127 for words in bold print.

In my experience, it is more effective to target one or two specific areas than to write a broad goal and try to accomplish everything all at once. A goal like *To improve student achievement in reading, writing, speaking, and listening* is broad in scope and could be difficult to track and achieve, not to mention being overwhelming for teachers. Instead, it might be more manageable and more effective to target one area. Will this area affect the others? Likely. But keep the goal targeted and specific. This chapter's Talk Time on page 19 could support you in goal-setting with your staff.

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Focusing on Pedagogy

If literacy underpins all we do in our elementary classrooms, we should be talking about literacy instruction regularly. We move toward what we focus on. By setting aside time for this discussion, it shows what we value in our school. When planning your staff meetings, consider choosing questions from Talk Time one chapter at a time, one element of language learning at a time. This will ensure your discussion is guided and grounded in pedagogy.

Although I have structured this book by separating the various elements of language learning, it is essential that we—and our teachers—realize that these elements are very much interconnected. (We will discuss this more in Chapter 2.) They are so interconnected, in fact, that it was sometimes difficult to decide which topics should be in which chapter. As an example, should phonemic awareness be in the chapter on word study or reading? One could make an argument for both. Therefore, if you are looking for a specific topic, check the contents or index. Otherwise, you might decide to work through the discussion questions one chapter at a time.

You'll notice that the heading for this section refers to pedagogy and not curriculum. The difference between the two? Curriculum is *what* is being taught and pedagogy refers to *how*. Although curriculum is an important part of the conversation, the discussion should most often focus on pedagogy: *how* we are teaching the curriculum to maximize student learning.

Using Common Language

Now that I am no longer working for one school division, schools often hire me as a writer-in-residence. One of the most effective outcomes of this experience is building common language for all students and teachers within the school. This is also something you will accomplish through regular staff meeting discussions about pedagogy. Common language is powerful when we, as a staff, are discussing our vision, our goals, and our practice. Common language in the classroom can also propel our students' learning forward as they move from grade to grade.

The language-arts curriculum is known as a spiral curriculum: a concept is revisited repeatedly from year to year, with complexity increasing and student understanding deepening. In essence, we are building on what we have learned in previous years, rather than introducing new content and concepts each year. Using common language, then, helps students see the connections in what they are being taught, rather than leaving them feeling like teachers are continually introducing new concepts.

(Re)Considering School-wide Practices

Sometimes when we develop a common understanding, common goals, and common language with our teachers, we decide to establish school-wide literacy practices. If well thought-out, school-wide practices can improve both the practice of our teachers and the learning for our students. However, we must be cautious about becoming overzealous and implementing something just for the sake of implementation.

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Let's consider a few examples. Many schools implement a school-wide period of time for independent reading: fifteen minutes each day when everyone is reading, for example. In *Sometimes Reading is Hard*, Robin Bright (2021) suggests,

> Fifteen minutes is magic!… Carving out 15 minutes a day can make all the difference. That length of time is considered consequential in helping students improve their decoding, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension reading skills. And it's so easy to make this a part of your daily routine. (85)

A few considerations: What time of day is best for most classrooms? How will we ensure students are actually engaged in reading? What should students be reading at this time? What are teachers doing during independent reading? (These questions will be addressed in Chapter 6.)

In *The Book Whisperer*, Donalyn Miller (2009) says, "The question can no longer be 'How can we make time for independent reading?' The question must be 'How can we not?'" (51)

As a school-wide practice, my preference is to begin the day with independent reading. In some schools with a morning broadcast or announcements, I have noticed a surprising amount of wasted instructional time, as nothing consequential occurs in the classroom until those announcements begin. And yet, let's think about how purposeful this time could be. Take those 15 minutes and multiply them by 5 days in a week: 75 minutes a week! Let's assume a 40-week school year: 75 minutes multiplied by 40 equals 3000 minutes. That's 50 hours of reading or instruction that our students are missing out on! If we establish the first 15 minutes of class as independent reading time—and we ensure that announcements or broadcast occur consistently at the same time each day—this instructional time becomes purposeful, rather than time spent waiting.

Let's consider another example of a school-wide practice: An elementary school implemented school-wide, multi-grade literacy groupings for 90 minutes every morning (three 30-minute blocks). All available staff were used to work with students in small groups. Students moved from adult to adult during those three blocks of time to work on different skills and strategies; teachers, then, did not always work with their own students. Although this plan was well-intentioned, many teachers said they did not feel the time was as valuable as it could have been. For one thing, they were not able to plan as well for these groupings as they could for their own class. Other teachers said that the time spent transitioning in and out of the groupings was neither efficient nor productive, often leaving three 20- or 25-minute blocks rather than using all 30 minutes with each group. So, although the intention of the admin team was commendable (and the planning considerable), many of the teachers resented this practice and felt that it was infringing on the quality instructional time they had with their own students.

If you are thinking about implementing a school-wide practice, or if there is currently a school-wide practice in place, consider these questions:

- What is the desired outcome?
- Will this practice use instructional time effectively?
- Is time used efficiently or is a lot of time spent in transitions? Is it an easy-to-implement practice?
- Will this practice improve student learning?
- When will we schedule time to talk about this practice as a staff to hear how it is working or not working?
- How might you generate excitement and a buy-in from your staff?

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Building Capacity

Think of one or two school leaders you admire. Are those individuals confident about their own impact? Are they comfortable not always being the smartest in the room? Do they strive to empower others?

I once read that the best leaders are people who feel great about themselves. I have given this statement a lot of thought and considered it in regard to the leaders I have worked with. Perhaps it holds some truth. The most effective leaders I know are those who understand that they aren't necessarily the smartest in the room, who don't try to do everything themselves, who know the value of team, and who build others up while capitalizing on their unique gifts. If you are a secondary-trained principal leading an elementary school, this is confirmation that you can be an effective administrator in this environment even though you might feel out of your comfort zone.

The fact that you're reading this book shows a willingness to learn and improve. As you consider how to proceed with literacy goals within your school, think carefully about how you can build capacity and empower your staff, capitalizing on the strengths of your team to create the biggest impact.

Becoming Literacy Leaders in Our Schools

"Be silly. Be honest. Be kind."— Ralph Waldo Emerson

"You're off to great places! Today is your day! Your mountain is waiting, so… get on your way!"— Dr. Seuss, *Oh, the Places You'll Go!*

One of the unofficial goals in most elementary schools is to inspire a love of reading. What students see around them should promote a love of reading, invite students to read, and demonstrate how the adults in the school are readers too! Are there nooks with books throughout your school? Are the books within your students' reach? Are there books on display with the covers visible (not only the spines)? Do the book displays change regularly? Are there child-friendly quotes around the building? Bulletin boards to show favorite books of staff members? The physical environment within a school speaks volumes. What do you want your space to say?

"Wear your reading love proudly in front of your students every day. The reality is that you cannot inspire others to do what you are not inspired to do yourself." (Miller 2009, 118)

The most effective literacy teachers are those who value reading and ensure they are reading what their students are reading. These teachers can easily recommend books to their students and engage in meaningful conversations. And yet this is something administrators don't often think to do. Imagine the immediate connection you could make with a class if you asked them for a book recommendation, borrowed the book, and then returned the following week to share your reaction. Students who hadn't yet read the book would be much more likely to pick it up, knowing that their principal had read it too! Do you have young children or grandchildren in your life? Visit your primary classes and ask students for recommendations. They will be thrilled to tell you about their favorite books. The best part? This excitement is contagious. Students who haven't had much exposure to books at home, or students whose feelings about books have been primarily ones of frustration, in time may be influenced by the interest you show and by these positive associations with books.

Do you give out birthday pencils or certificates to the students in your school? Is there any way you could give books instead? I know of many schools who have creatively found the funds to purchase a wide variety of books; on their birthdays, students choose from this selection. I have witnessed many students skipping down the hall with a new book of their own—a gift of literacy in more ways than one!

The bottom line: don't leave it to your teachers to be the only literacy leaders in your school. How can you become a literacy leader for students too?

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Finding the Funds

As principal, one of the challenges you face continually is budget. Whether we realize it or not, financial decisions are revealing and reflect what is valued within a school. If you believe strongly in the importance of literacy within your building, do your financial decisions demonstrate this? Are you committed to purchasing the resources needed to support your school goals? Have you allocated some of your budget to pay for a librarian or teacher librarian, even on a part-time basis? Have you set aside funds to support literacy school-wide, such as creating an environment to promote a love of reading?

Financial decisions that support literacy demonstrate what you value: to students, to staff, to parents. Money talks.

When budgets are especially tight, get creative. Pursue additional funding through grant applications. Be open to book donations (perhaps from a more affluent school or from the public library that might be culling). Consider: Are the book donations suitable for your library or could they be donated to families in need? In what ways can your school council support your literacy goals?

Instructional Walk Considerations: A Shared Literacy Vision

On your next instructional walk, consider:

- What do you notice about the physical environment of your school? Does it reflect the importance of literacy and promote a love of reading?
- Look at your school through the eyes of a student. What might they notice to help them understand that literacy is valued in their school?
- What might you do to improve the physical space to ensure that it reflects your core beliefs and your school goals?
- Are school-wide interruptions (announcements, phone calls to the classroom, pages for the principal to come to the office) kept to a minimum to protect instructional time? How can you ensure that communication does not negatively affect learning and teaching?
- What are the strengths of the teachers within your school?
- Is there a school-wide practice already in place within your school? If so, does it seem to be effective? Does it honor instructional time?
- What are your students reading? What books do they recommend to you?
- How might you facilitate the sharing of student book recommendations with other students in the school? On a school-wide bulletin board? Through a book talk during broadcast?

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Talk Time: A Shared Literacy Vision

Take some time to read and think about this quotation and these questions before discussing them with your colleagues.

In *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, Stephen Covey (2004) said, "To begin with the end in mind means to start with a clear understanding of your destination. It means to know where you're going so that you better understand where you are now and so that the steps you take are always in the right direction." (98)

- How does this quote apply to your work with students?
- What are your goals for your students this year? (Prioritize 3 or 4 at most.)
- What do you plan to do to reach these goals? Be specific.
- Which of your goals might be appropriate to consider as part of our school goals? Is there a way we can work toward one of these goals collectively as a staff?

Other questions for discussion:

- Think about your classroom environment. Does it reflect your own personal goals for the year or your school-wide literacy goal(s)? Is there anything you might add or change?
- What do you suggest we do to our school environment to better reflect our literacy goals?

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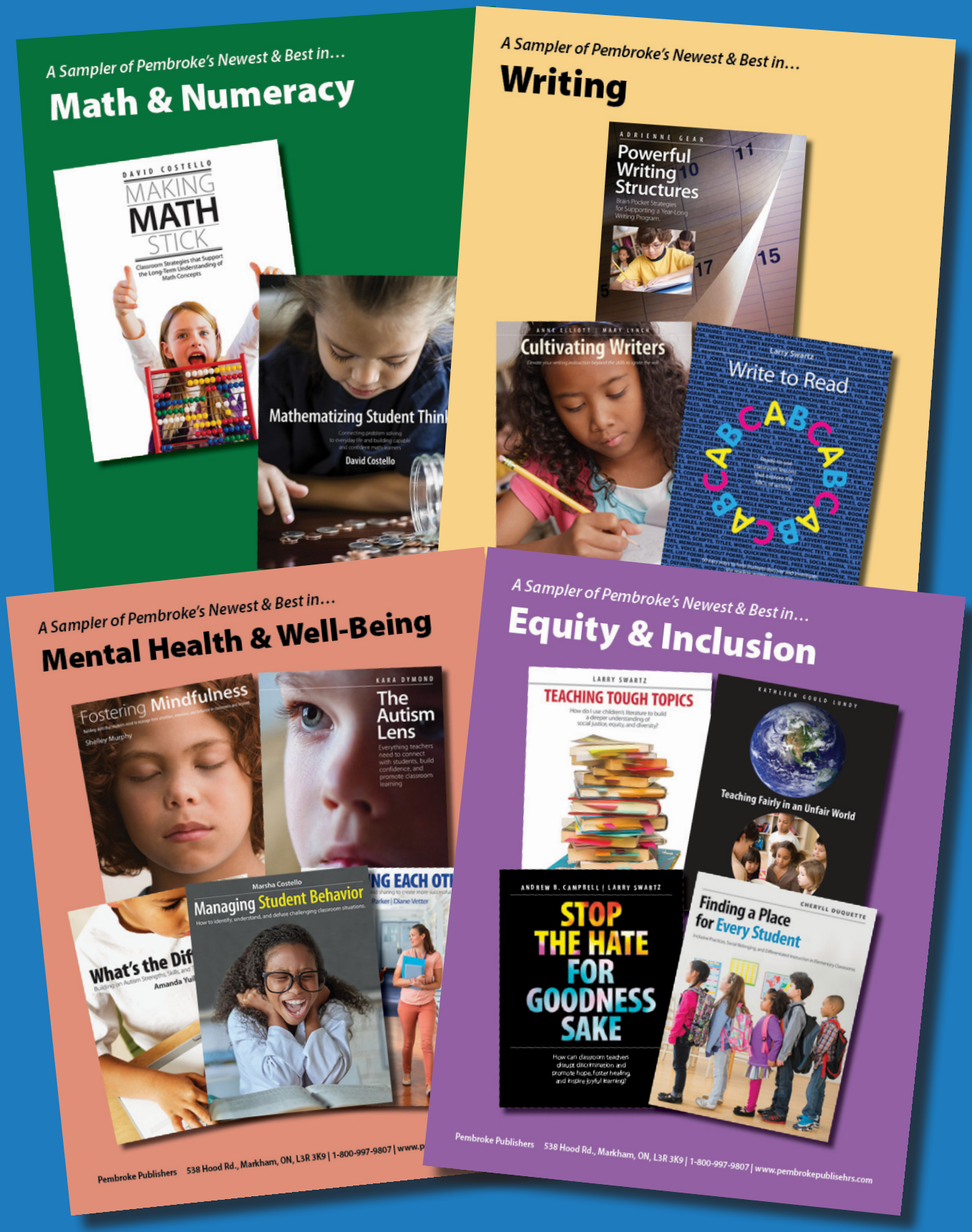
Don't Miss Our Other Great Subject Area Samplers…



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