



COLUMN: THE SHIFTING LITERACY LANDSCAPE

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COLUMN INTRODUCTION

Literacy things are changing in the State of Texas. Whether it is HB 3, the Science of Teaching Reading, the new ELA TEKS, or the yet-to-be-designed ELA STAAR test, the pathways beneath our feet are uncharted. But one of the best ways to wayfind is to work together, each person seeing a small piece of the whole landscape, sharing what we know with one another, and making informed, thoughtful decisions based on what we know and learn. Things will keep changing, even as we strive to implement the change ahead of us, but together we will find our way.

THE PATH IN-BETWEEN: SANITY AND SUSTAINABILITY DURING THIS LATEST ROUND OF “THE READING WARS”

Across the decades, the US has invested incredible amounts of time and money in trying to understand how best to teach children to read. Building on the simple view of reading, the National Reading Panel outlined the pillars of reading instruction, which included a powerful minority report pointing out the shortcomings of the Panel. Reading First was the legislative incarnation of the NRP, investing billions of dollars to discover that it is really hard to teach children to read and many still struggle (Gamse et al., 2008). Reading for Understanding (Pearson et al., 2020) is the most recent attempt to pin down exactly what is going on with reading, learning to read, and teaching reading. Yet it, too, acknowledges the complexity and inherent uncertainty of the task.

In the midst of this complexity and change around some elements of the science of reading, though, there is an unchanging idea supported by reading professionals and scholars (ILA 2019; NCTE, 2018), as well as readers of all ages and stripes. That idea is that young people have a right to read.



Pulling from various policy documents, position statements, and other resources, we offer ways that different people in different roles can take up the multiple and complex stories of reading to ensure that students' right to read is honored.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

Classroom teachers live at the intersection of children and reading and are pressured from all sides to teach reading the right way as defined by any particular perspective. Any teacher will tell you that

[p]assively receiving the latest mandates doesn't add to our job satisfaction. Railing against the machine can often threaten our job security. We need a new model for a path in between--one that enables us to work to change the system but continue to succeed in it at the same time. In such a role, educators learn to work in ways that are smart, safe, savvy, and sustainable. (Fleischer, [nd], para. 3).

To find a "path in between" instead, lean into independent reading as required by the TEKS in the self-sustained reading strand by visiting the library often and working to build a classroom library with a wide range of books for children to select. Pick your own book to read so that your students see you reading and hear you talking about a book you love.

Department chairs, specialists, and administrators can support teachers as they lean into independent reading by acknowledging that independent reading is standards-aligned and research-supported. Your path in between may well look a little different from that of classroom teachers. As you convey what need to happen, choose your words carefully so as not to contribute to the

...conflating [of] reading and learning to read with phonics [because that stance] is at odds with both theory and research on what readers actually do in the process of making sense of texts. Equating reading with the mastery of an autonomous set of reading 'skills' will always be insufficient to understanding the reading process. (NCTE, 2019, para. 3).

And, as a very local instructional leader, advocating for teachers and students, we suggest that you make it a priority to, early on, review the budget and allocate money for classroom libraries and new books (ILA, 2019, p. 7). Richard Allington (2011) reminds us again and again that children learn to read, in large part, by reading.

Parents and caregivers who value reading should remember that "when parents speak, they have a better chance of being heard" (Fleischer, 2016). When your child is getting to read a lot in their class, and select texts they find interesting, tell that teacher that you appreciate the reading instruction that is happening. Get your friends to also email in support of that teacher. If you notice very little self-selected reading, ask why and request more. Parent and caregiver voices are powerful in school decision-making. Those interactions allow the teacher to lean on "parent feedback" when engaging with administrators around reading instruction. Go to the principal chats or open office hours and advocate for self-selected reading. Put it on your calendar to go visit school board meetings and speak during the citizens-to-be-heard portion.



Lastly, for those of you reading who teach graduate classes to inservice teachers, remember that “[p]racticing teachers are already aware of the gaps between what research-based literacy practice suggests and what they are often asked to do in schools” (For Teacher-Educators, [nd] para. 5). So, instead of continuing to point out the gap, support them in “articulat[ing] the issues inherent in those gaps and find ways to have their voices influence decision-making surrounding how literacy is taught” (For Teacher-Educators, [nd] para. 5). In practice, a shift like this may mean that a final paper for your course is a position statement, testimony to a school board or a curriculum hearing or a public comment on a new reading policy.

CONCLUSION

All literacy educators in Texas have a stake in supporting children’s right to read. This stake means finding ways to support classroom teachers as they take the actions necessary to support reading. Classroom teachers create classroom libraries with a huge variety of books to hook and hold every student. Classroom teachers make time for independent reading during the school day, even as the pressures to prepare for a test or make it through the phonics curriculum mount. And classroom teachers engage their students in discussions about the reading they are doing. This combination of selection, time, and talk is a powerful way to solidify children’s right to read and, potentially, open up young people to the pleasure and power of reading.

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