

How I Am Navigating the Science of Reading

A colleague has been sharing articles and videos with me via email. “Check this post out. Very helpful for understanding the science behind foundational reading skills.” I will respond back in the affirmative (“Will do - thank you!”). Eventually I will read or watch whatever was shared that supports the science of reading. I’ve also been sharing a few articles and research studies in response.

If the article or video presents something inaccurate or lacks evidence to support its position, I will either leave a comment on the actual post and/or respond to this educator. “I appreciate what you shared,” I noted in an email reply one time, “but I think the author conflated phonics instruction with foundational reading skills.” He responded back, “That might be right. Maybe it is because phonics instruction has not been given enough attention up until this point.”

My goal here is not to win or be “right”. Nor am I conceding that something shared online is a valid source of information without some scrutiny. What I am seeking is *to understand*. I have found the following three practices helpful in navigating the conversation around the science of reading.

1. Build an understanding of the topic.

As the science of reading became more prominent, I realized I did not have enough knowledge about it to even comment with any authority. My teaching experience never went below 3rd grade. So I have taken advantage of my memberships to respected literacy organizations.

For example, the International Literacy Association has dedicated two issues of *Reading Resource Quarterly* (RRQ) to this topic. I don’t read all the articles. I will select two or three based on my familiarity of the author(s) or after I preview the text. The following RRQ articles have been helpful for me in building my own knowledge base.¹

- “[How the Science of Reading Informs 21st-Century Education](#)” by Yaacov Petscher and several co-authors
- “[Disrupting Racism and Whiteness in Researching a Science of Reading](#)” by H. Richard Milner IV
- “[A Confluence of Complexity: Intersections Among Reading Theory, Neuroscience, and Observations of Young Readers](#)” by Catherine Compton-Lilly, Ayen Mitra, Mary Guay, and Lucy K. Spence

When I share these resources, I am conveying an interest in the topic. And in a subtle way, I am also contradicting any misinformed posts shared with me.

2. Be intentionally curious.

My initial educational studies did not include a lot of background in literacy instruction. And this was 25 years ago! Instead of accepting this situation as static, I have sought to ask questions instead of feeling like I had to have all the answers. These inquiries are not simply “tell me more about this”. They are informed by and grounded in the previous information I have read.

For example, when I visited a classroom that was engaged in an explicit phonics lesson, I asked students how what they are learning is helping them become a better reader. Thankfully, kids have largely been able to verbalize the connection between these lessons and the books they have selected to read independently. I could not ask this question without having learned that students need to see foundational reading skills as a part of a larger purpose (becoming a lifelong reader) and integrated.

I am also curious about what I am reading. What is the selection process that RRQ uses when deciding which studies and articles to publish? What voices am I not seeing in this journal that should be present? New perspectives are being published elsewhere. For example, Peter Johnston and Donna Scanlon made strong points in [this article](#) about what we still don't know regarding dyslexia and the related research. The science is anything but settled!

3. Come back to our shared literacy beliefs.

The blog posts and online group discussions can be overwhelming. For example, in [this post](#), Greg Ashman and Peter Bowers go on and on about whether explicit phonics instruction or systematic word study is more effective for emerging readers.

As my eyes glazed over while reading the discussion thread, I paused and asked, “Are we overcomplicating reading instruction?” This question reminded me to go back to our shared literacy beliefs my school had owned together from previous professional learning sessions.[2](#)

Our Beliefs About the Reading—Writing Connection

- 1 You can teach phonics and skills with a child's written story and assess their phonemic awareness by examining his/her journal writing.
- 2 Shared writing that evolves from common experiences are often the easiest texts to read and is an excellent way to connect to reading.
- 3 Young children do not need to know all their letters and sounds before they can write stories and read back their writing.
- 4 Explaining vocabulary through interactive read-aloud can lead to students applying that vocabulary in their reading and writing.
- 5 Reading excellent literature and/or hearing quality literature read aloud positively influences students' writing quality.
- 6 For struggling readers, reading their own writing is often their first successful reading experience.

The answer: quite possibly! I especially appreciated the first belief we share:

"You can teach phonics and skills with a child's written story and assess their phonemic awareness by examining his/her journal writing."

With these beliefs informed by educators more knowledgeable than me on this topic, I can now interact with colleagues with confidence.

This outcome was the result of a process that I have described here:

1. **Build an understanding of the topic.** Read deeply and widely on the subject. I don't have to know everything, but enough to feel I am adequately informed.
2. **Be intentionally curious.** The previous studies help me craft questions that can support an effective implementation of these ideas in the classroom.
3. **Come back to our shared literacy beliefs.** What do we know and believe to be true? If a practice is not supported by a belief, I have encouraged teacher leaders to craft a belief that would support it and was agreed upon by all faculty members.

1 You can explore more about the science of reading and my responses below.

[Wondering: Where does engagement stand within the science of reading?](#)

[Three Questions and Responses About Foundational Reading Skills, Phonics, and the Science of Reading](#)

2 For more information about shared literacy beliefs, see Regie Routman's professional development series [here](#). She also wrote about this process in her book [Read, Write, Lead: Breakthrough Strategies for Schoolwide Literacy Success](#) (ASCD, 2014).