

The Fundamental Importance of Literacy

Introduction

- I. Literacy as Gateway
- II. The Stark Reality: Literacy and the Achievement Gap
- III. Why We Have a Literacy Course
- IV. The Balanced Literacy Approach: Some History
- V. A Closer Look at Balanced Literacy Instruction
- VI. Preview of the Literacy Text

Reading is the fundamental skill upon which all formal education depends. Research now shows that a child who doesn't learn the reading basics early is unlikely to learn them at all. Any child who doesn't learn to read early and well will not easily master other skills and knowledge, and is unlikely to ever flourish in school or in life.¹

I. Literacy as Gateway

As Teach For America corps members, alumni, and staff, we are unified by our conviction that all children should have an equal opportunity in life. For those of us teaching elementary students, one could argue that our greatest opportunity to alter our students' life prospects comes through teaching them to read, write, and communicate effectively. No single method of intervention will have as dramatic an effect on a student's future learning and success than a solid foundation in literacy. Quite literally, a child's reading and writing skills are portals to, and catalysts for, whole worlds of learning.

If this seems like an obvious point, it may only be because so many of us have been fortunate enough to take our own literacy for granted. Research on the benefits of literacy ability (and on the tragedy of a lack thereof) provides a stark reminder that one's mastery of literacy is inextricably tied to success in all other academic areas. For example, children who read well in the early grades are far more successful in later school years. Research has demonstrated that vocabulary size at the end of first grade predicts reading comprehension ten years later with striking accuracy.² Young, capable readers will seize the opportunities provided in a literacy-infused classroom and develop invaluable confidence in their own abilities, which leads directly to success in other subjects such as social studies, math, and science.

The corollary to that finding is the disturbing truth that even a relatively small gap in a child's literacy development can have devastating, long-term consequences. Research conducted by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development has found that more than 74% of children who enter first grade at risk for reading failure will continue to struggle to read into adulthood.³ Weak literacy skills will prohibit these children from accessing entire fields of knowledge, often resulting in failure to complete school and in a lifetime of diminished opportunities. The Children's Literacy Initiative drives home this point: "Americans are faced with disheartening statistics: 85 percent of the juveniles who

¹ Moats, Louisa. "Teaching Reading IS Rocket Science: What Expert Teachers of Reading Should Know and Be Able to Do." American Federation of Teachers, June 1999. Online at <http://www.aft.org>.

² Biemiller, Andrew. Teaching Vocabulary in the Primary Grades: Vocabulary Instruction Needed. In J.F. Baumann & E.J. Kame'enui (Eds.), *Vocabulary Instruction: Research to Practice* (pp. 28-40). New York: Guilford.

³ <http://www.educationnews.org>.

Fundamental Importance of Literacy

appear in court and 75 percent of unemployed adults are illiterate.”⁴ Clearly, the risks that face children who cannot read proficiently are incredibly and unacceptably high.

II. The Stark Reality: Literacy and the Achievement Gap

It is disturbing, but perhaps not surprising, that the literacy skills of students in the under-resourced schools where we teach often lag well behind those of children in wealthier areas. Thus, literacy is not only one of the key levers for overcoming the achievement and opportunity gap that plagues the nation’s most under-resourced schools, but the *absence* of literacy skills is one of the key indicators of the achievement gap in the first place. As former Secretary of Education Rod Paige made clear: “Children who do not learn to read early on are at risk of being left behind. And yet, seven out of ten inner-city fourth graders can’t read proficiently. This is unacceptable—our children deserve better, and we will change this.”⁵

Keeping in mind that “basic level” as a standard of reading achievement is truly a low bar, consider the following facts, drawn from the United States Department of Education:⁶

- Approximately 40 percent of students across the nation cannot read at a basic level.
- Almost 70 percent of low-income fourth grade students cannot read at a basic level.

Similarly, the National Assessment of Educational Progress surveys in 1998 found discrepancies in writing skills of students by socio-economic status.⁷

Simply considering statistics that describe the enormous number of our students who struggle to read cannot prepare us for the reality of teaching those students in our classrooms. Katie Jaron (Houston ’02) remembers how shocked she was upon discovering the lagging literacy skills of her fourth graders:

Before I began teaching, I had read and studied what seemed like a thousand statistics on the gap in literacy skills I knew I would encounter in my classroom. But my first week of teaching fourth grade, when I discovered that most of my students were clustered around a mid first grade or early second grade level in their reading fluency and comprehension, made all of those statistics real to me in a truly startling way. In the first week of school, I watched my students struggle to read and spell basic sight words. I watched them stumble through easy reading passages only to have absolutely no recollection of the text’s meaning. It’s one thing to read a statistic about a certain percentage of children performing below a basic level; it’s another thing entirely to observe a ten year old who can only read 40 words per minute at the beginning of fourth grade, when he should be reading over 100. The moment I realized how alarmingly far behind my students were in their literacy skills was also the moment I realized that moving their reading and writing forward in dramatic ways was the most important and enormous charge I could ever have.

⁴ Adams, Marilyn Jager. *Beginning to Read: Thinking and Learning About Print*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990.

⁵ Paige, Rod. Upon presenting \$500,000 grant to the National Urban League, October 11, 2002.

<http://www.ed.gov/news/pressreleases/2002/10/10112002.html>, accessed 7/1/2010.

⁶ National Association of Educational Progress. “Nation’s Report Card: Reading 2002.” Available online at

<http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2003521>, accessed 7/1/2010.

⁷ National Center for Education Statistics. “Nation’s Report Card,” 1998. Website

<http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/>.

Research has shown that 95% of children have the ability to learn to read in a predictable way.⁸ The remaining five percent have specific reading or cognitive disabilities and delays that make learning to read exceptionally challenging. Given these statistics, why is Katie's first-week experience all too common among teachers of low-income students? What accounts for the 70% of low-income fourth graders who have **not** acquired literacy skills in the expected manner? The association between poor reading outcomes and poverty or minority status no doubt reflects the accumulated effects of several risk factors, including lack of access to literacy-stimulating preschool experiences and to excellent, coherent reading instruction in the early elementary grades.

The raw difference in the number of words that, on average, poorer children encounter is also a factor. A landmark study conducted at the University of Kansas examined the exposure to verbal language of children in several socio-economic settings and found a dramatic difference in the total number of words heard by children at the high end of the socio-economic scale (45 million words over four years) and the children in the lowest sector of the socio-economic scale (13 million). All children will show up for Kindergarten on the same day, but one may have heard 32 million fewer words in his or her lifetime, a fact that will almost certainly affect how quickly a child can decode and understand words.⁹ Clearly, environmental factors—including those at play before children ever arrive at school—have an enormous impact on students' literacy development.

The multiple reasons for this gap do not change our responsibility to work to close it. But the language and literacy gap that exists, even amongst our Kindergarteners, has dramatic implications for *what* we do in the classroom and *how* we prepare ourselves to do it.

III. Why We Have a Literacy Course

We put special emphasis on teaching literacy at the summer institutes for two primary reasons. First, it is absolutely clear that teaching our students to read and write proficiently is critical to our ability to lead students to significant academic gains. By dramatically increasing our students' literacy levels, we put them on the path toward a better future. Second, teaching children to read and write is incredibly difficult. It is **not a process that we can design** simply by relying on our own education or advanced literacy skills. Our own love of and enthusiasm for books and reading will not be enough to create independent readers and writers either. **There is a science to teaching children to decode words and read independently, and as elementary teachers, it is our responsibility to learn it.** The reality for many of our students is that they are lagging dramatically behind their peers in literacy development; this fact only increases the sense of urgency with which we approach our own preparation and development as literacy teachers. This text will provide you with a scientific, research-based foundation for teaching your students how to decode and understand text.

IV. The Balanced Literacy Approach: Some History

Literacy is the foundation of every student's learning, and learning to read English is a particularly challenging task. Far from a perfect alphabetic system, the letters of our language do not always correspond to sounds in a consistent, one-to-one manner (consider the spelling of the /f/ sound in *father* and in *phone*). It is both the importance and challenge of learning to read the English language that led to

⁸ <http://www.aasa.org>, accessed 7/10/2010.

⁹ Hart, Betty and Todd Risley. *Meaningful Differences in the Everyday Experience of Young American Children*. Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes Publishing, 1995.

Fundamental Importance of Literacy

a great deal of controversy over the most effective ways to teach reading. Scholars, teachers, and researchers have long wrestled with how to teach students to understand and apply an imperfect alphabetic code without ignoring the whole purpose of being able to read—to understand and make meaning of written text.

From the colonial era through the mid-1800s, there was one common belief about how to teach children to read: teach them to decode (to break the complex alphabetic code through lots of exercises with letters and sounds), and give them material to read. Around the middle of the 19th century, many began to argue that breaking down the English language into sound-symbol relationships was too complex a process to ask children to learn. Horace Mann, the secretary of the Massachusetts Board of Education in the mid-1800s, suggested that educators should teach students to recognize whole words on sight, rather than requiring them to use the arduous process of decoding. Over the next 100 years, children read from books such as the *Dick and Jane* leveled readers, that contained primarily the words they had already been taught to recognize. Upon encountering a word that had not been taught, children were told to use picture or context clues to determine its meaning. The emphasis on teaching students to recognize whole words automatically and to use clues to determine the meaning of unfamiliar words became known as the whole language approach.

The inherent challenge of learning to decode words within such a challenging alphabetic code is illustrated in the following poem, entitled *Hints on Pronunciation for Foreigners*.¹⁰

I take it you already know
Of tough and bough and cough and dough?
Others may stumble but not you,
On hiccough, thorough, laugh, and through.
Well done! And now you wish, perhaps,
To learn of less familiar traps?

Beware of heard, a dreadful word
That looks like beard and sounds like bird,
And dead: it's said like bed, not bead —
For goodness' sake don't call it "deed"!
Watch out for meat and great and threat
(They rhyme with suite and straight and debt.)

A moth is not a moth in mother
Nor both in bother, broth in brother,
And here is not a match for there
Nor dear and fear for bear and pear
And then there's dose and rose and lose —
Just look them up—and good and choose,
And cork and work and card and ward,
And font and front and word and sword,
And do and go and thwart and cart —
Come, come, I've hardly made a start!
A dreadful language? Man alive.
I'd mastered it when I was five.

In the 1950s, the publication of a highly polemical book by Rudolph Flesch stoked the fires of controversy yet again by arguing that phonics (decoding words by examining relationships between sounds and letters) is the only natural way to learn to read English. He explained that for the previous hundred years, good readers had been teaching themselves to break the alphabetic code with little formal instruction. Flesch argued that to deny instruction in that code to children who could not teach it to themselves was undemocratic. In truth, it was not Flesch's ideas about the importance of phonics instruction that created such uproar; rather, it was his politically charged rhetoric. As Marilyn Jager Adams notes in *Beginning to Read*, Flesch's book had several negative consequences: it polarized the field of research on how children best learn to read and oversimplified the phonics-based approach to teaching reading.¹¹ For

¹⁰ From a letter published in the *London Sunday Times* (January 3, 1965). Reprinted in Adams, Marilyn J. *Beginning to Read: Thinking and Learning about Print*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990, p. 20.

¹¹ Adams, Marilyn Jager. *Beginning to Read: Thinking and Learning about Print*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990, p. 25.

the thirty years following the book's publication, many argued over the role that phonics instruction should play in American classrooms.

Fortunately, the long history of debate and rancor concerning the best way to teach reading—a history so contentious as to have been dubbed the “Reading Wars” by some scholars—has given way to a relative consensus among educators that is built on data-driven evaluations of the effectiveness of various instructional strategies. *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children*, a 1998 report from the National Research Council, noted that children master the important skills, strategies, and knowledge they need to become successful readers and writers most quickly and effectively if their teachers integrate both systematic instruction in letter-sound relationships *and* critical thinking about literature in to their literacy classrooms. Researchers and educators often refer to this multi-faceted approach as “balanced literacy” instruction.

To be clear, a balanced literacy approach to reading requires that students receive instruction and have practice in **both** decoding and comprehension processes. However, balanced literacy instruction **does not** simply integrate the teaching and practice of phonics with the reading of poems, stories, and pieces of expository texts. To understand this distinction, consider how a basketball coach prepares beginning players for the game. First, the coach must provide instruction in discrete skills, such as ball handling, passing, shooting, and guarding, and then ask the players to practice those skills in daily drills. A coach would never expect such fundamental skills to be picked up solely through playing the game. **In a similar way, balanced literacy teachers provide direct, explicit and systematic instruction in the foundational skills of reading (the letter-sound relationships that govern the English language) and allow ample opportunities for students to practice putting those decoding skills into action before sending them off to read.**

However, a basketball coach would not force his players to practice three pointers for several years before he allowed them to attempt that important shot in a game. If they never got to play the game, players wouldn't understand the purpose of all that skill-building practice and would probably lose interest in the sport altogether. The same is true for beginning readers. While they must have their daily practice in basic reading skills (phonics), they must also have a chance to get in the game—by reading books on their independent level and thinking about more challenging books that are read aloud to them.

To continue this analogy one step further, as basketball players improve, many of the foundational skills they've practiced in drills become second nature, and the intensity with which they're able to play increases. Whereas beginning players may only be able to run a “four passes and shoot” offense, advanced players will be able to execute more complicated patterns, like back door cuts, pick and rolls, and end-of-shot-clock plays. Likewise, beginning readers who receive explicit, systematic phonics instruction and practice decoding simple words and reading easy books will eventually find that their ability to decode has become so automatic that they have to expend little cognitive energy on the process. At that point, their mental energy can be used to read and comprehend increasingly complex words and texts. All analogies break down at some point, but our line of reasoning is clear. We cannot expect our students to “pick up” phonics skills simply by immersing them in literature.

What distinguishes balanced literacy instruction from other approaches is the time allotted for decoding and comprehension (more time for phonics instruction in Kindergarten and first compared to upper grades), the emphasis given to component skills (following a research-based scope and sequence for how to teach sounds and letters), and the contexts in which decoding and comprehension skills are taught and practiced (from Word Study to Read Aloud to Independent Reading) vary according to students' language and literacy needs. The appropriate methods through which you will teach students to decode and to comprehend, and the scientific research that points to the most effective methods for doing so will be the focus of the remainder of this text.

Fundamental Importance of Literacy

V. A Closer Look at Balanced Literacy Instruction

With the caveat that various researchers and educators have different formalized definitions of balanced literacy, at the core of this approach to teaching literacy are three, closely related concepts:

- **The Building Blocks of Literacy.** Balanced literacy calls for systematic, direct instruction of the underlying building blocks of reading and writing, including Book and Print Awareness, Phonological and Phonemic Awareness, Phonics and the Alphabetic Principle, Word and Structural Analysis, and Reading Fluency. Though subsequent chapters will explain these terms in great detail, the building blocks are the fundamental skills necessary to read independently, including: understanding the function and purpose of books and print; understanding that spoken speech is comprised of units of speech, like words, syllables, and individual sounds; using knowledge of letter-sound relationships to decode words; examining meaningful word parts, such as prefixes, suffixes, and roots; and, being able to decode automatically, so that reading is effortless and efficient.
- **Reading Comprehension.** Balanced literacy calls for many opportunities to think about and discuss books. Teachers provide students with explicit instruction and practice in how to use reading comprehension strategies to understand what they read. Additionally, because a wide vocabulary increases a student's ability to comprehend, teachers build students' vocabularies so that they know a multitude of words related to many content areas. Comprehension instruction is delivered in a variety of ways, from teacher-directed methods, such as modeled reading in the Read Aloud, to more student-directed methods, such as Guided Reading. This explicit instruction in comprehension strategies and vocabulary increases students' abilities to read and understand.
- **Writing.** Similarly, balanced literacy calls for frequent opportunities to write. Great literacy classrooms focus students' energy on transferring what they know about oral language onto the page and on using the writing process to communicate effectively. Additionally, great literacy classrooms focus on the defining characteristics of many genres, looking to published work as models and infusing these genre-specific characteristics into students' writing. Similarly to reading instruction, effective teachers employ a range of instructional methods, from teacher-directed to student-directed, in their writing lessons.

VI. Preview of the Literacy Text

The purpose of this text is to prepare you—a new teacher in an under-resourced school that serves students who will likely have lagging literacy skills—to use a balanced literacy instructional approach to teaching literacy. Thus, this text will provide you with research-based methods and tools for reading and writing instruction.

Corps members who are most successful as literacy teachers are those who approach literacy instruction with four key questions in mind. This course has been designed around those four questions:

What is literacy? Successful literacy teachers recognize that “literacy” is a complex idea, and that none of its various components can be emphasized to the exclusion of others. In **Chapter One**, we will explore several key components of “literacy,” emphasizing the implications of those components on your teaching. Those key components are:

- Book and Print Awareness
- Phonemic and Phonological Awareness
- Phonics and the Alphabetic Principle
- Word and Structural Analysis
- Reading Fluency
- Reading Comprehension Strategies
- Writing Skills and Strategies

What literacy knowledge and skills should I teach my students? In **Chapter Two**, we will survey the general evolution of literacy knowledge and skills that you should expect of your elementary school students by looking at the general literacy-related standards for each grade, K-5. We will examine how to use literacy diagnostics to determine individual student needs and how to track student progress toward literacy goals.

How do I teach literacy? This question dominates the rest of this course. While Chapter Two gives us a vision of where our students are headed, the next five chapters provide the vehicles for getting there.

- **Chapter Three - The Building Blocks of Literacy.** Chapter Three, in three parts, explores how to effectively teach the building blocks of literacy. Part I provides you with background knowledge about the construction of spoken and written English so that you will be prepared to help beginning and struggling readers learn to read. Part II looks at the foundational reading skills within each building block and discusses the order in which to teach those skills. In Part III, we turn to the most effective and efficient research-based methods that you will use to deliver instruction in the building blocks of literacy. With the assistance of the National Institute for Literacy's resource *Put Reading First*, found in the Related Readings section in the back of this text, we address some of the fundamental building blocks of learning to read.
- **Chapter Four - Reading Fluency: A Bridge from Decoding to Comprehension.** In Chapter Four, we consider several broad ways to build students' fluency (their ability to read as quickly and expressively as they talk) and then focus on a variety of instructional methods and techniques that will ensure your students leave your classroom on their way to reading quickly, effortlessly, and with meaningful expression.
- **Chapter Five - Methods of Comprehension Instruction: Vocabulary and Language Development.** Chapter Five explores methods for building and developing students' vocabularies to increase their comprehension. We will examine the critical role that vocabulary size, even for our youngest students, plays in determining reading comprehension. Then we'll look at instructional methods to use in the literacy and content-area classrooms, as well as daily practices that immerse students in a vocabulary-rich environment.
- **Chapter Six - Methods of Comprehension Instruction: Comprehension Strategies.** In Chapter Six, we take a look at the specific comprehension strategies that good readers use to construct meaning as they read and the instructional methods that good teachers use as they guide students to critically engage with many types of texts.
- **Chapter Seven - Methods of Writing Instruction.** In Chapter Seven, we take a three-part look at writing instruction. First we consider best practices for teaching the building blocks of writing, including English Language Conventions and penmanship. In Part II, we explore a series of the most effective instructional contexts for writing,

Fundamental Importance of Literacy

methods that fall along a broad continuum of teacher-directedness. Finally, we examine teachers' implementation of the writing process—pre-writing, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing—and look at how to teach students to identify the characteristics of genres and use those characteristics in their own writing.

How should I structure my classroom to teach literacy each day? In **Chapter Eight**, we will provide an overview of a balanced literacy block, explaining the purposes of and instruction methods used in each component of the block. We will provide you with some vivid images of what instruction looks like in a strong literacy classroom throughout a typical literacy block. We will survey instructional methods and classroom structures and systems that lead students to become proficient readers and writers.