

A RESPONSE TO THE REPORT FROM FAMILIES IN SCHOOLS

Families in Schools

FIS Claim, p. 8

“Unfortunately, in many classrooms, students are still receiving reading instruction that is not based on evidence about what works as a result of shifts in leadership and misguided opinions about the best approaches to reading instruction.

For example, the “whole language” approach is based on the idea that students learn to read naturally through exposure to literacy-rich environments, the use of context clues, and word memorization. “Balanced literacy” is a variation thereof that embraces elements of multiple approaches, including small doses of phonics instruction while retaining ineffective elements from the whole language approach. Balanced literacy curricula such as Lucy Calkins’ Units of Study have remained popular despite facing increasing pressure to align their programs with evidence-based principles.”

Researchers’ Response

The assumption here is that there are only three approaches to reading instruction. This is false, perhaps stemming from a misunderstanding of the meaning of the term “instructional approach” in usage among education researchers and more commonly among teachers. In language and literacy research, terms have precise meanings and cannot be used interchangeably as if they are synonymous with each other. For example, a theory is not the same as a model (theoretical model), a method is not the same as an approach. Approaches to instruction are an amalgamation of theoretical models and perspectives on how learners learn. **There is no research methodology that can generate empirical data to verify the “effectiveness” of an approach to instruction. This is because “effectiveness” of instruction is specific to an educational context with a specific demographic of students, depending on a complex array of implementation and teacher effectiveness variables.** Consequently, claims of “ineffective” approaches or more effective approaches from the advocates of the Science of Reading lack credibility among academic researchers and literacy scholars.

FIS Claim, p. 10

*“As California education advocates have increasingly come together to identify common ground about what constitutes **a strong reading instructional approach for all students**, a fundamental point of agreement is that foundational skills such as phonics are important to effective literacy instruction and should be taught explicitly and systematically – tailored, of course, to students’ needs – to allow students to access text”*

In reality, there is no such thing as a Science of Reading approach to literacy instruction. If, as the SoR advocates claim, the Science of Reading includes the entire corpus of research on language and literacy learning based on experimental design, then they must acknowledge the criteria among researchers of the factor of population validity that cautions against assuming that

research findings are generalizable to every subgroup and demographic of students. This is why the SoR advocates frontal attack on research from linguistics, psycholinguistic and sociolinguistics is very problematic for researchers with expertise in language and literacy education of multilingual learners.

FIS Claim Graphic p. 13

Researchers' Response

A literacy curriculum does not prescribe an approach to instruction in reading and writing.

FSI Claim Graphic p. 14

Researchers' Response: If 96% of parents want evidence-based approaches to instruction, they can rest assured that the ELA/ELD framework and Common Core Standards that the California Department of Education has implemented are "evidence-based" although they do not prescribe teaching methods and approaches.

FIS Claim, p. 17

"However, many teachers believe there is no one right way to teach reading – a concerning sentiment given the decades of research showing that science of reading principles outline the most effective approach to reading instruction."

"Ensuring teachers can provide evidence-based reading instruction will require a stronger understanding of the science of reading and participation in sustained training opportunities to gain the necessary instructional skills."

Researchers' Response

Teachers are correct. There is no one right way to teach reading. The methods, approaches, and strategies that teachers use in their classrooms must be based on students' learning needs and characteristics. There is no one-size-fits-all way of teaching reading and writing and "scientific" research in how students learn has demonstrated the many variables involved in assessing students' learning at different stages of development. The variability in language and literacy learning for students who speak a language other than English in the home is even greater than among monolingual native English-speaking students. This variability in learning characteristics of students demands that teachers be fully informed about the impact of the factors that impact learning for multilingual learners and learners with disabilities in order to make sound, evidence-based decisions about instruction. **The body of research referred to as the Science of Reading alone does not provide a comprehensive pedagogical knowledge base for teachers to be fully equipped for literacy instruction decision-making.** The California state legislature does not have the expertise to prescribe instructional approaches and strategies for teachers.

FIS Claim, p. 22

Teacher preparation programs are required to implement new, evidence-based literacy standards, thanks to SB 488 (2021).

Researchers' (Teacher Education Faculty) Response

This statement appears to assume that prior to the “new” standards for teacher preparation, teacher credentials programs were not implementing “evidence-based literacy standards” in teacher credential programs. This assumption is incorrect. The Reading Instruction Competency Assessment (RICA) has been a requirement for Multiple Subjects Credential candidates to qualify for earning their credential since 2009. The RICA Content Standards were issued in 2007. According to the California Commission on Teacher Credentialing (CCTC), “The RICA Content Specifications were developed by the CTC's RICA Design Team, consisting of California teachers, administrators, reading specialists, and teacher educators with experience and expertise in the areas of reading and reading instruction.” The university literacy faculty from the University of California and California State University systems who were involved in the development of the RICA Content Standards are experts in Science of Reading research. University literacy methods courses and courses on instruction for English learners are aligned with the RICA Content Standards. Consequently, California families can rest assured that every teacher who holds a Multiple Subjects credential issued by the CCTC since 2009 has demonstrated through passage of a rigorous written examination of the pedagogical knowledge base and foundational principles of effective literacy instruction, including, but not limited to, the Science of Reading research.

FIS Claim, p. 23

The English Language Arts/English Language Development (ELA/ELD) framework was adopted in 2014 to help guide curriculum and instruction. While the framework contains useful elements and makes it clear that explicit teaching of foundational skills is critical, it is over 1,000 pages long, making it inaccessible and impractical to many educators who are a primary audience for this document.

Researchers' Response

Teachers generally do not use the state curriculum framework(s) to guide them in instructional planning. They usually work directly from the curriculum standards. In California, these are the Common Core Standards, which are further articulated for instructional purposes by the San Diego County Office of Education's publication of *the Common Core Standards Linguistic Augmentation* (2012), commonly referred to as the *Common Core en Español*. These parallel grade-by-grade standards enable dual language teachers and English medium teachers of English learners to plan explicit instruction focused on supporting transfer of learning and cross-linguistic transfer that enhances language and literacy achievement for multilingual learners. The Common Core standards address foundational skills and support explicit teaching that is horizontally and vertically aligned with multidisciplinary research on effective teaching in English language arts and Spanish language arts. The *Common Core en Español* standards are

recognized nationally and internationally as a model curriculum for guiding instruction for Spanish/English multilingual learners.

In addition, publishers of language arts programs and materials are required to articulate in detail how the Common Core Standards are addressed in every unit and lesson of the program. In the textbook adoption process, the Committee verifies this articulation. Publishers are required to submit a “white paper” that documents the research base for the components of their program. Given that the state curriculum standards are research-based, this process ensures that commercial instructional materials and programs are research-based.

FIS Claim, p. 28

Require teachers, coaches, and administrators to complete sustained SOR training, either within their local school district or through a state-approved list of providers, ensuring the content clearly reflects the needs of multilingual learners.

Researchers’ Response

Professional development for teachers is most effective when it is specifically targeted to address teachers’ self-identified needs for increased pedagogical knowledge and instructional strategies according to their own school context, grade level and student population in their classrooms. Teachers must be involved in planning their professional development in order for it to have an impact on their instruction. Teachers most frequently request professional development to support their implementation of the specific language arts programs adopted by their schools. Professional development cannot be used to indoctrinate teachers into a particular model or approach to instruction mandated by the state. Teachers are professionals. They are the ones who should decide on what the needs of their students are, including and especially for multilingual learners. The imposition of professional development requirements that teachers perceive as indoctrination. Mandated “training” that teachers perceive as irrelevant to their contexts and practices will result in resistance and will be a waste of taxpayers’ dollars, without having any positive impact on instruction.

An example of the contradictions that AB 2222 poses for designing and implementing relevant and effective professional development for teachers stems from the language of the bill itself. See Section 10 60011p. 19-20 “(5) *Does not rely on any model for teaching word reading based on meaning, structure and syntax, and visual cues, including a three-cuing approach, with the exception of instruction to pupils who are identified as deaf or hearing impaired, as defined in paragraphs (3) and (5), respectively, of subdivision (c) of Section 17 300.8 of Title 34 of the Code of Federal Regulations.*

This language of the bill in effect bans the use of language subsystems, including syntax, which is grammar. The professional development course called LETRS is based on Dr. Louisa Cook Moats’ book *Speech to print: Language Essentials for Teachers* (2001). In her introductory chapter one, titled “Why study language?” Dr. Moats says this on p. 1-2: “Seldom has language study been required for teachers... Literacy is an achievement that rests on all levels of linguistic processing, from the elemental sounds to the most overarching structures of text. ... To help the teacher deliver successful instruction, this book of necessity contains a great deal of information about the lower levels of language (units smaller than the word, such as sounds, syllables, letters,

and some morphemes) from which the higher levels (units larger than the word, such as phrases, sentences, and paragraphs) are constructed. Language itself is the substance of instruction. **Students without awareness of language systems will be less able to sound out a new word when they encounter it**, less able to spell, less able to interpret punctuation and sentence meaning, and less able to learn new vocabulary words from context.”

On p. 21, Dr. Moats “metalinguistic skill, or awareness of language structure itself.” In a column titled “Level of language” in Table 1.1, Dr. Moats lists the subsystems of language: phonology, orthography, morphology, **syntax**, semantics, pragmatics, and discourse structure. Based on these statements in her book, it is difficult to imagine that Dr. Moats would be opposed to teachers providing direct, explicit, individualized feedback to emergent readers on all these levels of language during students’ oral reading. This is why we educators and parents need to be concerned about teachers’ confusion and possible misunderstandings about effective instruction stemming from the bans on “cueing” proposed by Science of Reading advocates. There are provisions of AB 2222 that are internally inconsistent and in fact, contrary to the Science of Reading that the bill seeks to mandate.

Families who have children who struggle with dyslexia need to also be aware that the definition of the Science of Reading in AB 2222 is in conflict with the recommendations for instruction of students with dyslexia in the *California Dyslexia Guidelines* (California Department of Education, 2017). This resource document defines syntax as one of several language-based systems where explicit, direct instruction for students with dyslexia is beneficial. However, AB 2222 appears to ban instruction in syntax.

Language-Based Systems

Language *form* relates to the structure of language. “*Phonology* is the sound system of a language and the rules that govern the sound combinations. *Morphology* is the system that governs the structure of words and the construction of word forms. *Syntax* is the system governing the order and combination of words to form sentences, and the relationships among the elements within a sentence” (American Speech-Language-Hearing Association 1993).

Language *content* pertains to the meaning of language. “*Semantics* is the system that governs the meanings of words and sentences” (American Speech-Language-Hearing Association 1993). Language *use* refers to the function of language. “*Pragmatics* is the system that combines the above language components in functional and socially appropriate communication” (American Speech-Language-Hearing Association 1993). Pragmatics also includes the purposes for using language (i.e., conversational, narrative, expository, and persuasive discourse).

Dyslexia as One Type of a Language-Learning Disability

The American Speech-Language-Hearing Association has defined a language disorder as an impairment in the “comprehension and/or use of a spoken, written and/or other symbol systems.” The disorder may involve (1) the form of language (phonology, morphology, and syntax); (2) the content of language (semantics); and/or (3) the function of language in communication (pragmatics), in any combination (American Speech-Language-Hearing

Association 1993). Students who are identified as having both a language disorder and a specific learning disability may also be referred to as students with a language-learning disability.

In addition, the language of AB 2222 states that the Science of Reading does not rely on models of word recognition that rely on “meaning.” The technical term in linguistics for meaning is semantics. Meaning-making is a key theme of the California ELA/ELD Framework documents for grade levels PreK-Grade 8. In fact, the grade-level Framework documents use the term “meaning” 419 times. Yet, AB 2222 requires that teachers’ instruction based on the Science of Reading “*does not rely on any model of teaching words based on meaning.*” *The English Language Development Framework* emphasizes that ELs “should learn how English works to make meaning ...” (p, 33). How can ELs learn how English works without learning about the “meaning, structure and syntax” of the English language through the “visual cues” of language represented symbolically through print? How can teachers be expected to resolve these conflicting policies and recommendations when planning and implementing classroom instruction?

Conclusion

Families in Schools express genuine concerns about achievement gaps in literacy between identified subgroups of students that must be addressed in our public schools. However, this document does not provide a rationale for California’s legislators to pass a law that contradicts the research knowledge base about how students learn literacy that educators must have in order to implement effective classroom instruction. Furthermore, the language of the AB 2222 legislation creates policies and requirements that are in conflict with existing Department of Education curriculum. The authors of this analysis advise Families in Schools to oppose AB 2222.