

TREAD LIGHTLY: THE CEMENT IS NOT QUITE DRY

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Knowing how to best teach for literacy success is a careful walk of combining research and practice. As a practitioner, I want to know what to do. As a researcher, I want to find the next small step and the next big question. As a practitioner based in research, I aim to guide teachers in what is best for their learners. However, the conundrum is that research is ever evolving and it can be very hard to be definitive about what to do in practice. Research is cumulative and a scientific approach involves being open to not knowing and to **keep on looking**.

The experience of hearing researchers at the Society of the Scientific Studies of Reading conference (2023) made me think that following the research can sometimes be a walk along a newly cemented pathway. Researchers present tentative results and fledgling ideas. If we tread too boldly with too definitive an approach based on early results or one interpretation, we may become locked in a method that is later proved wanting. A narrow interpretation of the research puts us in danger of becoming stuck in the way previous methods are now accused of being stuck.

Taking a tentative approach does not mean we don't change the way we teach. It is important we keep open in our practice in teaching literacy as we find the best way for our learners. My personal experience with changing how I understand the teaching of reading is a story of being open to change (eventually), an experience that I have referred to as unstitching some of my teaching DNA. But we also need to be cautious of our new knowledge and our excitement with it and beware of narrow interpretations that might result in getting stuck.

The notion that nobody knows everything is a helpful one. The fact we don't know everything is not a hopeless cause nor an invitation to do whatever we like. There are some things we can know and do with confidence. There are other things we should approach more tentatively and with a light step. As much as we want a very clear pathway, following a narrow pathway can be counter to best practice that stands the test of time. We have seen this happen before.

The research to practice pathway has some cement already dry and other newer pathways that we need to approach tentatively. There are some non-negotiables. We must teach children to decode successfully and this involves explicit teaching. It is likely that a scope and sequence, and decodable texts help in establishing mastery of the early patterns for all learners and is an essential approach for those with any difficulty. We know handwriting and



spelling have a vital role in writing outcomes and that handwriting affects both spelling and reading acquisition. We must give many opportunities for children to develop strong oral language, including vocabulary and sentence structure. We know background knowledge is important to understanding a wide range of texts.

But there are many ideas that are more tentative. The number of spelling patterns that need to be taught before self-teaching begins is unknown, but self-teaching must occur for efficient and sustained learning. How long we need to use decodable texts for is an under-researched area so we must tread carefully with guidelines. It is not clear the role that explicit teaching of syllables plays and whether this teaching is confusing for some learners. Some researchers advocate for phonological awareness tasks without letters, while others state that phonological is best taught with the letters. These are just a few of the ideas I have heard arguments about and loud voices can crowd out healthy discussion and make experienced and capable teachers feel they can no longer trust the teacher they have been.

For a successful change to literacy practice, we must be careful not to get locked into ideas that haven't set yet. We can hold opinions gently to bring others along and to give ourselves the chance to continue growing. We need practitioners who try out resources and continue to watch and think and respond to their learners as they implement new practices. Teachers deserve to have their experience and expertise valued. They must have licence to question and they need support to keep on finding out. We all do.

The approach of not knowing may be uncomfortable for those of us who are more of the practitioner. For researchers, it is just one more step. We do know some things about how to teach reading and writing but we can't know everything. No-one can. As practitioners, I hope we can remind ourselves to tread lightly on cement that might not be quite dry so that our practice can stand the test of time for the sake of our learners.

For those interested in considering how to implement literacy with a treading lightly approach, the table below shows **some** key ideas in literacy, and briefly outlines what we know, and what we might need to keep thinking about. The treading lightly section suggests how we might approach the thinking in our practice, using the evidence.

The table is not a definitive document but an invitation to learn more. I hope it shows that there is a way forward that involves considering what research tells us for practice even if not in absolutes. I know I have to challenge myself to read beyond things that just confirm what I think is right and walk in the uncomfortable place of reading things that challenge.

There are many other ideas that could be explored and the ideas here are an example of exploring the tensions and possible solutions.

THINGS WE KNOW	QUESTIONS WE STILL HAVE
How we learn to read words Neuroscience (e.g. Deheane, 2009) confirms earlier reading models (e.g. Seidenberg & McClelland, 1989) that the reading process occurs as a grapheme/phoneme activity with meaning involved after a decoding attempt.	Set for variability research is working to find out what we actually do (meaning, phonics, syntax) to make a fix-up when our first attempt is incorrect. (Steady et al, 2020; Venezky, 1999)
Treading lightly: Teach children to use the graphemes to decode words. Bring in meaning once a decoding attempt has been completed. Following a scope and sequence means decoding attempts are more successful in the early stages of learning. Oral vocabulary assists with the target word if first attempt is close.	
A progression for phonics knowledge Learning to read and spell the printed code of English follows a progression from closed syllable CVC words through to more complex spellings of vowels and on into syllables. Ehri (2020); Gentry (2004). Not all PGCs need explicit teaching as self-teaching takes over (Share; Arrow & Tunmer)	Opportunities to self-teach (Share, 2008) Best balance for explicit teaching and incidental learning (Hepplewhite) How much and when to teach syllables. Over-emphasis on syllables may add to cognitive load (Kearns). How to use morpheme knowledge to move from GPCs to larger chunks
Treading lightly: Follow a scope and general sequence but it doesn't have to be lock-step. Use a programme that works for your learners and for your teaching. Be responsive. Employ some flexibility in teaching (teacher knowledge needed for this). Use the syllables as logical touchpoints that are built from learning the key spelling patterns for the vowel sounds (short vowels, long vowels, other vowels, reduced vowel). Progress from mastery of smaller units to larger units to work with multi-syllable words. Be aware that syllable types may not be necessary or helpful for all learners or all words.	
Using decodable texts Decodable texts appear to be useful when learners are first learning how the printed code works. They give more surety of pattern. (Castles, Nation, Rastle 2018) Authentic or natural language texts give more opportunities to engage with irregular and high frequency words and a range of patterns and sentences (Solity 2009)	Optimum time and use of decodable texts is unclear. When will moving to authentic texts be a more useful approach? Can a combination of decodable plus natural language be used and how.
Treading lightly: Use decodable texts to establish early level code and follow through but keep eye on children's progress and difficulty. Consider how to involve learners in authentic text e.g., shared book approach of less controlled patterns; use poems and read aloud of a wide range of texts.	
Teaching handwriting Handwriting training positively affects writing outcomes (Berninger et al; Graham et al) Regular teaching with modelling and monitoring is important	Teach according to letter shapes? Print or cursive; pen or pencil When capital letters are taught Particular programmes Opportunities for older learners
Treading lightly: Ensure we teach letter formation through to fluency. Teach handwriting as a whole class lesson as well as formation in small group sessions. Use pencil for tidy corrections. Add cursive when shapes are secure. Choose a programme that works for you and your learners.	
Teaching alphabet Mastery of alphabet knowledge is vital for reading and writing	Name vs sound or both Names help with sound (Ehri) but names can confuse some children Order of learning and best sequence
Treading lightly: Children will eventually need both name and sound. Find ways to use both, for example we might say alphabet poems and songs using names but in reading and writing use the sound. Watch out for confusion and which students may need to focus more on sound. Whole class daily alphabet work, including alphabetic order is likely important.	
The place of phonological awareness Phonological and particularly phonemic awareness is associated with reading scores Phonemic awareness is vital for reading and spelling	Phonological awareness at syllable and rhyme level? Teaching phoneme awareness with or without the letters? Having a separate PA time?
Treading lightly: Read poems and rhymes that give opportunities to find the rhyme, the same sounds, the rhythm (syllables). Play games that involve finding a word's first sound, last sound, middle sound, clap syllables, make rhymes, blend sounds to make a word m-a-p → map, and segment a word to find the sounds 'map' → m-a-p. Listen for phonemes and bring in letters to support understanding of sound and letter. Consider how PA teaching is best implemented.	
Comprehension Reading comprehension relies on decoding the words efficiently and comprehension in oral language mode. Oral vocabulary assists with decoding real words (Tunmer & Chapman, 2012) Comprehension relies on background knowledge and inferencing skills (Shanahan, 2023)	Balance of building background knowledge and teaching comprehension strategies Best way to teach or provide opportunities for comprehension to develop?
Treading lightly: Ensure learners have lots of opportunities to grow their knowledge AND to learn some strategies (how to apply the knowledge to this particular text or context). Opportunities to build vocabulary. Use of well-crafted picturebooks as whole class read aloud invites use of inferring strategies. Topic-centred learning builds background knowledge.	

SOME USEFUL LINKS

Debbie Hepplewhite about the balance of explicit and incidental teaching <https://phonicsinternational.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Set-for-Variability.pdf>

Kearns, D 2020 Does English have useful syllable division patterns <https://ila.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1002/rrq.342>

Syllable types may add to cognitive load and the role of morphemes <http://dyslexiahelp.umich.edu/answers/ask-dr-pierson/syllable-division-new-data-can-inform-intervention>

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