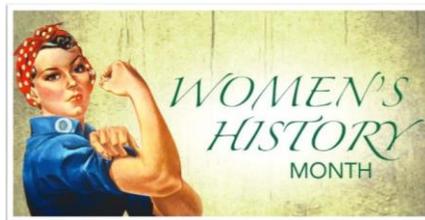


March/April 2022



Balancing Your Approach to Literacy Instruction – Part 1

Literacy Resources

Other Resources

- Women's History
- Inclusivity and Identity

Professional Offerings and Opportunities

- SRSD Study: An Opportunity to Improve Writing Outcomes in Grades 3-5
- Secondary Literacy Partnerships: NEXIS
- Tools for Teachers Summer Workshop
- Lexile Workshop Recordings
- For Students: Writing and Arts Contests for Youth

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Balancing Your Approach to Literacy Instruction – Part 1

There has been a lot of discussion and debate around the best way to teach students how to read, especially in regard to scope and sequence of phonics instruction and phonemic awareness in the early grades. These are considered “code-based” skills and include the ability to map letters to their respective sounds and in combination to read words. Generally, code-based skills can be acquired by third grade. They are what [Doug Fisher](#) refers to as “constrained” reading skills, as there is an end to what a person can learn. These are foundational skills and should be taught with a clear scope and sequence. Direct and explicit instruction, especially in phonics, is very effective in teaching code-based skills ([Lesaux](#), 2013).

To be a competent reader, code-based skills are necessary but not independently sufficient. Students also need “meaning-based skills” (such as oral language use and vocabulary) to support reading comprehension and writing. These are what Fisher calls “unconstrained” reading skills because vocabulary knowledge and skills in reading comprehension continue to grow over time. However, these two broad skill sets differ in their developmental course and in the amount and types of instruction that support them. For this reason, it is essential to provide an adaptive approach to literacy instruction that includes a balance of evidence-based practices that meet the needs of all learners and respond to those needs accordingly.

Research clearly supports the use of a range of instructional approaches in supporting literacy development for students during the PreK through third grade period ([Foorman, et al.](#), 2016, and Christie, 2008). For example, when learners are beginning to acquire literacy skills, more attention tends to be paid to code-based skills, like understanding letter sounds (phonemic skills), while also supporting meaning-related skills by providing rich oral language experiences to build vocabulary.

There is a developmental continuum of literacy skills. As children develop code-based skills and begin to develop fluency, more attention can be paid to meaning-based skills that support comprehension ([Foorman, et al.](#), 2016). Unlike code-based skills, meaning-based skills are cumulative and continuously develop from early childhood on. Developing these skills requires more exposure to hearing and using language, including opportunities to build vocabulary through real life experiences in addition to interactions with text. To build meaning-based skills, some explicit instruction is effective, but so is exposure to language and reading through other

approaches ([Lesaux, 2013](#)). Therefore, effective instruction looks different across grade levels as learners' skills develop and their learning needs change ([Lesaux, 2013](#)).

I recently attended a seminar by Doug Fisher in which he noted that we are having a lot of conversations about how we are teaching word recognition, but we're not paying as much attention to language comprehension. Fisher went on to assert that the point of comprehension instruction is not just comprehension – the point is to do something with the knowledge gained. As Pimental and Liben point out in [Reading As Liberation – An Examination of the Research Base](#), “reading comprehension is not a thing; it is not a cluster of observable skills. It exists in the reader's mind. Scientists refer to this existence of comprehension in our mind as ‘representation’” ([Pimental & Liben, 2021](#)). Therefore, the best way to support reading comprehension is to develop specific literacy skills that contribute to a student's being able to make inferences and draw conclusions about a text.

As will be discussed in future articles, knowledge contributes significantly to reading comprehension in multiple ways, as does vocabulary breadth and depth. In fact, knowledge and vocabulary work together to improve reading comprehension: “The more you learn about the world, the larger your vocabulary gets. The more you know about the world and the more words you know, the better comprehension you demonstrate because of that knowledge (Whipple 1925; NCES, 2012)” ([Pimental & Liben, 2021](#)).

Stay tuned for future articles about knowledge and comprehension, text-based writing, improving adolescent literacy, and reading motivation and engagement.

Literacy Resources

- [How We Read: A Graphic Guide to Literacy](#) – Reading is a complex process that involves multiple parts of the brain working together. This graphic booklet from Achieve the Core explains how we learn to read.
- [Literacy Essentials](#) – These free documents are designed to help educators improve childhood literacy development through research-proven, effective approaches.
- [Foundational Skills to Support Reading for Understanding in Kindergarten Through 3rd Grade](#) – This practice guide provides four recommendations for teaching foundational reading skills to students in kindergarten through 3rd grade. Each recommendation includes implementation steps and solutions for common obstacles. The recommendations also summarize and rate supporting evidence.
- [Improving Reading Comprehension in Kindergarten Through 3rd Grade](#) – This guide recommends five specific steps that educators can take to successfully improve reading comprehension for young readers.

Other Resources

Women's History

- [Women & the American Story Digital Curriculum](#) – This flexible curriculum (featuring primary and secondary sources) is organized into 10 thematic and chronological units. A balance of resources and real-life stories, the materials also include vocabulary guides, discussion questions, classroom activities, and more.
- [NEA Women's History Month for the Classroom Collection](#) – This huge collection of resources includes grade-band-specific lesson plans, free texts, virtual museum visits, and printable quizzes, posters, and activities. If you're an NEA member, be sure to check out their [Women's Leadership Training](#) opportunities.

Inclusivity and Identity

- [Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Inclusive Language Guidelines from the American Psychology Association](#) – Words matter. Psychological science shows that the language people use is critically important as individuals strive to create a more equitable, diverse, and inclusive world. In an effort to build a common vocabulary, APA has introduced the inclusive language guidelines—a place to find the most relevant language to use when communicating about equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI).
- [School Library's Journal's 10 Middle Grade Novels that Address Mental Health with Compassion](#) – These middle grade titles from the past three years depict compassionate, accurate mental health representation featuring a diversity of characters and diagnoses.
- [Best Practices for Serving LGBTQ Students from Learning for Justice](#) - This collection includes recommendations about evaluating school policies, creating an inclusive classroom culture, integrating queer voices into curricula, and engaging families and communities.
- [Support LGBTQ+ Students](#): This two-part webinar series (October 5 and 12) from the Fresno Unified School District will help educators, school leaders, and district staff build their understanding of the needs and risks faced by LGBTQ+ students and identify concrete resources and practices to implement in school to support them.
- [Help Students Reflect on Identity](#) – These identity charts from Facing History and Ourselves help students confront stereotypes, engage in relationship-building conversations with peers, and build their understanding of how identities shape our world.
- [Respect Gender Identities](#) – This comprehensive guide from NPR provides a glossary of terms and answers frequently asked questions about gender identity.

Professional Offerings and Opportunities

Self-Regulated Strategy Development (SRSD) Study: An Opportunity to Improve Writing Outcomes in Grades 3–5 – The [SRSD Study](#) is seeking elementary schools

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with populations of approximately 50% FRL or higher, as well as those demonstrating low/declining ELA proficiency scores, to scale key components of established evidence-based practices for teaching writing. The study will provide professional learning opportunities that enable teachers to improve literacy outcomes and enhance the effectiveness of services for students who require additional support. There will be no costs incurred by schools; each participating school will receive a stipend of \$7,500 to cover costs for stipends for teachers and substitutes (schools can use the excess according to their needs). Each school will receive free books (\$130 worth per teacher), free professional development (valued at \$10,000 per school), and free writing scoring data (valued at \$20,000 per school). For more information, [contact Pat Fitzsimmons](#).

Secondary Literacy Partnerships – Literacy intervention and instruction in middle and high school can be a challenging space to navigate. Students in secondary schools often arrive with a complex literacy background and differentiating instruction to meet the needs of these students is essential. In this *Networks for Excellence in Schools (NEXIS)* experience, literacy interventionists and universal level teachers will work together to identify points of inquiry and engage in Plan-Do-Study-Act cycles to make equitable systems change in our schools and state. Visit Partnerships for Literacy and Learning’s webpage [for more information and to register](#).

Summer State Network of Educators (SNE) Workshops – Smarter Balanced is excited to share that the [Smarter Tools for Teachers](#) resource development workshop for ELA/Literacy instructional resources for grades 3 through high school is scheduled for July 13-15. If you are interested in participating, please visit the [SNE Workshop Recruitment](#) page to complete the [Save-the-Date survey](#) to let your state lead know that you are interested in attending. The [SNE Workshop Recruitment](#) page provides valuable information and answers frequently asked educator questions about the event.

New! Putting the Lexile Framework for Reading to Work in the Library (19 minutes) – This [introductory information for library/media specialists](#) shows how they can utilize Lexile® measures within the library context. This short recording is designed to provide some foundational information about the measures themselves and also about the free tools and resources available. Previous recordings include [An Introduction to the Lexile Framework for Reading](#) (20 minutes), [Let’s Explore the Lexile and Quantile Hub](#) (12 minutes), and [Family Engagement in Reading and Math](#) (20 minutes).

For Students: Writing and Arts Contests for Youth – Contests include Northwind Storytelling Contest (deadline 4/4) and Bow Seat Ocean Awareness Contest (deadline 6/13). Visit the [VTLIB website](#) for more information.

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