Agora: Red Deer Polytechnic Undergraduate Journal
Volume 15:1 2024 Agora Conference Proceedings

Illiteracy in Today's Classroom: The Pedagogies That Can Help or Hinder Success

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Literacy, the ability to read and write, is an essential skill in North America. It is necessary for daily tasks such as using a recipe or following written instructions on a job site. It is also important when it comes to tasks such as dosing medication for yourself or children under your care. The ability to read and write also helps build critical-thinking skills, problem solving, and vocabulary, as well as empowering people to have a choice and a voice in all aspects of their lives (Frontier College, 2019, pp. 1-2). However, despite public education being a human right across the globe, as well as a law in Canada, over 48% of adults in Canada have extremely limited or nearly non-existent literacy skills (United Nations, 1990; Government of Canada, 2022; Statistics Canada, 2015). The Canadian government released the statistics for its first survey on literacy in 1991. It noted that at that time, the number of functionally illiterate adults was only at 16% (Statistics Canada, 1991, p. 9). How is it that our literacy rates have gone down so drastically over the past two decades? I believe that the pedagogical practices in the classroom have a direct impact on the ability of students to gain this important life skill.

To understand how to remediate literacy rates, educators must first understand how humans learn to read. There is a common assumption that learning to read is as natural as learning how to speak. That seeing and experiencing it, you become aware of how to use the squiggles on the page in connection to sounds you hear in speech. That is to say that simply by seeing text, and hearing text read, you understand how to get meaning, grammar, and the connection between the letters and the sounds they make. This is a common, yet incorrect assumption. Human brains are not wired for reading, rather the symbolic connection to verbal communication was created approximately 10,000 years ago (Wolf, 2008, p. 24), compared to the hundreds of thousands of years that Homo sapiens have existed on this planet. This means that our brains have had to change and evolve to this technology, making new neuropathways in our brains to create a connection between symbols or text to meaning.

Of course, before the world had neuroscience, brain imaging, or even the basic scientific studies on how human beings learn to read, we had anecdotal evidence and observations. Cuneiform tablets have been found which depict education in both reading and writing the

logographic language dating approximately 3300-3200 BCE (Wolf, 2019, pp. 31, 37). There are practice tablets depicting teachers and students writing words out together, this shows that there was direct instruction from teachers to students so that students could learn the proper formation of the symbols, as well as shows lists that focus on semantics and phonological elements of the symbols (Wolf, 2019, p. 39). Certainly, this is not the first written depiction of language, but one of the first examples of how the written language, and in turn reading, was taught (Wolf, 2019, p. 37-40).

The creation of phonetic alphabets simplified the ability to read and write, the grapheme (letter/symbol) more directly correlating to the phoneme (sound) that the grapheme represents. The Latin alphabet was created before 600 BCE and adjusted in the Middle Ages to add letters (Britannica, 2024; Venezky, 1999, p. 4). The letters are not perfectly formatted for the English language, which explains why there are 26 letters to depict 44 sounds (depending on the dialect used). The code needed to decipher English can seem complex, but there are rules and reasoning behind all the phonemes and graphemes used, largely it has to do with the borrowed words from other languages (Venezky, 1999).

Here lays the foundation of what has come to be known as "The Reading Wars," does the alphabetic code need to be explicitly taught to create good readers? In the early 1840s, Horace Mann took to the Massachusetts senate to discuss reform in literacy education, stating in regard to the alphabet, "They are skeleton-shaped, bloodless, ghostly apparitions, and hence it is no wonder that children look and feel so death-like, when compelled to face them" (Association of Masters of Boston Public Schools, 1844, p. 82). Instead, he spoke about teaching whole words to students, as this would create a happier time for the children. Yet, even here, the Association of Masters of the Boston Public Schools reminds the readers that the "duty" of the teacher should come before the "pleasure" of the child (1844, p. 85). This is to say, that the teacher ought to first educate the student about how to read before they can enjoy the process of reading.

The idea of teaching whole words first, then phonetics later became known as Whole Word teaching, and this method was used in schools across Canada and the United States. Readers, such as the Dick and Jane books work in the Whole Word fashion. The words match with the pictures and are used repeatedly throughout the text so that the student can memorize words because of the repeated exposure to them.

Rudolph Flesch wrote his book, *Why Johnny Can't Read and What You Can Do About It*, in 1955 to bring attention back to the phonics method as he saw there was a deficiency in the literacy skills of students in the education system. He broke down the history of the English language and studies that had been completed in the fifty or so years prior that were both for and against the teaching of the alphabetic principle. At this point, Flesch notes that there is only a need for remedial reading in the United States because they were not teaching the connection between letters and sounds that make the words (p. 18). He notes that it is far more difficult to course-correct reading issues once formed, as opposed to teaching phonics from the start (p. 18). He reports that all the studies that he has reviewed have shown that directly teaching phonics, as opposed to Whole Word methods is "superior" in results (p. 60).

This could have been the end of the debate, the research was showing that phonetic skills were necessary for success, but the idea persisted. What would come to be known as the Whole Language movement came about a century after Mann, and a decade after Flesch. Kenneth Goodman mirrored Mann's thoughts that the alphabet and phonics instruction was boring to students and tedious to teachers. Goodman wrote that reading was a "psycholinguistic guessing game" in 1967 and felt that readers perceive words based on clues they can pick up from within the word themselves. This idea evolved into what would become known as Three-Cueing. That is to say that a reader looks at the visual/graphic information as well as the meaning and structure of a text to know what they are reading (Goodman, 1976, p. 9), as opposed to decoding the sounds the letters make in each word. He went on to publish books where he smeared the idea of teaching phonics to children because it was "a flat-earth view" since it was simply reducing words to "matching letters with sounds" (Goodman, 1986, p. 37). He believed that learning to read was exactly like learning to speak, children just needed exposure to texts, and they would get it (1986, p. 9). He also went so far as to say that students who struggled with reading for any reason (including diagnosed learning difficulties) "suffer" when receiving remedial instruction as opposed to simply more exposure to books generally (Goodman, 1986, p. 36).

Goodman (1987) did not isolate learning to read in the Whole Language movement, he felt that writing would also be learned implicitly. If a student was exposed to both text and opportunity, then they would be able to write with meaning. He knew that there was a hierarchy in growth from where students would start writing and where they could finish, but he again

applied a discovery element. Goodman states that students will misspell words, use incorrect or no punctuation, as well as incorrect forms for writing, but with repeated exposure to reading and writing, they will "develop a sense" of how to do it correctly (1987, p. 51).

The Whole Language movement caught on like wildfire. As the President of the International Reading Association from 1981-1982, Goodman had a bigger audience for messages that disregarded the ongoing research on the reading brain, and disparaged diagnoses such as Dyslexia. The National Council for Teachers of English also continues to work on the foundational beliefs of Whole Language (n.d.).

At around the same time, Marie Clay, from New Zealand, wanted to study what techniques good readers use that struggling readers do not. She noticed good readers did not sound out words as they read them and she connected that to be a good reader, one must not use phonetic skills (Hanford, 2022a). This idea was the foundation of Reading Recovery, a program designed to remediate first-grade reading skills. The premise is to watch a student read and interpret the errors that were made (much like the idea of Goodman's cues). This program came to the United States in 1984 and Canada in 1993 (Reading Recovery Council of North America, n.d.). Clay mentions that the aim of the program is not to teach the students each sound a letter could make, but rather that the students must make a decision when they see some letters (Clay, 2016, p. 69).

In the 1990's a "solution" to the issue of literacy instruction was created called Balanced Literacy. It was a blend of Whole Language and phonics. However, there was no prescription for the amount of either practice that should be used, and often it leaned more toward Whole Language with phonics taught in small lessons as students learn "on the run" while reading and writing (Fountas and Pinnell, 2003, p. 1). Gay Su Pinnell and Irene Fountas saw Marie Clay speak in Ohio in the 1980s and used her work as a jumping-off point for their own system of reading using cues rather than explicitly teaching phonics (Hanford, 2022b). They explain that "word solving" can be completed in a multitude of ways, including looking at the letters and words as well as pictures (Fountas & Pinnell, 2017, pp. 362, 401). The key to success here is the repetition of predictable texts, much like Dick and Jane books of the past. The student should be "solving" words based on the meaning, syntax, and visuals in the sentence itself, rather than

sounding the word out because comprehension is the overarching goal (Fountas & Pinnell, 2017, p. 362).

There has been research, as Rudolph Flesch pointed out, since the 1900s that promotes the growth and education of our students with phonics; Gough and Tunmer created the Simple View of Reading in 1986, and Hollis Scarborough created The Reading Rope in 2001 to further solidify that research. These theories have worked together to consolidate the base of what is called Structured Literacy, which is backed by the science of reading. Gough and Tunmer asserted that language comprehension multiplied by decoding was equal to reading comprehension (1986). The Reading Rope goes deeper and defines what makes up the components; language comprehension is made up of background knowledge, vocabulary, language structures, verbal reasoning, and literacy knowledge, and word recognition is made up of phonological awareness, decoding, and sight recognition (Hollis, 2001). Through brain scans and imaging, it can be seen which parts of the brain are activated when reading as well as what changes occur as the brain grows from illiterate to literate (WISE Channel, 2013, 6:27-12:15). Research has further shown that despite our literacy rates in North America being approximately 50% that 95% of people can learn to read, they simply need explicit, systematic, and direct instruction (Young, 2023; Moats, 2020). The changes that are possible can be seen in Mississippi, where in 2013 they implemented a framework that brought their state reading scores from forty-ninth in the US, up to twenty-first in 2022 by using Structured Literacy in every school, by every teacher (Lurye, 2023).

Educators are leaving post-secondary institutions without the knowledge that they can meet the needs of 95% of their students through the pedagogy of Structured Literacy. Our students' basic right to education should foundationally include literacy, rather than leaving it to the whims of an educator. With a comprehensive knowledge base for teaching literacy backed by over a century of research, students should not be leaving twelve years of school unable to read. Adult comfort has historically been the limiting factor for student growth, and the approach is failing them. Mississippi has put in the work and the results are astounding, it was one of three states that did have gains over the pandemic (Lurye, 2023) which attests to the growth possible with Structured Literacy across North America. Our children, their futures, and our country are worth the effort and vulnerability the change will require.

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