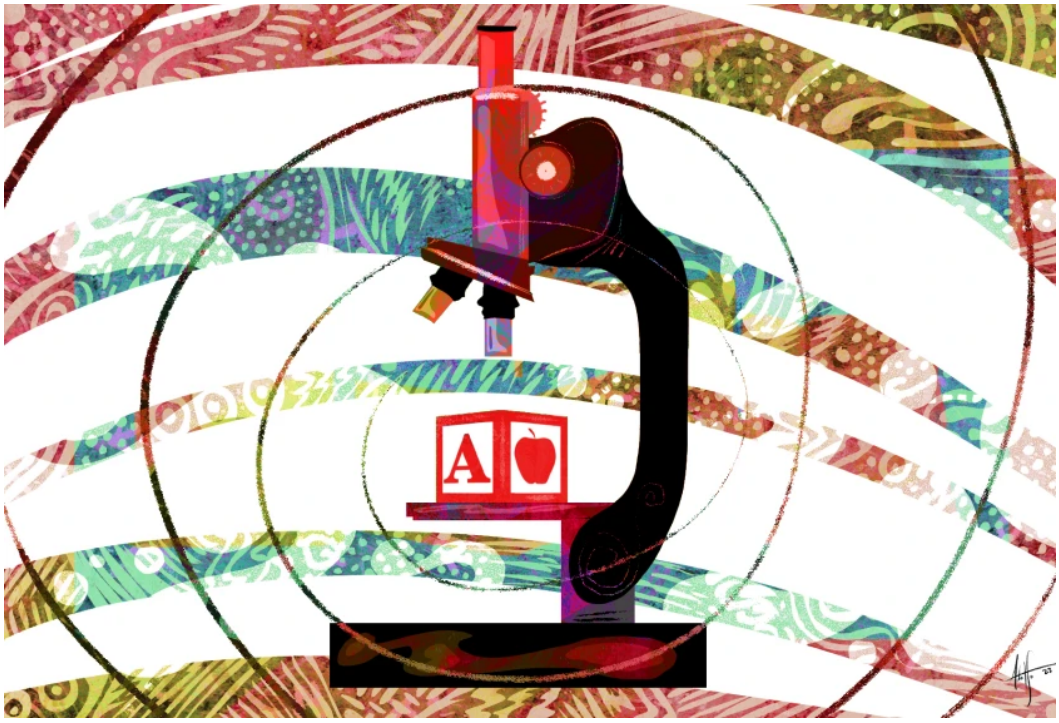
What People Are Getting Wrong About the Science of Reading

It's time to look at the research and get real about the role of phonics

By Brooke Wilkins & Lauren McNamara — July 07, 2023 5 min read



Adolfo Valle for Education Week

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The reading wars have become a tool used to further polarize and divide an already fraught educational climate, and the victims of this war are our nation's students.

At the forefront of conversations about literacy instruction is the science of reading, a multidisciplinary body of research. Perspectives on the framework lean toward oversimplifying it as a way to champion the teaching of phonics alone. In a recent New York Times article, Susan Neuman, a professor at New York University, speaks of the most recent shift toward incorporating phonics instruction into classrooms: "'I worry,' she said, 'that it's déjà vu all over again.'" It does feel as if we have had this debate before: teach phonics or not? Teaching phonics is crucial, but it is not the only facet of reading development, despite frequently being portrayed as such. The reading wars have intensified as an unnecessary battle of semantics, a losing battle at that.

Natalie Wexler, an education journalist and author of *The Knowledge Gap*, recently suggested that science of reading advocates receive pushback because of messaging that promotes phonics as the most important factor in improving reading outcomes. She argues that these advocates need to look at "*all* the science, not just the part relating to decoding" in order to support a more comprehensive translation of science into practice for literacy education.

As two veteran educators and science of reading advocates on the front line of addressing the literacy crisis, we provide an answer to Wexler's call to action to reframe arguments supporting the science of reading. Serving as reading specialists and literacy coordinators, we have developed an integrated model of programs that addresses phonics as well as language comprehension for students at a K-6 Title I school in Pennsylvania. We have observed significant improvement in our students' early-literacy benchmark scores and, throughout this process, we have developed a perspective on the science of reading that we believe can help others in need of clarification.

We have rooted our work in the knowledge that phonics alone will not solve instructional issues. Students who are learning to crack the code need more intensive instruction in this area, but that instruction should not impede the learning of those who are already decoding. By differentiating phonics instruction through a data-driven model, we provide learning experiences specific to individual student needs. Additionally, cracking the code is not the only element of literacy instruction we provide. Our integrated model includes a comprehensive language arts program that builds students' knowledge and empowers them to comprehend increasingly complex texts.

The science of reading, while typically villainized for solely advocating phonics, is misrepresented as a phonics program, while really, it is a body of research that informs the most effective way to teach decoding ***and*** language comprehension. The definition of the science of reading, provided by The Reading League, is "the vast, interdisciplinary body of scientifically-based research about reading and issues related to reading and writing." The term "science of reading" does not equate to phonics. That term does not equate to comprehension.

The term also does not equate to a teaching approach. In another recent New York Times article, columnist Nicholas Kristof writes, "Many school systems, most recently New York City's, are adopting the science of reading, based partly on the success in Mississippi and elsewhere." The science of reading, however, is not something that can be adopted. It is research that informs the resources and approaches that are adopted so that instruction matches how the brain processes text and creates meaning from language. When the science of reading is branded as something that can be adopted, it is too easy to conflate it with phonics and, thus, problematize it as a single-minded approach toward literacy education. When we conflate the science of reading with phonics, we dismiss a critical aspect of learning how to read that is also informed by the science of reading: development of language comprehension. Hollis Scarborough's reading rope is a helpful visual metaphor from the science of reading research that depicts the necessity of both aspects of reading development.

Balanced literacy sits on the other side of the reading wars. One definition is "an instructional approach that involves a balance between teacher-led reading and writing instruction and independent learning." It is difficult to find a consistent definition for balanced literacy because the ambiguity of the term allows for individual interpretation based on teaching preferences. As with the science of reading, balanced literacy is conflated with other terms, including workshop, three-cueing, and whole language. When we conflate balanced literacy with the damaging strategies that have become attached to the label, we contribute to the idea that an intentionally balanced approach to literacy is exclusive to those using erroneous strategies and ineffective instructional practices.

Herein lies why the reading wars will never be won. Both sides have a part of the answer. If we define reading as the action or skill of reading written or printed matter silently or aloud, and if we define the intended outcome of reading to be comprehension, the capability of understanding something, then we need to account for students' abilities to decode while also building their capabilities to make meaning from what they are reading. The science of reading informs a pedagogical approach toward teaching reading that suggests ***balancing*** the literacy block for

students so they receive direct, explicit, and systematic instruction in the teaching of phonics (word recognition) and they receive instruction that will build their vocabulary, background knowledge, and understanding of grammatical structures (language comprehension). Instruction aligning with these principles includes a ***balance*** of explicit phonics instruction; shared reading experiences; close studies of fiction, nonfiction, and digital media; practice with vocabulary; and application of learning through written and spoken outcomes.

Using information that exists on both sides of the war can empower teachers, administrators, and school leaders to develop a literacy program that is both balanced in its time allocation of the elements of reading instruction and supported by the body of research that is the science of reading. Isn't it time to call a truce?