FINDING HARMONY IN TIMES OF DISCORD: HELPING LITERACY PROFESSIONALS UNPACK THE CURRENT READING INSTRUCTION MOVEMENT

Bethanie C. Pletcher
Texas A&M University – Corpus Christi

Gina Doepker
University of Texas at Tyler

Patricia Durham
Sam Houston State University

Aimee Morewood
West Virginia University

Roberta Raymond
University of Houston – Clear Lake

Abstract

In the past few years, certain labels for how we frame literacy teaching have become triggers for heated debates in various venues, such as media, social media, journal articles, blogs, and professional organization conference sessions. In this article, we aim to find common ground between proponents of balanced literacy and proponents of a phonics-based/phonics-forward and first approach. We first present and unpack reading instruction vocabulary that has been frequently used in the discourse of educators and media who ascribe to one of the two mentioned approaches. Then, we provide resources and advice to literacy professionals and administrators who work directly with teachers so that they might find balance and harmony amidst the information that is prevalent in both literacy journals and the media.

Keywords*:* science of teaching reading; literacy professionals; balanced literacy definitions

The most recent iteration of the “reading wars” becomes more heated as time goes on. The war metaphor, as discussed in depth by MacPhee et al. (2021), has created sides in the form of winners and losers. The question Tierney and Pearson (2024) and Bommarito (2022) have proposed is, what if we reframe this latest iteration into one of harmony and accord, where we can find commonalities in the approaches suggested in service of providing the best teaching for all readers?

In the past few years, certain labels for how we frame literacy teaching have become triggers for heated debates in various venues, such as media, social media, journal articles, blogs, and professional organization conference sessions. Just the mere mention of a term such as “balanced literacy” can spark arguments as well as mean-spirited words. Much of this is grounded in the ways definitions for literacy concepts are interpreted. Indeed, “nuanced differences in how people understand specific terms can often stoke debates where none are necessary” (Gabriel, 2020, p. 13). Additionally, these debates have spurred changes in many states’ education codes, the likes of which have never been seen, such as in Texas, where a house bill was passed to eliminate the use of the misunderstood and incorrectly defined “three-cueing system” (House Bill [HB] 1605, 88th Texas Legislature, Regular Session, 2023).

Therefore, in this article, we aim to present and unpack several terms commonly seen and heard in early literacy education discourse. This is vocabulary that has been frequently used in the context of debates between educators and media who ascribe to one of two mentioned approaches: balanced literacy and phonics-forward. While many reading this article may find some terms and concepts familiar, we also consider the novice literacy educator who may have little exposure to previous reading movements and who could benefit from this unpacking of the literacy education lexicon. As we present these terms, we provide resources grounded in research. At the end of the article, we provide a framework, in the form of questions, for literacy professionals and administrators who work directly with teachers.

Process of Selecting Terms from the Discourse in Literacy Education

We met as a writing team several times to discuss the terms that we were reading and hearing frequently in the various milieus in which we work: universities, K12 schools, academic and professional conferences, academic and practitioner journals, professional organization websites (e.g., International Literacy Association, International Dyslexia Association), state house bills, social media circles, podcasts, blogs, and editorial pieces on news sites such as Education Week or in newspapers. For a deeper analysis, we each then selected one or two of these sources to review more closely to determine which topics we should address. We met again and agreed on the following terms: *balanced literacy; guided reading; running records; cueing systems; decodable, leveled, and predictable text;* and *approaches to phonics instruction*.

Here, we provide definitions of these terms that may help literacy professionals provide the best instruction for all students, regardless of where they align themselves on the continuum between balanced literacy and phonics-forward instruction. Included for each term are definitions taken from several sources and examples of how the term can be useful to proponents of the approaches to teaching children to read.

Balanced Literacy: An Approach, Not a Program

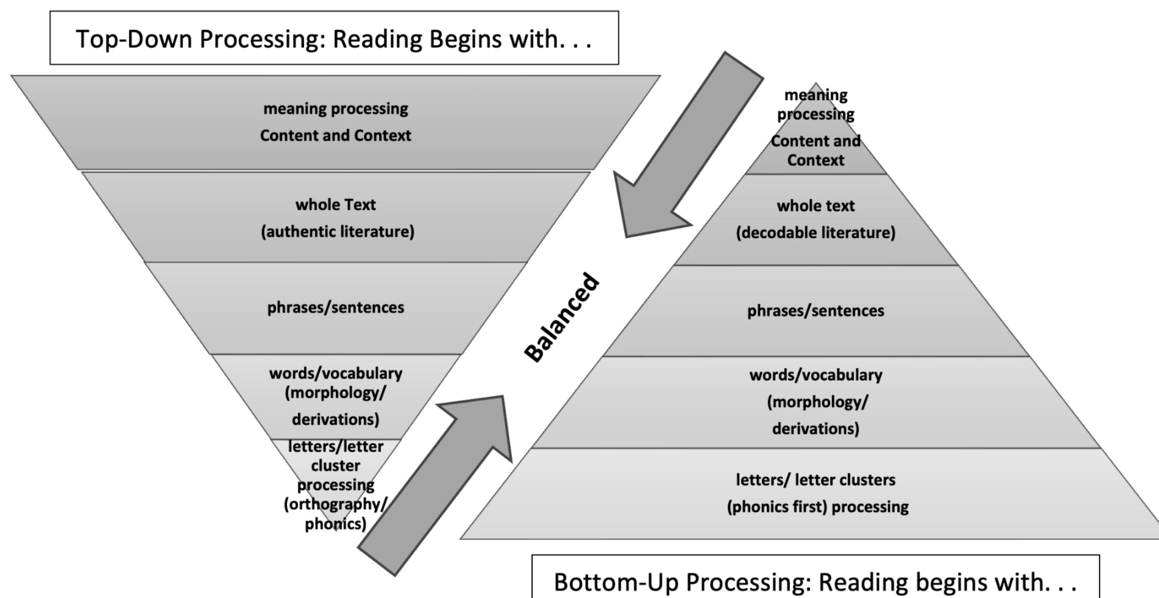
Since the mid-1990s there have been several definitions of *balanced literacy*. In response to low test scores in California, where the California literacy framework grounded in some of the concepts of Whole Language was implemented, Honig (1996), the State Education Commissioner, requested a more balanced literacy approach, "one that combines the language and literature rich activities associated with the whole language with explicit teaching of the skills needed to develop fluency with print, including the automatic recognition of a growing number of words and the ability to decode new words" (p. 2). Wharton-McDonald and colleagues (1997), in a study of highly effective literacy practices conducted with 89 regular education teachers and 34 special education teachers, stated, "highly effective teachers reported using both immersion in authentic literacy-related experiences and extensive explicit teaching through modeling, explanation, and minilesson re-explanations, especially with respect to decoding and other skills" (p. 519).

During the same time, *The Report of the National Reading Panel* (2000, NRP) set out to answer questions related to components of effective reading instruction. Of the many findings presented in the report, clear caution was given related to phonics instruction – synthetic or analytic, as the NRP found both to be valid – and the need to find balance in reading programs.

> It is important to emphasize that systematic phonics instruction should be integrated with other reading instruction to create a balanced reading program. Phonics instruction is never a total reading program . . . Phonics should not become the dominant component in a reading program, neither in the amount of time devoted to it nor in the significance attached. It is important to evaluate children's reading competence in many ways, not only by their phonics skills but also by their interest in books and their ability to understand information that is read to them. By emphasizing all of the processes that contribute to growth in reading, teachers will have the best chance of making every child a reader. (NRP, 2000, p. 2-136)

From this cautionary tale, finding balance within a reading program was given validation by the National Reading Panel. This "meeting in the middle" approach allows for flexibility in selecting reading components but clearly identifies where that balance is found, as visualized in Figure 1. Pearson (2002) asserted, "A balanced approach will privilege authentic texts and tasks, with a heavy emphasis on writing, literature, response, and comprehension, but it will also call for an ambitious program of explicit instruction for phonics, word identification, comprehension, spelling, and writing" (p. 459).

Figure 1. *Visual of 'Balance'*



For a classroom to be balanced, in this sense of the term, educators must ensure they are teaching all literacy components and using high-quality instructional methodology. The National Reading Panel held public hearings across the United States to help inform and establish a set of topics to be addressed (2000). Based on the public hearings and published research, the following topics were targeted for further study.

- Phonemic awareness: Part of phonological awareness, it is the understanding and manipulating the phoneme (smallest unit of sound) in spoken words (NRP, 2000).
- Phonics instruction: A method used to teach children about the relationship between sounds and letters. There are multiple approaches to teaching phonics, "synthetic, analytic, analogy, spelling-based, and embedded" (NRP, 2000, p. 2-123).
- Fluency: Ability to "read text with speed, accuracy, and proper expression" (NRP, 2000, p. 3-1).
- Vocabulary: Oral vocabulary words are "recognized in speaking or listening" (NRP, 2000, p. 4-16); reading vocabulary "refers to words that are used or recognized in print" (NRP, 2000, p. 4-16).
- Comprehension: Readers' ability to make meaning of what they have "viewed, read, or heard" (ILA, 2023).

NRP noted that, because of the vast amount of research, not all topics were addressed. It should not be inferred that these topics were not of importance (NPR, 2000). In addition to the topics outlined by the NRP for further study, teachers should incorporate opportunities for writing within the classroom. Children need time to respond to texts, engage in the writing process, and share. Furthermore, the affective dimension of reading is important in a balanced literacy classroom where teachers "nurture students' love of reading and writing" (Rasinski & Padak, 2004, p. 96).

Fisher and colleagues (2019) define balanced literacy as including the following: informational and narrative texts, the use of both direct and dialogic instruction, whole and small

grouping, and “skills and knowledge, including literacy processes such as oral language, phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, comprehension, and writing” (p. 15). Some classrooms may use a readers’ and writers’ workshop model which includes a mini-lesson, time to read and write independently, conferences with students, and opportunities to share. What must be noted here is that contrary to what is often reported in the media, balanced literacy proponents believe in the teaching of systematic phonemic awareness and phonics, although the approach may be observed in both embedded and discrete approaches to delivery.

Guided Reading

Emerging out of the resurgence of the constructivism learning theory, by the mid-1990s, *guided reading* shifted the focus from the strategies and skills presented in lockstep fashion in the basal text to the needs of the reader (Pearson, 2002). By 2000, the National Reading Panel report authors found guided reading and repeated reading to be unequivocally effective - “The analysis of guided oral reading procedures led to the conclusion that such procedures had a consistent, and positive impact on word recognition, fluency, and comprehension as measured by a variety of test instruments and at a range of grade levels” (p. 3).

A key outcome of guided reading instruction is for readers to successfully engage with continuous authentic texts independently for a sustained period. The framework of guided reading instruction incorporates the pedagogical concepts of scaffolding and releasing control of instruction to lay a foundation for processing through the act of reading (see Table 1). Instruction focuses on readers’ needs identified through formal and informal assessment with a variety of tools. From the assessment data, teachers intentionally select an instructional focus that introduces or reinforces aspects of the reading process, such as concepts about print, decoding, orthography, prosody, text structure, metacognitive reading skills, and/or comprehension elements (Fountas & Pinnell, 2017).

Table 1. *Guided Instruction Framework (whole class to small group)*

Level of Scaffolding	Role of Teacher and Student	Instructional Approach
Modeling	Teacher demonstrates/ Students watch/listen	Instructional read aloud with think aloud/instructional focus using a mentor text and related to reading/metacognitive skills or strategies
Direct Teach	Teacher instructs/ Students watch/listen	Mini-lesson via anchor chart connected to instructional focus skill or strategy
Shared Practice	Teacher leads/ Students apprentice	Shared reading practice related to the instructional think aloud and instructional focus skill or strategy

Guided Practice	Students demonstrate/ Teacher assists	Guided reading: small groups (3-6) for guiding learner towards mastery of accuracy and fluency of selected texts/Focus is on learner-identified needs related to phonics, word study, and fluency Guided comprehension: small groups (3-6) for guiding learner towards mastery of comprehension of selected texts/Focus is on learner-identified needs related to vocabulary, text structures, and metacognition strategies
Independent Practice	Students practice/ Teacher observes and assesses independent practice activities	Sustained independent reading/writing extension activities such as literature or discover/inquiry circles

Guided reading instruction is a cognitive approach wherein teachers demonstrate the ways readers should identify and use a variety of strategies, including word-solving using phonics skills, to problem-solve when decoding and comprehending print. Teachers select appropriate texts for readers, matching these to their instructional needs and interests. Teachers also gradually increase the level of difficulty of the text using a text gradient.

A key component of guided reading instruction is that the instruction occurs in a small group setting. Teachers meet with guided reading groups (3-6 students) three to five times a week for 10-20 minutes, depending on the age group. The teacher has a variety of grouping options such as flexible grouping based on assessments (e.g., running records, miscue analysis, anecdotal records) and grouping by strategy and skill need (e.g., studying story elements). This type of dynamic grouping allows for change in reading groups based on ongoing assessment and skills of individual students rather than on fixed reading level groups and/or whole class instruction that utilizes a one-size-fits-all method of reading instruction.

During the guided reading lesson, the teacher follows a structured order of procedures; however, what occurs during these procedures varies from group to group and from lesson to lesson, based on the students' strengths and growth areas. First, the teacher introduces the text, where the teacher and children discuss possibilities of what the text is about, make connections to the text, discover and practice unfamiliar language structures and vocabulary, and locate some known and new words (Fountas & Pinnell, 2017). The children then read the text as the teacher closely monitors their reading and steps in to teach, prompt, and reinforce new and recently learned strategies. After the reading, the children and the teacher discuss and revisit the text. Finally, the teacher provides a succinct, explicit teaching point based on what the children in the group need at that moment in time.

Contrary to the narrative that has been presented in some media venues, phonemic awareness and phonics instruction are utilized throughout the guided reading lesson. Approaches to increase decoding skills for word recognition and accuracy include using methods of phonics instruction through orthography or the study of the sequence of the letter/sound patterns in words. Orthography requires learners to study words to reveal the "logic and consistencies within our written language system, and to help students achieve mastery in recognizing, spelling, and defining specific words" (Bear et al., 2011, p. 4). Phonics taught through the orthographic

approach and used within the guided reading framework responds to the National Reading Panel's cautionary tale as it provides the learner the opportunity to apply decoding skills in the context of the reading activity.

> Programs that focus too much on the teaching of letter-sounds relations and not enough on putting them to use are unlikely to be very effective. In implementing systematic phonics instruction, educators must keep the *end* in mind and ensure that children understand the purpose of learning letter-sounds and are able to apply their skills in their daily reading and writing activities. (NRP, 2000, pp. 2-135)

Running Records and the Cueing Systems

Teachers who have been properly trained to use *running records* and *cueing systems* to teach children to read are not being given "credit" for their procedural and pedagogical knowledge (Davis et al., 2021). Davis and colleagues (2021) asserted that the "flaws identified in critiques of the cueing systems are merely flaws in some applications of the model and are not inherent in the model itself" (p. 303), which calls to attention the possible lack of training for teachers. The ways in which the media has presented cueing are partly to blame for several states' House Bills that have outlawed the use of the cueing systems, and subsequently, running records.

A running record is a "systematic way to record and compare the sources of information that students use and ignore when reading aloud" (Barone et al., 2019, p. 525). Clay (2019) asserted that children's progress in learning to read is often viewed in terms of known letters, sounds, and words; however, children must apply this knowledge to read continuous text, hence the need for a method to record and analyze students' oral reading. Teachers can take a running record with any text or part of a text on blank paper. Running records are easy to administer with some practice with standard coding (Dougherty Stahl et al., 2019; Reutzel & Cooter, 2019). After the teacher takes the running record, they engage in a quantitative and qualitative analysis of the child's errors to determine progress in terms of what sources of information (cues) the student uses at points of difficulty. In this regard, errors are always viewed as "partially correct" (Fountas & Pinnell, 2017, p. 263). Running records are most useful up to about grade three, at which time much of the reading work of the student becomes covert (Reutzel & Cooter, 2019).

Listening to an emergent, early, or even transitional reader read a text aloud is an effective way of gauging how the child is using letter to sound correspondences in the context of continuous text. For example, the teacher may notice that every time a child comes to a word with a blend at the beginning of a word the child only sounds the first letter. The teacher can note this pattern and provide immediate feedback to the child. This in-the-moment teaching can be more powerful than relying on the teaching of discrete skills alone (Cabell et al., 2022; Duke & Cartwright, 2021; Graham et al., 2018; Schwartz, 2019.

The running record also serves as an informal embedded assessment teachers can use to determine what texts are easy, instructional, and difficult for students (Barone et al., 2019; Clay, 2019; Reutzel & Cooter, 2019). It is also a tool to help the teacher decide what to teach next (Barone et al., 2019). The teacher uses the information from the running record to identify teaching points the reader needs rather than waiting until a later time when the collected data's shelf life is nearing an end (Barone et al., 2019; Clay, 2019). This process also helps teachers

differentiate the teaching of reading behaviors, such as monitoring for meaning, rereading, and self-correcting (Barone et al., 2019; Fried, 2013) within authentic text rather than in isolation.

The use of running records aligns with the phonics forward approach related to the science of reading because teachers can use this assessment to determine how students are using phonics skills to accurately read text. In a study of the use of easy, instructional, and difficult texts, Rodgers and colleagues (2018) determined that students who read books at a level of difficulty (less than 90% accuracy) scored significantly lower on the Observation Survey of Literacy Achievement than did students who read texts at their instructional level (90-95% accuracy). Beginning readers require texts that are at their current Zone of Proximal Development (Vygotsky, 1978) to have just enough challenges that they do not "interfere with progress" (Rodgers et al., 2018, p. 152). In other words, if we want children to be able to use and grow their phonics knowledge, they need to read texts in which they can use the skills currently available to them.

In a study of running record use, Ross (2004) found that teachers who taught in effective schools are "more likely than teachers in ineffective schools to use…running records to diagnose student needs and monitor progress" (p. 186). Ross also asserted that using running records had a more positive effect on reading achievement than not using them. Recently, Rodgers et al. (2021) contended that more training is needed for teachers to use running records to their full potential. More specifically, they suggested focused professional development and simulation exercises related to "providing rationales alongside rules" and explaining what children's word-solving attempts mean (p. 25).

To match texts to students, it is imperative that teachers attain each child's easy, instructional, and difficult reading level. In two separate studies involving the analysis of teachers using running records to record students' reading levels, the researchers found that, although the levels were accurate according to inter-rater reliability, it took several texts to determine those levels (D'Agostino et al., 2021; Fawson et al., 2006). D'Agostino et al. (2021) and Fawson et al. (2006) both found that using only one reading selection to gauge a student's text level might not yield reliable and accurate results. They suggested teachers invite each student to read at least three selections and average the score of the three; however, they did mention that this process presents issues of feasibility in the classroom.

Although there have been many questions raised related to running records and the three cueing systems presented in the media (Barone et al., 2019; NCTQ, 2023), there are researchers who have made suggestions that should be taken into consideration when analyzing students' miscues and using them to inform instruction. The major claim presented in recent podcasts and editorial articles is that teachers are focusing children's attention on using the text's meaning (including the meaning found in the illustrations) instead of using letter-sound correspondences to aid in the production of accurate reading. A closer look into the writings of contemporary researchers reveals that, especially for emergent and early readers, both cueing systems are important (Scanlon & Anderson, 2020).

Davis and colleagues (2021) and McKenna and Picard (2006) wrote that the original works of Clay and Goodman in the 1960s gave "equal footing" (McKenna & Picard, 2006, p. 379) to meaning, structure, and visual cueing systems that are used to analyze reading errors on running records. They argued that early readers need to rely on contextual information to read print, but that as they transition into more difficult text, teachers need to support them by placing more value on using visual information. Similarly, Scanlon and Anderson (2020) argued that

young readers need to use semantic information to figure out words while they are learning other word-solving skills, but this does not mean semantics is central during instruction.

Recently, Tierney and Pearson (2024) noted that most theoretical reading models (e.g., Rumelhart's Interactive Model, 1977) include semantic and syntactic processing, not just orthographic processing. Adams (1998) explained that the cueing systems are helpful tools that can be used to describe how early readers use print and illustrations to make meaning. In a blog post at the start of the latest reading "war," Schwartz (2019) wrote that beginning readers rely more on meaning and structure cues and check their attempts against visual information. This approach requires less effort for a reader at this stage than does sounding words letter by letter. Children should be flexible and use both "code- and meaning-based strategies" (Scanlon & Anderson, 2020, p. S20). Stouffer (2021) added that only using meaning cues may "lead to inaccurate guesses at words," but that "fixating on…letter-sound relations (e.g., after being prompted to 'sound it out') could also be frustrating" (p. 775).

Support for the process of using cueing systems can be found in research that refers to the concept of Set for Variability (SfV) - how children in grades two through six use "phonological cleanup" to correct a mispronounced decoded word by using context (Steacy et al., 2022). This work follows other studies (see Savage et al., 2018; Tunmer & Chapman, 2012), and SfV has been found to "play an important role in the development of word recognition skills" (Tunmer & Chapman, 2012, p. 138). Additional studies of SfV may help to clarify the cueing systems and their usage during the reading of connected text.

So, how can literacy professionals negotiate this information and use running records and the cueing systems in ways that help children become strategic and proficient decoders while still making meaning of text? First, teachers should continue to use running records to yield students' approximate instructional text levels (McKenna & Picard, 2006). This will help teachers match books to students for small group instruction. Second, the running record is an effective tool for teachers to determine the progress students are making in the area of decoding print and how they are using sources of information "more globally" (Stoufer, 2021, p. 778), although readers eventually do need to rely more on visual information and confirm their attempts with meaning cues (Davis et al., 2021; McKenna & Picard, 2006).

Teachers can ask themselves questions such as these while analyzing a student's running record: "Did this reader over-rely on any particular cueing system?" and "What does this evidence indicate in terms of providing targeted instruction?" (Gillett & Ellingson, 2017, p. 140). Also, when teachers pay attention to miscues that affect the meaning of the text, they can notice and address comprehension issues (Afflerbach, 2022). Finally, D'Agostino et al. (2021) and Harmey and Kabuto (2018) suggest teachers should use other assessment tools in addition to running records to make important decisions about students' strengths and growth areas.

Explicit and Systematic Instruction

Research and scholars in the field largely agree that all five reading components (e.g., phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension) identified by the National Reading Panel Report (2000) impact student literacy learning. The research in the report indicated that an *explicit and systematic* approach to phonics instruction has more impact on student learning than approaches that do not include phonics instruction. The report specifically states that phonics instruction is most effective in early literacy instruction and that the impact of phonics instruction decreases throughout the grade levels. Specifically, the NRP

(2000) states, “Teaching students to decode words using systematic and explicit phonics instruction results in improved word-decoding skills” (p. S271). Interestingly, the report indicates that for readers who struggle, phonics instruction had minimal impact on learning to spell. Nevertheless, phonics is a necessary component of learning to read. The NRP directly stated, “teaching students phonological awareness and letter knowledge, particularly when combined, results in improved word-decoding skills” (p. S271). Further, reviewed research in the report indicates that while phonics instruction does positively impact decoding, it does not stand alone as an isolated pathway to reading. Instead, phonics instruction must be a part of a comprehensive reading program that includes phonemic awareness, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension, particularly for emergent and early readers and those who struggle with reading tasks. As the NRP Report (2000) suggests, teaching students’ phonics does not interfere with their comprehension of text; rather, it supports students’ reading and understanding of texts. This indicates that including phonics instruction in a reading program is necessary; however, it should not be the sole instructional focus (Tierney & Pearson, 2024). The degree to which phonics is needed and how it is taught is more nuanced across conversations. Shanahan (2005) argued that the NRP report found that synthetic and analytic phonics methods could be taught systematically. Bowers (2020) pushed further by suggesting that if the field focused on teaching methods that included both phonology and morphology, students would be better equipped to decode and generate meaning from text.

Given the information the NRP Report (2000) provided about phonics, we chose to look closely at the phrase explicit and systematic. This phrase can be heard across the educational landscape from school-based practitioners to legislators and is usually included in discussions related to phonics instruction. Much like other terms, it seems that these descriptors are used by all participants of the current reading conflict. We wanted to take a closer look at how these terms are defined to illustrate similarities and differences in conceptualizations and school-based applications.

The International Literacy Association (ILA) and the International Dyslexia Association (IDA) have been vocal in their stances on how to provide effective literacy instruction for all readers. Since both organizations have published position pieces and responses to engage in this conversation, we felt it important to visit their websites to gain firsthand information about how they define explicit and systematic.

The International Literacy Association defines systematic instruction as, “a plan of instruction (e.g., scope and sequence) that takes students through an explicit sequence of learning activities” (ILA Glossary, 2023); however, ILA does not provide a specific definition for the term explicit instruction. Upon further review of ILA’s website, the Dyslexia Research Advisory (2023) addresses explicit and systematic phonics instruction as a method to teach graphemes, phonemes, and morphemes to support students who struggle to read words and spell.

The term structured literacy is often brought into the conversation along with the terms explicit and systematic. The International Dyslexia Association used the term structured language teaching in their 2010 standards document, and the 2018 version states that this approach can support students with and without disabilities. In both the 2010 and 2018 IDA publications, the standards are presented in two distinct sections:

> Section I addresses foundation concepts, knowledge of language structure, knowledge of dyslexia and other learning disorders, administration and interpretation of assessments, the principles of structured language teaching, and ethical standards for the profession. Section II addresses skills to be demonstrated in supervised practice. (p. 4)

The terms explicit and systematic can be found throughout the standards in both categories of Content Knowledge and Observable Competencies for Teaching Students with Dyslexia and Related Difficulties.

In 2015, IDA published a guide called *Just the Facts*. This guide outlines three main elements of the structured literacy approach for students with dyslexia. These elements are systematic and cumulative, explicit instruction, and diagnostic teaching. Below are the IDA definitions of each element.

- Systematic and Cumulative. Systematic means that the organization of material follows the logical order of the language. The sequence must begin with the easiest and most basic concepts and elements and progress methodically to more difficult concepts and elements. Cumulative means each step must be based on concepts previously learned.
- Explicit Instruction. Structured Literacy instruction requires the deliberate teaching of all concepts with continuous student-teacher interaction. It is not assumed that students will naturally deduce these concepts on their own.
- Diagnostic Teaching. The teacher must be adept at individualized instruction. The instruction is based on careful and continuous assessment, both informally (e.g., observation) and formally (e.g., with standardized measures). The content presented must be mastered to the degree of automaticity.

Along with definitions of explicit and systematic, IDA's *Fact Sheet* (2020) on structured literacy (2020) further explains that structured literacy must include "hands-on, engaging, multimodal methods and be diagnostic and responsive" (p. 3).

After reviewing the definitions from both organizations, the terms explicit and systematic are being used in similar ways. Given how ILA and IDA are defining and using these terms, we suggest that these terms not be used with a deficit model lens (i.e., one side stating that the other is not providing explicit and systematic work). Instead, we suggest both sides come together and recognize that our use and understanding of these terms is more similar than it is different. The effective use of phonics instruction in the classroom lies with the teacher's ability to be responsive to student needs. When interpreting these terms, it is important literacy professionals understand that "explicit instruction is not the same as narrow synthetic phonics; it means that children need well-planned teaching of reading that includes phonics and other vital elements" (Wyse & Hacking, 2024, p. 17).

Text Types for Reading Instruction

The debates over which type of book is best to use to teach children how to read continues. Should children read *decodable books, predictable books,* or *leveled books*? Each type of book will be defined and discussed in its relation to its use in the classroom.

Decodable books are appropriate when young children are first learning the alphabetic principle and letter-sound associations. These books use specific phonics patterns that are progressively sequenced, such as short vowels, long vowels, blends, and digraphs to build students' decoding skills (ILA, 2018, 2023; Kearns & Hiebert, 2023; Stark, 2020). Proponents of a phonics-forward approach would argue that decodable books help beginning readers to first sound out letters or clusters of letters and then blend the sounds into words (Cheatham & Allor, 2012; Ehri, 2020). However, as readers move up in text that is more complex, "they are more likely to benefit from challenging and meaningful literature" (Beverly et al., 2009, pg. 191) because decodable texts are not designed to support comprehension (Pennell et al., 2024, p. 675).

It must also be noted that there is very little research that supports using only decodable books to teach children how to read (Mesmer, 2001; National Reading Panel, 2000). We support the use of decodable books to build students' letter-sound and word recognition skills, especially at the emergent stage of word learning; however, we do not advocate for the sole use of decodable books in teaching children how to read and comprehend.

Predictable books support students through repetitive text and predictable patterns (Dahl-Leonard et al., 2024; Pennell et al., 2024), such as those found in *Brown Bear, Brown Bear What do you see*? (Martin & Carle, 1970). The predictability of words across the pages allows students to see and rehearse phrases multiple times, which in turn also supports fluency development. Unlike decodable books, predictable books include illustrations or photos that more explicitly support the text. The picture usually corresponds to more complex words outside of the patterned text. For example, in the text, *"Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What do you see? I see a ___ ____ looking at me*" (Martin & Carle, 1970), the more complex words would be *red* and *bird*. A picture of a red bird supports the child's decoding of the words. It is for this reason that "predictable texts are the most appropriate for children who have little to no alphabet knowledge and who are not yet applying letter–sound relationships to decode words" (Pennell et al., 2024, p. 675). Proponents of a phonics-forward approach to teaching reading would argue that the child is not reading but rather is memorizing the predictable pattern of words and repeating them (Burkins & Yates, 2021). However, predictable phrases, along with the contextual clues, support beginning readers' attempts at recognizing words (Cunningham et al., 2005, Pennell et al., 2024). More specifically, for "emergent readers who are still developing alphabet knowledge, predictable texts can provide a useful context for developing their understanding of print concepts, including concept of word and beginning automatic word recognition" (Pennell et al., 2024, p. 677). Rehearsing the repetitive text in predictable books and reading the more complex words, such as *red* and *bird*, may also increase the child's oral language acquisition skills. We support the use of predictable books to build students' word recognition skills and boost feelings of reading success.

Leveled texts are assigned levels that correspond to a text gradient, starting from least complex and gradually moving toward more complex. As the level increases, the text structures, vocabulary, and decoding demands increase in complexity as well (Fountas & Pinnell, 2012). Teachers carefully select leveled texts depending on each student's instructional reading level, word solving skills, reading strategy use, reading strengths, and reading needs. It must be noted that each book within a certain level holds its own supports and challenges.

Advocates of a phonics-first approach to reading instruction might contend that leveled texts include uncontrolled vocabulary, potentially encouraging poor reading habits like guessing words or skipping over unfamiliar words during independent reading. Specifically, Cunningham et al. (2005) stated, "the way Reading Recovery© books are leveled provides no support for instruction in recognizing words by their orthography or decoding them by their phonology" (p. 425). However, even decodable books increase in difficulty as more phonics skills are added. We support the use of leveled books to build students' reading strategy use, fluency, and comprehension of text, and that "[b]y matching appropriately leveled texts to readers, teachers can control the level of difficulty of the texts used for instructional purposes" (Ankrum, 2022, p. 609).

Kearns and Hiebert (2023) and Price-Mohr and Price (2019) contend that, while using decodable texts increases scores on measures of the alphabetic principle, non-decodable books have significant effects on foundational skills as well as effects on comprehension and fluency

measures. Children need decodable books to build their phonics skills, they need predictable books to build word recognition, specifically irregular words, and they need leveled books to orchestrate skills and strategies they are learning to read and comprehend books at increasingly difficult levels. The goal for teachers is to create lifelong readers - this may or may not be accomplished by using decodable and predictable texts alone. Additionally, students should engage with authentic high-quality literature, such as poetry, fantasy, folktales, realistic fiction, science fiction, historical fiction, nonfiction, biographies, autobiographies, and graphic novels.

A Framework for Practice

Now we shift to discussing the ways in which literacy professionals might use this information to facilitate professional learning events, professional learning communities, grade level planning meetings, and individual coaching conversations with teachers. What follow are research-supported observation tasks and questions literacy professionals might consider as they negotiate the influx of content related to the science of reading and reading instruction.

Balanced Literacy

Observation task: Spend long stretches of time in classrooms at different points throughout the day to take a pulse on the types of literacy components.

Questions to consider: Are teachers providing students with ample opportunities to read and write with the teacher, with other students, on their own? Is phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension instruction connected to authentic text reading and writing?

Guided Reading

Observation task: Spend time in classrooms to take a pulse on the ways in which small group instruction is implemented.

Questions to consider: Are teachers working with small groups of students every day, a couple days a week, or not at all? When they do work with students, what is the exact nature of this work? Are teachers working on the same concepts and skills with small groups, or are they differentiating the work depending upon the needs of the learners? Are concepts and skills taught discretely or are they also embedded in authentic reading and writing tasks?

Running Records

Observation task: During grade level or professional learning community meetings, explore how teachers are using running records to get to know their children as readers.

Questions to consider: Do teachers know the difference between formal and informal running records? Do they understand how to analyze children's errors and how to use this information for instruction in phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension? Do they use running records in conjunction with other assessments to gain a "whole picture" of the child's literacy?

Cueing Systems

Observation task: Observe teachers while they work with children during whole group shared reading instruction and small group guided reading instruction.

Questions to consider: Do teachers encourage children to check their responses against the meaning and syntax of the text after they use visual information to solve a word? Do teachers prompt them to do so? Are children provided with opportunities to discuss texts before, during, and after reading so that they are making meaning from the text?

Explicit and Systematic Phonics Instruction

Observation task: Spend ample time with teachers while they consider formal and informal reading assessment data to plan phonics instruction so that there is a focus on phonology and morphology.

Questions to consider: Which students need intensive small group intervention and what instructional methods (synthetic, analytical, analogy-based) will serve them best? Which students need a smaller dose of phonics? Which students only need minimal phonics instruction? How are teachers making sure there is a transfer of phonics skills to authentic reading and writing tasks? How are teachers providing instruction that has students decode words (phonology) and capture meaning (morphology)?

Text Types

Observation task: Conduct a thorough evaluation of the texts used during daily classroom instruction.

Questions to consider: Are students given ample opportunities to listen to and read, through shared and guided experiences, high-quality children's literature (i.e., motivating, diverse, meaningful storylines)? Are there books available to teachers to use for small-group instruction (i.e., predictable texts, leveled texts, and decodable texts)?

Conclusion

Our purpose for writing this article is to help literacy professionals further find accord amongst several of the terms and phrases that have been used widely in recent podcasts, blogs, website articles, and even state house bills. As we have engaged with others in our professional circles, we have experienced frustrations of how these terms are misunderstood and misrepresented. Reading interventionists, literacy coaches, and other literacy professionals should guide teachers to use current and relevant research and their knowledge of students as readers and writers to plan literacy instruction.

References

Adams, M. J. (1998). The three-cueing system. In J. Osborn & F. Lehr (Eds.), *Literacy for all: Issues in teaching and learning* (p. 73-99). Guilford Press.

Afflerbach, P. (2022). *Teaching readers (not reading): Moving beyond skills and strategies to reader-focused instruction.* Guilford Press.

Ankrum, J. W. (2022). Complex texts or leveled readers for the primary grades? Yes and yes! *Early Childhood Education Journal, 50*(4), 605-611.

Barone, J., Khairallah, P., & Gabriel, R. (2019). Running records revisited: A tool for efficiency and focus. *The Reading Teacher, 73*(4), 525-530.

Bear, D. R., Invernizzi, M., Templeton, S., & Johnston, F. (2011). *Words Their Way: Word Study for Phonics, Vocabulary, and Spelling Instruction* (5th Ed.). Pearson.

Bear, D. R., Invernizzi, M., Templeton, S. & Johnston, F. (2020). *Words their way: Word study for phonics, vocabulary, and spelling instruction* (7th Ed.). Merrill/Prentice Hall.

Beverly, B. K., Giles, R.M., & Buck, K. L. (2009). First-grade reading gains following enrichment: Phonics plus decodable texts compared to authentic literature read aloud. *The Reading Teacher, 53*(4), 191-205.

Bommarito, S (2022, November) Let's use common sense to guide the way to common practices: A centrist's advice on traversing the current social media debate about best practices in reading. *Doctorsam7.* https://doctorsam7.blog/2022/11/

Bowers, J. S. (2020). Reconsidering the evidence that systematic phonics is more effective than alternative methods of reading instruction. *Educational Psychology Review, 32*(3), 681-705.

Burkins, J., & Yates, K. (2021). *Shifting the balance: 6 ways to bring the science of reading into the balanced literacy classroom.* Stenhouse.

Cabell, S. Q., Gerde, H. K., Hwang, H., Bowles, R., Skibbe, L., Piasta, S. B, & Justice, L. M. (2022). Rate of growth of preschool-age children's oral language and decoding skills predicts beginning writing ability. *Early Education and Development, (33)*7, 1198-1221.

Cheatham, J. P., & Allor J. H. (2012). The influence of decodability in early reading text on reading achievement: A review of the evidence. *Reading and Writing, 25*, 2223-2246.

Clay, M. M. (2019). *An observation survey for early literacy achievement* (4th Ed.). Heinemann.

Cunningham, J. W., Spadorcia, S. A., Erickson, K. A., Koppenhaver, A., Sturm, J. M., & Yoder, D. E. (2005). Investigating the instructional supportiveness of leveled texts. *Reading Research Quarterly, 40*(4), 410-427.

D'Agostino, J. V., Rodgers, E., Winkler, C., Johnson, T., & Berenbon, R. (2021). The generalizability of running record accuracy and self-correction scores. *Reading Psychology, 42*(2), 111-130.

Dahl-Leonard, K., Hall, C., Mesa, M. P., Zucker, T. A., & Peacott, D. (2024). Exploring small group reading instruction for students at risk for reading difficulties in kindergarten classrooms. *Reading & Writing Quarterly, 40*(6), 1–18.

Davis, D. S., Jones, J. S., & Samuelson, C. (2021). Is it time for a hard conversation about cueing systems and word reading in teacher education? *Reading & Writing Quarterly, 37*(4), 301-316.

Dougherty Stahl, K. A., Flanagan, K., & McKenna, M. C. (2019). *Assessment for reading instruction* (4th Ed.). Guilford Press.

Duke, N. K., & Cartwright, K. B. (2021). The science of reading progresses: Communicating advances beyond the simple view of reading. *Reading Research Quarterly, 56*(S1), S25-S44.

Ehri, L. C. (2015). How children learn to read words. In Pollatsek, A. & Treiman, R. (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Reading* (pp. 293-325). Oxford University Press.

Ehri, L. C. (2020). The science of learning to read words: A case for systematic phonics instruction. *Reading Research Quarterly, 55*(51), S54-S60.

Fawson, P. C., Reutzel, D., Smith, J. A., Ludlow, B. C. & Sudweeks, R. (2006). Examining the reliability of running records: Attaining generalizable results. *The Journal of Educational Research, 100*(2), 113-126.

Fisher, D., Frey, N. and Akhavan, N. (2019). *This is balanced literacy, grades K-6*. Corwin.

Fountas, I. C., & Pinnell, G. S. (2012). Guided reading: The romance and the reality. *The Reading Teacher 66*(4), 268-284.

Fountas, I. C., & Pinnell, G. S. (2017). *Guided reading: Responsive teaching across the grades* (2nd Ed.). Heinemann.

Fried, M. D. (2013). Activating teaching: Using running records to inform teaching decisions. *Journal of Reading Recovery, 13*(1), 5-16.

Gabriel, R. (2020). The future of the science of reading, *Reading Research Quarterly, 74*(1), 11-18.

Gillett, E., & Ellingson, S. P. (2017). How will I know what my students need: Preparing preservice teachers to use running records to make instructional decisions. *The Reading Teacher, 71*(2), 135-143.

Graham, S., Liu, X., Bartlett, B., Ng, C., Harris, K. R., Aitken, A., Barkel, A., Kavanaugh, C., & Talukdar, J. (2018). Reading for writing: A meta-analysis of the impact of reading interventions on writing. *Review of Educational Research*, *88*(2), 243-284.

Harmey, S., & Kabuto, B. (2018). Metatheoretical differences between running records and miscue analysis. *Research in the Teaching of English, 53*(1), 11-33.

Honig, B. (1996). *Teaching our children to read: The role of skills in a comprehensive reading program*. Corwin Press.

House Bill (HB) 1605. (2023). 88th Texas Legislature, Regular Session. https://capitol.texas.gov/BillLookup/Text.aspx?LegSess=88R&Bill=HB1605

International Dyslexia Association. (2010). *Knowledge and practice standards for teachers of reading.* https://www.researchgate.net/publication/265244801_The_International_Dyslexia_Association_IDA_Knowledge_and_Practice_Standards_for_Teachers_of_Reading

International Dyslexia Association. (2015). *Just the facts: Effective reading instruction for students with dyslexia.* Retrieved December 1. 2023, from https://dyslexiaida.org/effective-reading-instruction/

International Dyslexia Association. (2018). *Knowledge and practice standards for teachers of reading.* (2nd Ed.). https://dyslexiaida.org/knowledge-and-practices/

International Literacy Association. (2023). *Dyslexia* [Research advisory]. https://www.literacyworldwide.org/docs/default-source/where-we-stand/research-advisory-dyslexia.pdf

International Literacy Association. (2023). *Literacy Glossary*. Retrieved from https://www.literacyworldwide.org/get-resources/literacy-glossary

Kearns, A., & Hiebert, E. H. (2023). Text types and their relation to efficacy in beginning reading interventions. *Reading Research Quarterly, 58*(4), 710-732.
MacPhee, D., Handsfield, L. J., & Paugh, P. (2021). Conflict or conversation?: Media portrayals of the science of reading. *Reading Research Quarterly, 56*(S1), S145-S155.
Martin, B., & Carle, E. (1970). *Brown bear, brown bear, what do you see?* (Board book Ed.). Henry Holt and Company.
McKenna, M., & Picard, M. C. (2006). Revisiting the role of miscue analysis in effective teaching. *The Reading Teacher, 60*(4), 378-380.
Mesmer, H. A. E. (2001). Decodable text: A review of what we know. *Reading Research and Instruction, 40*(2), 121-142.
National Council on Teacher Quality. (2023). *Teacher prep review: Reading foundations* [Technical report]. Retrieved from https://www.nctq.org/pages/TPR-Standards-Revision-Reading.
National Reading Panel (US) & National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (U.S.). (2000). *Report of the National Reading Panel: Teaching children to read: An evidence-based assessment of the scientific research literature on reading and its implications for reading instruction.* U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services, Public Health Service, National Institutes of Health, National Institute of Child Health and Human Development.
Pearson, P. D. (2002). American reading instruction since 1967. In N.B. Smith, *American reading instruction* (Special Edition). International Reading Association.
Pennell, A. E., Payne Jordan, R. L., Turners Nash, K., Elson, K., & Trathen W. (2024). A healthy diet for beginning readers: Decodable texts as part of a comprehensive literacy program. *The Reading Teacher, 77*(5), 673-684.
Price-Mohr, R., & Price, C. (2019). A comparison of children aged 4-5 years learning to read through instructional texts containing either a high or a low proportion of phonically decodable words. *Early Childhood Education Journal, 48*(1), 39-47.
Rasinski, T., & Padak, N. (2004). Beyond consensus—beyond balance: Toward a comprehensive literacy curriculum. *Reading & Writing Quarterly, 20*(1), 91-102.
Reutzel, D. R., & Cooter, R. (2019). *Strategies for reading assessment and instruction: Helping every child succeed* (6th Ed.). Pearson.
Rodgers, E., D'Agostino, J. V., Berenbon, R., Johnson, T., & Winkler, C. (2021). Scoring running records: Complexities and affordances. *Journal of Early Childhood Literacy*, *23*(4), 665-694.
Rodgers, E., D'Agostino, J. V., Kelly, R. H., & Mikita, C. (2018). Oral reading accuracy: Findings and implications from recent research. *The Reading Teacher, 72*(2), 149-157.
Ross, J. A. (2004). Effects of running records assessment on early literacy achievement. *The Journal of Educational Research, 97*(4), 186-194.
Rumelhart, D. E. (1977). *Towards an interactive model of reading: In attention and performance.* Lawrence Erlbaum.
Savage, R., Georgiou, G., Parrila, R., & Maiorino, K. (2018). Preventative reading interventions teaching direct mapping of graphemes in texts and set-for-variability aid at-risk learners. *Scientific Studies of Reading, 22*(3), 225-247.
Scanlon, D. M., & Anderson, K. L. (2020). Using context as an assist in word solving: The contributions of 25 years of research on the interactive strategies approach. *Reading Research Quarterly, 55*(S1), S19-S34.

Schwartz, R. (2019, September). The three cueing systems in beginning reading instruction: Good idea or hoax. *RRCNA Blog.* https://readingrecovery.org/the-three-cueing-systems-in-beginning-reading-instruction-good-idea-or-hoax/
Shanahan, T. (2005). *The National Reading Panel Report: A practical guide for teachers*. Learning Point Associates.
Steacy, L. M., Edwards, A. A., Rigobon, V. M., Gutierrez, N., Marencin, N. C., Siegelman, N., Himelhoch, A. C., Himelhogh, C., Rueckl, J., & Compton, D. L. (2022). Set for variability as a critical predictor of word reading: Potential implications for early identification and treatment of dyslexia. *Reading Research Quarterly, 58*(2), 254-267.
Stouffer, J. (2021). Seeking middle ground: Analyzing running records from the top and bottom. *The Reading Teacher, 74*(6), 769-784.
Tierney, R. J., & Pearson, P. D. (2024). *Fact-checking the science of reading: Opening up the conversation*. Literacy Research Commons. https://literacyresearchcommons.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Fact-checking-the-SoR.pdf
Tunmer, W. E., & Chapman, J. W. (2012). Does set for variability mediate the influence of vocabulary knowledge on the development of word recognition skills? *Scientific Studies of Reading, 16*(2), 122-140.
Vygotsky, L. (1978). *Mind in society.* Harvard University Press.
Wharton-McDonald, R., Pressley, M., Rankin, J., Mistretta, J., Yokoi, L., & Ettenberger, S. (1997). Effective primary-grades literacy instruction = balanced literacy instruction. *The Reading Teacher, 50*(6), 518–521.
Wyse, D., & Hacking, C. (2024). *The balancing act: An evidence-based approach to teaching phonics, reading and writing.* Routledge.

Statements and Declarations

Acknowledgement
We would like to acknowledge all literacy professionals who advocate for best teaching practices every day.

Declaration of Conflicting Interest
The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article'.

Funding Statement
No funding was received for this project.

Ethics Approval Statement
No data were collected for this paper. It relies on published manuscripts. No IRB approval was obtained or needed.

Data Availability Statement
Not applicable

About the Author(s):

Dr. Bethany C. Pletcher is a Professor of Reading Education in the Curriculum, Instruction, and Learning Sciences Department at Texas A&M University – Corpus Christi. Her research interests include literacy coaching, the design and implementation of reading clinics on university and elementary school campuses, and supporting emergent readers who experience reading difficulties. Dr. Pletcher has published 60 articles and book chapters, actively presents at conferences, and is an editor for *Literacy Research and Instruction*. She has been inducted twice into the Texas A&M System Chancellor's Academy for Teacher Educators and recently received the Jack Cassidy Distinguished Literacy Service Award. Prior to her current Faculty position, Dr. Pletcher was a Reading Recovery© Teacher, reading specialist, and classroom teacher in public schools for 12 years.

Dr. Gina Doepker is a professor in the School of Education at The University of Texas at Tyler. Doepker received her Ph.D. from The Ohio State University in Literacy Education. She is currently the UT Tyler M.Ed. in Reading Program Coordinator and teaches undergraduate and graduate literacy courses. Doepker's research interests include preservice teachers' attitudes towards children's literature, struggling readers and writers, reading motivation, using alternative texts (i.e. graphic novels & comic books) during literacy instruction to increase children's reading and writing skills, and service learning to enhance preservice teachers' literacy content knowledge and implementation of reading and writing strategies instruction.

Dr. Patricia Durham is a professor in the School of Teaching and Learning in the College of Education at Sam Houston State University. She teaches in the elementary literacy methods, advanced literacy specialist certification, and literacy leadership programs. Her research focuses on specialized literacy professional's advance training, novice literacy teacher development, and elementary level reading metacognition skills. Dr. Durham is currently the co-editor for the *Literacy Research and Instruction* journal. She is a certified reading specialist and taught at the elementary level (1-5) for fifteen years.

Dr. Aimee Morewood is a Professor at West Virginia University (WVU), is the Program Coordinator for the M.A with Reading Specialist certification program. This program received *National Recognition with Certificate of Distinction* from the International Literacy Association (ILA) for WVU's online literacy education program in 2019 and 2025. This was the first fully online program in the country to receive this recognition and distinction from ILA. Dr. Morewood's research interests include effective online instruction, literacy, leadership, adaptive teaching, and readability. Her individual teaching has been recognized at her university and nationally through the WVU *Digital Learning Award* (2019) WVU's College of Education and Human Services *Outstanding Teacher Award* (2021) WVU's *Foundation Outstanding Teaching Award* (2022) and International Literacy Association'*s Jerry Johns Outstanding Teacher Educator in Reading Award* (2020).

Dr. Roberta Raymond currently an Associate Professor and Program Director for the Literacy, Language Arts, and Literature Studies program at the University of Houston-Clear Lake (UHCL). Her research interests include preservice teachers' literacy education, literacy leadership, and writing. Roberta teaches pre-service, graduate, and doctoral students in literacy instruction. Additionally, she maintains an active service record with local area school districts and with state, national, and international professional organizations.