

Postcard from the US: The current controversy about teaching reading

Recently, the *New York Times* published an [article](#) on the front page about the teaching of reading. A friend posted in on Facebook saying “I won’t know what to think about this until Dan comments on it”. I thought some background for people like my friend might be useful.

How is the teaching of reading still controversial? Surely they’ve sorted it out by now.

The relationship between a teacher’s actions and a child’s success is murky.

Psychologists love to point out that “complex behaviour is multiply determined”. Reading is complex; therefore many factors contribute to success or failure. Phonics instruction supports children learning to decode, but some kids figure out decoding with less support. The degree to which kids need more or less phonics instruction depends on their oral language skills (vocabulary, the complexity of syntax they can unravel), their knowledge of letters and print, and their ability to hear individual speech sounds, at the least. In addition, a teacher may be fully on board with phonics instruction, but either not be great at it (lack of knowledge or skill due to poor training) OR may be hobbled by the school or district having adopted a mediocre reading program.

And once you get past measuring decoding (i.e., you’re measuring comprehension), things get still murkier because other factors contribute to comprehension.

So with all those factors, how much does all this really matter? If every teacher taught decoding via phonics instruction tomorrow, how much would reading improve?

It’s hard to say precisely, but you can predict the general pattern.

First, as I noted, some kids need less phonics instruction, so they get by with the bits and pieces they are getting now, although they’d learn to decode faster and more easily with more systematic instruction. It’s the kids with weak oral language skills, and those who have a hard time hearing individual speech sounds who will benefit most. There’s absolutely some percentage of kids floating into mid- and upper-primary grades with really poor decoding skills who could be doing better.

Second, ‘decoding’ is not synonymous with ‘reading’. It’s necessary but not sufficient. Once a child is a fairly fluent decoder, her comprehension is heavily influenced by her vocabulary, as well as the breadth and richness of background information in memory.

So it’s not that phonics instruction would make every child a great reader. It’s that without it, some kids won’t learn to read at all.

Isn’t phonics instruction boring for the kids who don’t need it?

There’s limited data on the matter, but a [nationally representative sample](#) from 1995 showed that reading attitudes weren’t affected by decoding instruction.



Daniel Willingham

Although phonics instruction may seem boring it may be that 1) decoding itself is rewarding; 2) phonics is boring, but there are still read-alouds and other stuff that support positive reading attitudes; 3) other types of instruction aren't as interesting as we might have thought.

Perhaps most importantly, in most classrooms, teachers accept that there are some things children must learn or experience that aren't fun, but are too important to skip. You make it as fun as you can, you make a show of enthusiasm, and hope the kids are swept along.

What happened that prompted *The New York Times* to put a story about this on the front page?

The article made it sound like new data from eye-tracking and brain imaging “now show” that phonics is crucial (and that exposure to appealing books isn't enough). I don't think that's true. The behavioural data were plenty convincing 20 years ago, although our understanding of how the mind reads is, of course, always advancing. (Also, brain-imaging and eye tracking data aren't that new.)

This issue – how much phonics instruction is really necessary? – has been visited and revisited since the 1920s. It quieted down in the early naughts with what was supposed to be a compromise position called ‘balanced literacy’. This position said “look, both sides are right. You need phonics, and you need great children's literature and read-alouds.” This position is correct, of course, but people have been worried that phonics is getting short shrift, that teachers (and those who teach them) who don't think phonics matters much just kept doing what they'd been doing, but now called it balanced literacy.

I've never met a US reading teacher who said, “Kids don't need any phonics instruction.” The concern is that teachers are underestimating the quality of phonics instruction required, as well as how much of it kids need. Exactly because reading is multiply determined, it's easy to think of reasons the child might not seem to get it very quickly ... and to think that maybe he'll get it in a few months.

Meanwhile, the instructional supports

teachers get often encourage this sort of thinking. [A recent review](#) of one of the most-used reading programs in early grades concluded that support for phonics instruction was weak. In 2015 I noted in one of [my books](#) that the K-2 literacy guide for New York City Schools listed 16 activities, only one of which was phonics instruction. Yet I don't think I was concerned enough.

The impetus behind the new controversy has been the work of [Emily Hanford](#), a reporter who has done a thorough job of describing what's known about how children learn to read, and she called schools of education to task for not teaching future teachers the best way to teach kids to read. Who knows, maybe the time was just right, but certainly the depth of her reporting made the moment possible.

So schools of education are to blame?

There are thousands of teacher preparation programs in the US so it's hard to generalise.¹ But the weekly education newspaper, *Education Week*, did a survey of professors regarding how they prepare future teachers to teach reading, and yeah, the results indicated that a lot of teachers are not getting very good instruction in teaching reading.

The most common misalignment I hear is this: when people think about reading, they think about it the way an already-skilled reader does it. For example, they say that readers use meaning-based cues to help figure out a word. That's true, and there are two ways it happens. One is an unconscious process that is only in place if you are a fluent decoder who understands the rest of the text to that point; this process only nudges you towards the right interpretation, it doesn't magically make you read it. The second is a conscious process, puzzling out what an unfamiliar word means, and ample data show readers are willing to do a little of that work, but not much. It's frustrating and effortful. So the idea that we should teach beginning readers to use meaning-based cues has a certain logic to it – it's what really good readers do – but it's not a good strategy for beginners.

So what happens next?

Ideally, current and future teachers will get better instruction in how people read (I actually wrote [The Reading Mind](#) as auxiliary textbook for schools of education with this purpose in mind) and then too in how to teach reading. There's much more to reading than phonics instruction and we actually know much less about how to teach those elements – fluency, for example, or how to raise reading motivation. Decoding is the most thoroughly researched aspect of reading, and it's the one we know the most about teaching. We really ought to take advantage of that work.

Editor's note: For Australian readers, a report was published in 2019 about initial teacher education (ITE), in which the authors concluded: “Studies, testimonies from pre-service and graduate teachers, and surveys of teacher and principal perceptions ... have together contributed to persistent and serious concerns about the quality of preparation to teach reading in [ITE] courses”. [See the full report here.](#)

This is an edited version of an article that first appeared on [the author's website](#) (February 2020).

Daniel Willingham earned his B.A. from Duke University in 1983 and his Ph.D. in Cognitive Psychology from Harvard University in 1990. He is currently Professor of Psychology at the University of Virginia, where he has taught since 1992. Until about 2000, his research focused solely on the brain basis of learning and memory.

Today, all of his research concerns the application of cognitive psychology to K-16 education. He writes the ‘Ask the Cognitive Scientist’ column for American Educator magazine, and is the author of Why Don't Students Like School?, When Can You Trust the Experts?, Raising Kids Who Read, and The Reading Mind.

His writing on education has appeared in seventeen languages. In 2017 he was appointed by President Obama to serve as a Member of the National Board for Education Sciences.