

Research Synthesis on Effective Literacy Instruction
Marcella Bullmaster-Day
Touro College Lander Center for Educational Research

Modern societies reward individuals not for what they know, but for what they can do with what they know. (OECD, 2013, p. 2)

Literacy in Today's World

Literacy is a student's lifeline to opportunity, and fundamental to literacy is reading skill. Developing proficient, fluent readers requires proven instructional strategies for assessing students' current performance, honing their decoding skills to the point of automaticity, and teaching them to acquire and apply meaning from text – all within a language-rich environment that promotes higher-order thinking.

Never before in human history has literacy – the ability to read, think, write, and speak in the various linguistic registers of the academic disciplines – been such a basic necessity on such a massive scale. Swift and sweeping worldwide change has stimulated new patterns of consumption; radically altered infrastructures that move information, people, and goods; and generated greater rewards for non-routine work now that many formerly lucrative occupations have been automated or outsourced.

Literacy in a Global Economy: Productive citizens today need to frame and solve novel problems through well-honed abilities to communicate, collaborate, design, and invent.ⁱ Therefore, preparing our students to thrive requires helping them attain high-level skill in accessing and analyzing information, along with the critical qualities of leadership, initiative, entrepreneurialism, curiosity, and imagination.ⁱⁱ

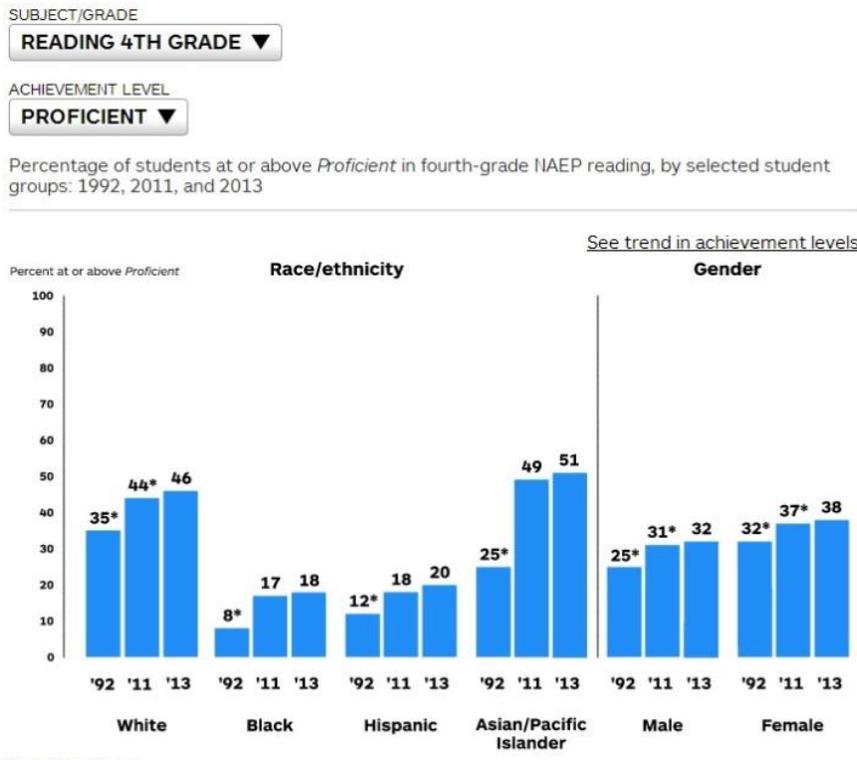
Literacy in U.S. Schools: In response to these rigorous 21st-century demands, most U.S. states have adopted the Common Core State Standards, which “ask students to demonstrate deep conceptual understanding through the application of content knowledge and skills to new situations...[including] reasoning, justification, synthesis, analysis, and problem solving” (Common Core State Standards Initiative, nd, p.2).ⁱⁱⁱ Accordingly, K – 12 students will be expected to read more difficult texts, do more with texts of different types, and handle larger amounts of reading.^{iv}

Yet, while reading scores have trended slightly upward since 1992, the level of literacy skill demanded by participation in society and the labor market today has risen sharply and the *opportunity gap* continues to widen between those with adequate levels of

literacy and those without.^v Reading scores of U.S. fourth and eighth graders on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) continue to reveal that a majority of students lack solid reading skills.

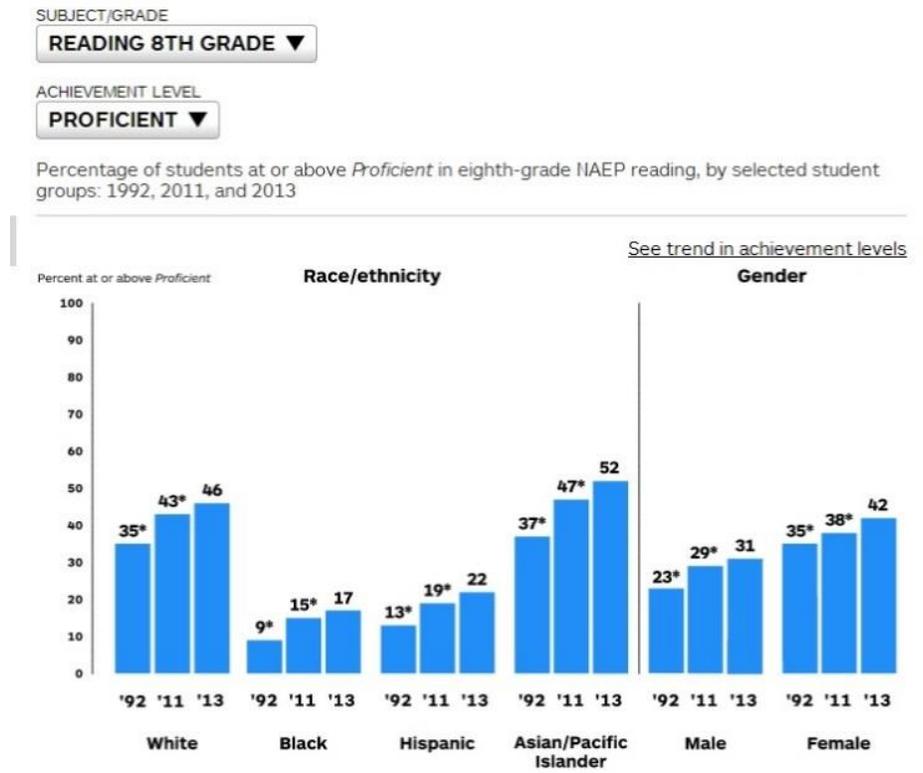
In 2013, nearly two-thirds of fourth and eighth graders (65% and 64% respectively) did not attain the *Proficient* level, which means that these fourth graders were unable to consistently draw conclusions or make evaluations, and these eighth graders could not summarize main ideas and themes; make and support inferences; connect parts of a text; analyze text features; and substantiate judgments. Further, 32% of fourth graders and 22% of eighth graders performed below even the *Basic* level, which means that these fourth graders could not locate relevant information; make simple inferences; identify details to support a given conclusion; or interpret word meanings. The eighth graders at this level were unable to locate information; identify statements of main idea, theme, or author’s purpose; make simple inferences; interpret word meanings; or state and support judgments.^{vi} And when disaggregated by demographic groups, the data for 4th- and 8th-grade reading scores demonstrate that pernicious achievement gaps persist (see Tables 1 and 2 below).

Table 1: 4th-grade Reading



Source: http://nationsreportcard.gov/reading_math_2013/#/student-groups

Table 2: 8th-grade Reading



Source: http://nationsreportcard.gov/reading_math_2013/#/student-groups

Further, low reading scores correlate with high dropout rates. In 2010, while researchers estimated the overall U.S. high school graduation rate to be 79.6%, 20% of White students, 38% of African American students, and 32% of Latino students failed to graduate from high school on time.^{vii} These are proportions that, while they have improved over the past decade, are unacceptably high in an economy that requires more reading of the workforce and has fewer low-skill jobs available.^{viii}

Developing Proficient Readers: What the Research Says

Most young children develop oral language naturally and quickly, even without much direct instruction. Yet many students do not learn to read efficiently by third grade. This is because, while speech develops naturally, reading and writing must be explicitly taught and learned through conscious, applied effort.^{ix} Effective reading instruction trains the brain to build connections between phonological and oral language systems so that students are able to read and write at the level at which they already speak and listen.^x Reading ability rests on the integration of a complex set of skills, including abilities to

- hear, replicate, and manipulate *phonemes* – the separate sounds in words,
- associate sounds with letters (*phonics*),
- automatically and fluently read words,
- build vocabulary, and
- understand what they read (reading comprehension).^{xi}

Phonemic Awareness: In the English language, 44 separate sounds, called *phonemes*, can be combined and ordered in infinite ways to produce syllables, words, phrases, sentences, and syntax to ultimately convey ideas and meaning.^{xii} Learning to speak does not require conscious awareness of the individual sound segments in words, but learning to read relies on *phonemic awareness* – the ability to notice, reproduce, and manipulate these individual sounds so that they can then be represented by letters.

In spoken interactions our focus is on whole words and meanings, so we combine phonemes fast enough for working memory to process whole words and word sequences. We don't consciously notice the individual overlapping and co-articulated sounds that combine to produce words. We say "pet the gray cat," chunking the sounds together into successions of words, rather than recognizing strings of separate sounds: /P/-/e/-/t/-/th/-/e/-/g/-/r/-/ay/-/c/-/a/-/t/. On the other hand, when we read, we see a sequence of letters and spaces that our brains translate into sounds, syllables, and words, linking encoded language with oral language. The words we read are "heard" in our minds and connected to the meanings we have stored in memory.

Fluent reading skill rests on phonemic awareness developed to the point of automaticity. Children who do not master phonemic awareness by first grade are at risk of having difficulty learning to read, and older students and adults who are poor readers typically continue to demonstrate limited phonemic awareness. Poor reading performance most often results from difficulty with *phonological* coding – the ability to link individual phonemes with their alphabetic spellings – not from visual deficits or problems with meaning or language structures. Some children are able to hear, identify, reproduce, and manipulate phonemes early and with relatively minimal training, while many others require additional intensive and explicit instruction in learning to recognize, manipulate, and then spell sounds.^{xiii}

Phonological difficulties are rooted in neurology, not in intelligence. Biological factors such as childhood ear infections interact with experiences so that the ease with which a child develops phonemic awareness depends upon a combination of genetic and environmental factors. For example, vocabulary size plays a role in phonemic awareness. The larger a child's vocabulary in the early school years, the more likely the

child is to have developed more refined within-word discrimination ability – the ability to hear the different sounds in words and to compare words to each other based on sounds within the words.^{xiv}

While early intervention for reading difficulties in grades K-2 is optimal, abundant research shows that concentrated, systematic intervention designed to foster phonemic awareness in older struggling readers is effective at any age and can significantly reduce the occurrence of reading disability diagnoses and help the majority of struggling readers close the oral language-written language gap and be ready to maintain grade-level performance, thereby lessening the number of assignments of students to special education.^{xv}

Phonics: Phonics is the system in the English language by which 26 letters (graphemes), alone and in combinations, represent 44 basic phonemes, combining in infinite ways to encode words and meanings. Letters spell sounds, and learning this coding system is not a simple process because there is not a regular one-to-one correspondence between letters and phonemes. Explicit instruction in phonics helps students understand that print represents the sounds of the language and establishes the phonological processing system that connects written words to their pronunciations so that the written words are “heard” in the mind.^{xvi}

Fluency: When students develop phonemic awareness and phonics together (*phonology*) to the point of automaticity, they achieve fluency – the ability to read connected text with the accuracy, speed, and *prosody* (appropriate rhythm, intonation, and phrasing). Words that have been encountered and decoded successfully a number of times become “chunked” and recognizable by sight as whole words, their spellings and meanings fully bonded to their pronunciations in the reader’s memory bank (*lexicon*). Sight-word learning is an alphabetic, phonological process based upon repeated experiences with decoding a word rather than a matter of memorizing shapes or visual features of words. Learning sight words depends upon sensitivity to orthography (common spellings of phonemes) and to the *morphology* of English (the system of prefixes and suffixes that change the meanings of root words according to common patterns).^{xvii}

In addition to chunking letters together into sight words, efficient, automatic readers chunk words together into phrases to increase reading speed. Instructional practices that include quality feedback and guidance through oral readings of text help students achieve fluency.^{xviii} Students who haven’t achieved fluency may develop idiosyncratic compensatory strategies such as slowing reading rate, pausing, looking back, reading aloud, re-reading, sounding out, rhyming, analogizing to known sight words,

contextual guessing, and jumping over words.^{xix} For most inefficient readers, these strategies divert attention and effort to the word recognition process and away from building vocabulary and comprehension.

In the upper elementary grades, vocabulary, language, and concepts become increasingly complex and texts become less predictable. Non-fluent readers fall, and often remain, behind. Rather than reading more as they progress through the grades, these students often read less, which further hinders their opportunity to become more efficient.^{xx}

Fluency is necessary but not sufficient for reading comprehension because decoding printed words at the word level and making meaning of them at the language level require different neurological processes. It is possible for some inefficient readers to derive meaning from text through laborious compensatory processes, and for some fluent readers to read connected text smoothly without attending to the meaning or being able to recall afterwards what the text was about – a process known as “word calling.”^{xxi}

Vocabulary: Vocabulary links the word-level processes of phonics and fluency and the meaning-making process of comprehension. Language shapes thinking, so the complexity and range of receptive and expressive vocabulary students have acquired affects the degree to which their critical thinking can evolve.^{xxii} Factors like socioeconomic status and prior experience affect the size of students’ vocabulary lexicons. By fourth grade, the expectation is that students have learned to read and now must “read to learn,” encountering increasingly complex texts and thousands of new words each year, including many academic and literary terms that are outside their ordinary everyday oral language interactions.^{xxiii}

Students and adults learn most of their new words incidentally through multiple exposures to increasingly complex texts and oral language environments. Efficient readers gain and use new words more quickly because when they encounter a new word, they recognize it phonetically and link it to the language lexicons already stored in memory. While only about 400 new vocabulary words are explicitly taught in school throughout an academic year, students who have learned to read efficiently by third grade will annually add 2,000 to 3,500 distinct new words to their vocabularies.^{xxiv}

Comprehension: Fluency, vocabulary, and content-domain background knowledge together form the foundation of reading comprehension – the ability to understand, analyze, evaluate, compare, make inferences and predictions, and draw conclusions

from texts.^{xxv} When students read fluently and have command of the necessary vocabulary, their attention (working memory) is freed to focus on making meaning and retaining information rather than on the process of lifting words from the page.^{xxvi}

Specific comprehension strategies include scanning to preview text; summarizing; detecting sequence; determining main idea; predicting; drawing conclusions; inferring; visualizing; creating concept maps; thinking aloud; re-reading confusing parts; questioning during reading; monitoring accuracy; using prior knowledge; applying personal experience; visualizing; using basic story structure; and using quotes, notes, and comments.^{xxvii} When students have frequent, regular opportunities to write about what they read, the teacher can gain insight into their comprehension levels.^{xxviii}

Designing Effective Instruction: What the Research Says

Effective instructional design begins with “the end in mind” through clearly articulated learning outcomes and identification of what will count as evidence that those outcomes have been achieved.^{xxix} Based on this desired evidence, appropriate learning activities must be planned and sequenced, with explicit checks for understanding built in all along the way. Successful instruction progresses from *priming* to *processing* to *retaining for transfer*.

Priming: Priming involves activating students’ existing skills and understandings so that these are ready to be modified and expanded.^{xxx} Effective priming strategies include pretesting, brainstorming, advance organizers, anticipation guides, text previews, problem scenarios, eliciting student stories and experiences, as well as pre-reading work on new vocabulary.^{xxxi}

Processing: Students process new material by engaging in various forms of practice, repetition, and problem solving. The teacher gradually releases responsibility for mastery and performance through a cycle of direct instruction, modeling (“I do”), guided practice with immediate feedback (“we do,” “two do”), independent practice (“you do”) with assessment.^{xxxii} *Academic learning time* (ALT) is critical to processing. ALT encompasses four variables: the time allocated to instruction and practice; the time actually used for instruction; engaged time; and student academic success and productivity.^{xxxiii}

Processing strategies include note taking, summarizing, seeking similarities and differences, working with nonlinguistic representations, questioning, reflecting, and working in cooperative groups. Regular monitoring of student understanding, by both

teacher and students, is particularly critical and must include timely, focused, substantive feedback so that students and teachers can continue to readjust their learning strategies.^{xxxiv}

Transfer: The goal of priming and processing is retention for transfer – the ability to select and apply the right skills or information at the right time to novel situations. Retention for transfer is strengthened by frequent self-testing; spacing study and practice over time and locations; and mixing or “interleaving” different types of problems or tasks. Novelty, repetition, challenge, emotional arousal, visual stimuli, and physical activity also enhance retention for transfer.^{xxxv}

Promoting Thinking Skills: What the Research Says

The Common Core Anchor Standards for Reading call for students to make logical inferences, determine central ideas or themes, summarize key supporting details and ideas, analyze word choice and text structure, evaluate arguments, and compare themes across texts.^{xxxvi} To meet these standards, students must develop high-level self-regulation and critical thinking skills.^{xxxvii}

Self-Regulation: The more ownership students take of their own learning, the more *self-regulated* they become and the greater the extent of their understanding and mastery of desired outcomes. Self-regulation is the cyclical metacognitive process of analyzing learning tasks, setting goals, strategically planning and monitoring progress toward the goals, and knowing when and how to ask for help along the way.^{xxxviii}

Self-regulated learners are intrinsically motivated, possess a sense of self-efficacy, and believe that errors afford learning opportunities. They are aware of their own strengths and limitations and attribute outcomes to factors over which they have control, such as effort. These students assemble a repertoire of problem-solving strategies and apply them appropriately to challenging new tasks. They restructure physical and social contexts to align with learning goals, habitually evaluating their progress in order to further adapt their methods. In addition to being more successful academically, self-regulated learners are more likely to view their futures optimistically.^{xxxix}

Self-regulating processes, however, do not “come naturally” to most students. They must be intentionally, explicitly taught through a skillful combination of teacher-directed and student-directed activities, including direct instruction, clear explanations, modeling, well defined learning goals, shared understandings of evaluation criteria, and ample opportunities for student choice with continued guidance and feedback.^{xl} Instruction that

promotes self-regulated learning engages students in meaningful, complex tasks that extend over long periods of time and allow students to choose among processes and products, evaluate their work, and collaborate with peers as the instructor purposefully helps them monitor their learning progress.^{xi}

Critical Thinking: Students who master metacognitive self-regulation strategies are more likely to employ higher level reasoning (comparing, classifying, sequencing, predicting), judgment, decision making, and problem solving. While these thinking processes are common at a superficial level in everyday life, they become *critical* thinking when applied to new, complex situations within specific content-area contexts.^{xlii} Critical thinking is enhanced through repeated, systematic instruction, practice, and feedback.^{xliii}

One proven strategy that allows students to experiment with critical thinking is structured group work. When students work in effectively structured pairs or groups they exert more effort to achieve, use higher-level reasoning strategies more frequently, retain information more accurately, receive peer validation, and build confidence. When they must work to explain and argue ideas rather than passively receive transmitted information, students' understanding of concepts and ideas increases and their interpersonal communication skills improve.^{xliv} Since students differ in their learning pace and readiness, teachers must plan for grouping students in ways that will best accommodate individual student capabilities and learning needs.^{xlv}

Creating a Culture for Literacy Learning: What the Research Says

Literacy growth is best supported in a school environment in which adults and students engage ardently and collaboratively in reading, writing, and high-level discourse. A culture for literacy learning makes time, space, and materials available in a way that prioritizes meaningful interaction with text and transforms traditionally individual literacy experiences into a social enterprise of apprenticeship and shared practices.^{xlvi} Positive, skilled improvement of teaching through leadership and coaching are vital to creating a culture for literacy learning, and to implementing new instructional programs.^{xlvii}

Teaching: Teachers' beliefs, expectations, and personal characteristics, together with school-context variables, influence instructional practices, classroom climates, and student outcomes.^{xlviii} Teachers with high expectations of their students' learning provide students with more feedback, probe student thinking with higher-order questions, and

manage student behavior in more positive ways than do teachers with lower expectations.^{xlix}

Teacher self-efficacy is a belief in personal agency, the expectation that teaching can influence student learning, and a sense of personal teaching competence. Participation in professional development contexts that allow teachers to learn from each other can enhance self-efficacy.¹ In fact, regular professional collaboration among teachers does more to boost student achievement than individual teachers' experience or ability.^{li}

Self-efficacious teachers are enthusiastic about teaching. They exhibit high levels of planning, organization, and commitment to the profession and believe that their teaching contributes to the social good. They believe that they can and should control what occurs in their classrooms and are committed to investing their personal resources as a sign of caring for their students; they make conscious efforts to avoid burn-out through striking a balance between routine and variety, work and play; and they develop successful coping mechanisms to shut out the negative conditions of teaching.^{lii} These teachers purposefully cultivate a "growth mindset" in their students. Students with a growth mindset are eager for new challenges and enthusiastic, rather than fearful, about learning from mistakes. They understand that success is a result of effort, more than of raw ability alone, while students with a "fixed mindset" worry about the judgments of others, fear failure, and resist risks, thwarting their own learning.^{liii}

Leadership: Building capacity for a school-wide culture for literacy learning is not the work of teachers alone. The effort depends upon the support of the principal, librarian, school reading specialists, coaches, teaching assistants, and parents. Successful school leaders are persistent and attentive to keeping all parts of a complex system moving toward improvement in a coherent, focused way. They build capacity by coordinating curriculum, instruction, assessment, accountability, and professional development efforts toward the goal of student literacy and achievement.^{liv}

A principal sets and monitors expectations for faculty and students and is the mediating influence on what happens in the school community. Practices like creating a positive, productive school climate are social and team-oriented and rely on interpersonal skills, cultural sensitivity, and emotional intelligence, while overseeing curriculum, instruction, and assessment requires more cognitive and task-oriented, practices.^{lv}

Coaching: Building capacity is more effective than designing controls^{lvi}, and quality coaching is a capacity-building vehicle. Research shows that placing greater emphasis on professional learning produces higher student achievement than a narrow focus on

accountability outcomes, because a collaborative peer culture of teachers becomes the source of innovation and energy toward improving student learning. Developing peer cultures that strengthen student achievement and linking those peer cultures to school and district systems is the work of coaches.^{lvii} Coaching in schools takes a variety of forms, including instructional coaching; cognitive coaching; peer coaching; and transformative coaching.^{lviii}

Program implementation: Building a school and district culture to support implementation of new instructional programs in which teachers and leaders work with external program designers relies on collaboration, clear lines of communication, ongoing direct personal contact between school staff and program designers, and continuous professional learning of both teachers and leaders.^{lix} Successful program implementation is *specific* in terms of materials, information, professional development, guidance, instructions, monitoring, evaluation, and feedback.^{lx} Program developers and school staff learn to work together in a dynamic process of mutual adaptation to produce predicted results, making iterative adjustments as needed according to the particular school context. Further, any whole-school change is more effectively implemented when the design is consistent with other school efforts and with state and district policy.^{lxi}

Successful program implementation requires high levels of commitment on the part of teachers; consistent, ongoing training; and conscious commitment to building sustainable leadership through knowledge-sharing communities and planning for smooth transition to their successors. Limits on competing time demands from other projects and positive relationships with adequate emotional support between adults and students are also necessary.^{lxii}

Endnotes:

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