

WHAT WORKS BEST FOR STRUGGLING READERS

THE ANSWERS MIGHT SURPRISE YOU

BY GEORGIE NORMAND, M.A.



READ THE ROOM: With reading fluency being a key predictor of school outcomes, reading scores represent a high stakes measure in terms of a child's academic and career trajectory.

The recently released 2022 Nation's Report Card for Reading showed the largest drop in reading achievement since the 1980s. While the educational chaos created by the pandemic certainly impacted performance, the sad truth is that reading scores have been in the basement for a good long time.

In pre-pandemic 2019, only 35% of fourth grade students scored in the *at or above proficiency* range. This means there are a lot of struggling readers out there. Without aggressive intervention, very few fourth graders with low reading proficiency will be able to catch up. With reading fluency being a key predictor of school outcomes, reading scores represent a high stakes measure in terms of a child's academic and career trajectory.

WHY SO MANY STRUGGLING READERS?

IT'S COMPLICATED...

STUDENTS WITH DYSLEXIA

Parents who have spent years reading to their child daily are often shocked when they find out their child is struggling to learn to read. You will sometimes hear that reading to your child will either prevent or fix reading problems. Reading to your child is very beneficial in terms of building oral language skills such as vocabulary and syntax, background knowledge, critical thinking skills, and comprehension – all skills that build a great foundation for learning to read. But it will take a dyslexia-specific intervention to teach your dyslexic child to read.

Experts estimate that up to 20% of children may have some of the characteristics of dyslexia that make learning to read difficult. If a dyslexic child does not attend a school where universal dyslexia screening is implemented in kindergarten (or earlier), they will likely not receive an early intervention and will quickly fall behind their peers. Many states are mandating early screening and intervention, but implementation is lagging in many schools.

The National Reading Panel (2000) identified five critical skills that should be included in reading instruction for all students – phonemic awareness (an awareness of individual sounds or *phonemes* needed for both reading and spelling), phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. Another key finding of the panel was that *explicit* and *systematic* phonics instruction is beneficial for all students and may even prevent reading failure in many at-risk students.

PHONOLOGICAL SKILLS ARE NOT ENOUGH

As important as they are, phonological skills are not sufficient to produce fluent reading. Studies have found that over 60% of dyslexic students have a double deficit of both phonological awareness and rapid automatized naming (RAN or rapid naming). A deficit in RAN impacts a student's ability to become a fluent reader. This means that interventions that focus primarily on phonics and only secondarily on fluency training will not be able to help students reach grade level fluency. Fluency training has also been found to serve as a shortcut to reading acquisition, helping dyslexic students make greater gains in far less time than with a primarily phonological approach to intervention.

HANDWRITING FLUENCY BUILDS READING FLUENCY

Fluency training activities should include extensive handwriting instruction and practice, especially timed handwriting tasks, such as timed handwriting from dictation or timed copy work. Handwriting is often minimized in dyslexia interventions, which is unfortunate because neuroimaging studies have found that even tracing letters builds the reading circuit of the brain. Handwriting fluency facilitates reading fluency. Other fluency-based activities such as repeated timed reading tasks have also been found to improve brain connectivity and fluency. In most schools, dyslexia interventions do not prioritize fluency training and the interventions are not implemented early enough to prevent reading failure. This is a tragedy, since we now know that as early as the first grade, these children are already behind their peers in reading.

THE DILUTION PROBLEM

For dyslexic students, the explicit and systematic phonics instruction model combined with a heavy focus on fluency training should never be diluted with other reading instruction methodologies. For example, while learning to read, dyslexic students should only practice reading using *decodable* text which is based on concepts and word patterns they have been explicitly taught so far. But instead, dyslexic students are usually thrown with their peers into a *leveled* reading system that pushes them into a word-guessing habit that is very hard to break once it's established. Even non-dyslexic students can develop a guessing habit when explicit instruction isn't supported with decodable text.

The assigned levels used in leveled reading systems are based on "readability measures" rather than explicit instruction the student has received. The leveling of stories, books, and articles often relies on complex algorithms to determine reading levels. This approach to reading instruction and practice leaves dyslexic students in the dust. It is not uncommon for those in kindergarten and above to be brought to tears when they realize how far they are from reading at the levels occupied by their classmates.

There are several ways to avoid this scenario. First, dyslexia screening in early fall of PreK (or at the very least during the first few weeks of kindergarten) followed by intervention could rescue many of these students from the humiliation, embarrassment, and anxiety they begin to feel very early in their academic life.

Secondly, since leveled reading systems are especially unfair and even detrimental to the dyslexic student, they should be allowed to

practice what they've learned using the antidote – decodable text. One criticism of decodable text is that even decodable books tend to be dull and contrived. But decodable text is only a temporary crutch, serving as a gateway to reading. With intensive work, dyslexic students, like most readers, will be able to read

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with automaticity, instantly recognizing the majority of words by sight, and the need to decode words when reading will diminish.

Extensive practice with decodable text is a temporary but necessary pathway to reading proficiency for dyslexic students. Explicit instruction and practice with decodable text is beneficial for all students, but compared to their classmates, dyslexic students need even more. Because of their brain differences in neuroplasticity, connectivity, and structure, they will need a considerable amount of repetition, ongoing cumulative review, and fluency training to internalize instruction – a process that takes more time than the regular class reading block would permit. They need daily intensive one-on-one or small group intervention outside the reading block.

OTHER STRUGGLING READERS

DYSLEXIC STUDENTS REPRESENT ONLY ONE PART OF THE MANY STRUGGLING READERS REFLECTED IN THE NATION'S REPORT CARD SCORES. WHAT IS CAUSING THE OTHERS TO STRUGGLE? THE RESEARCH HAS IDENTIFIED SEVERAL CONTRIBUTING FACTORS AND HOW TO ADDRESS THEM.

THE DECLINE OF HANDWRITING

One study suggests that handwriting instruction and practice is being minimized in schools and is contributing to reading related disabilities. It's not uncommon for students to spend more time "filling in the blanks" rather than writing sentences and paragraphs. Since neuroimaging studies have found that handwriting builds the reading circuit, handwriting should play a greater role in the typical school day.

ADD/ADHD

If your child struggles to read and has not been identified as at-risk in a dyslexia screening or formally diagnosed with dyslexia, there may be other factors at work. For example, ADD/ADHD can interfere with the process of learning to read. Being responsive to reading instruction requires focus and for many students the attention deficit symptoms must be addressed before reading instruction can be successful. Comprehensive assessment would be appropriate if your child has not responded to instruction and dyslexia has been ruled out.

HOME AND SCHOOL LITERACY ENVIRONMENT

Reading acquisition can also be influenced by the home literacy environment, the child's household socioeconomic status (SES), teacher training at the university level, and the type of reading instruction offered by the school.

Students from low SES households often enter school with weaker oral language skills, especially vocabulary. Reading acquisition is harder for them. The good news is that a seven-year longitudinal study found that the same explicit instruction that works for dyslexic and other students can level the playing field for students who come from low SES households. Although a strong home lit-

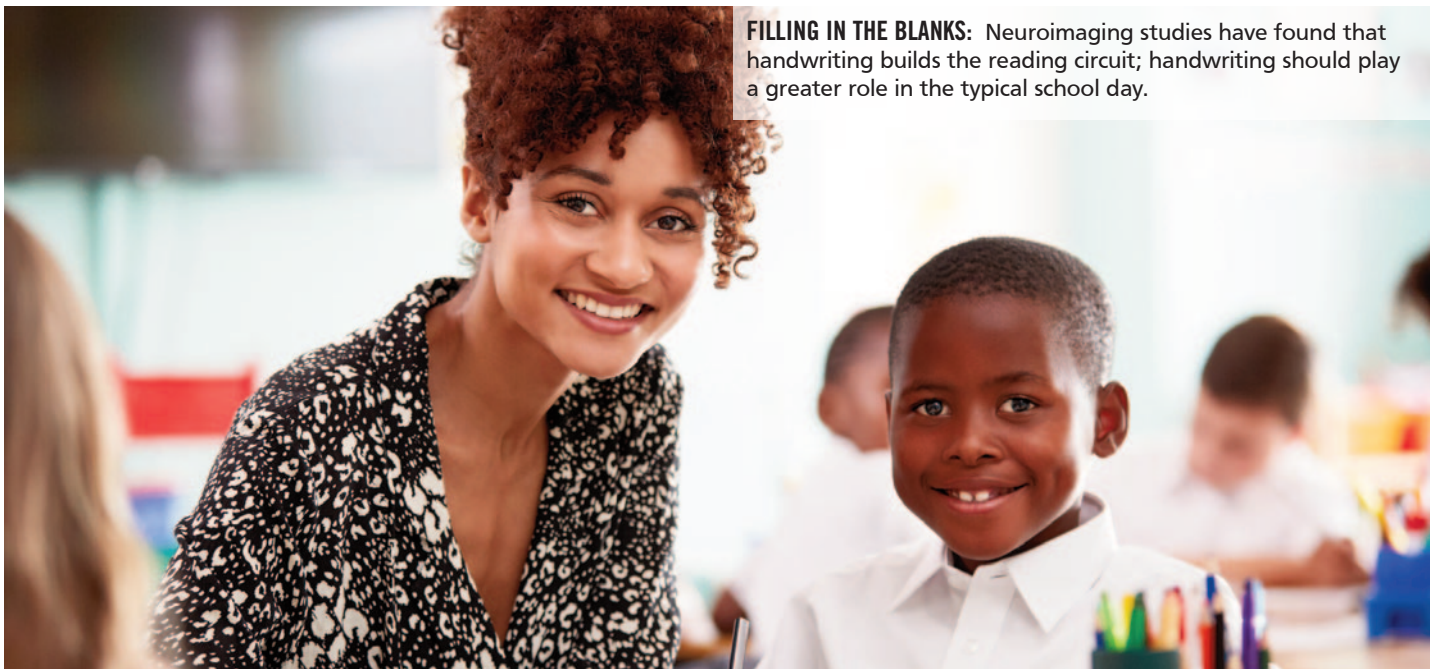
eracy background is helpful, explicit instruction can open the door to a literacy-rich academic life for those who enter school without it.

Teacher preparation programs may also be implicated in the number of students who are not reading *at or above proficiency* levels. For decades, teacher education programs have focused on everything but explicit and systematic phonics instruction. Most teachers who graduated from these programs had no idea where to begin when they entered the classroom. With no other guidance, many were forced to rely on the literacy program selected by the district for their scope and sequence for reading instruction.

These programs were often developed by curriculum publishers who followed the theories and trends prevalent in the teacher education programs, a school of thought and practice commonly referred to as *balanced literacy*. This approach minimizes the importance of explicit and systematic phonics instruction. Even after the 2000 National Reading Panel settled the question and recommended that explicit phonics instruction be included in the essential components of reading instruction, many schools continue to offer balanced literacy programs.

The rationale behind balanced literacy is that if children can just dive in and start reading books they enjoy with some guidance, they will love reading and become good readers. But this method encourages students to rely on context, pictures, and a lot of guessing to "read," without building the foundational phonics and fluency skills needed for comprehending what is being read. The Nation's Report Card scores for recent decades certainly do not provide a strong endorsement for the balanced literacy approach. Fortunately, the pendulum is finally beginning to swing away from the balanced literacy approach towards the explicit and systematic early reading instruction recommended in the body of research commonly called the Science of Reading (SoR).

FILLING IN THE BLANKS: Neuroimaging studies have found that handwriting builds the reading circuit; handwriting should play a greater role in the typical school day.



THE GROWTH OF ONLINE DATA-DRIVEN READING PLATFORMS

The steady growth in the use of data-driven platforms to differentiate instruction and provide real time progress monitoring for an entire classroom offers many benefits for both students and teachers. Originally designed to support and supplement teacher-led reading instruction and track student progress in the critical reading domains, an unexpected outcome may be an over-reliance on the system and less direct instruction and monitoring by the teacher.

Even with the detailed reports these platforms generate for the teacher about student performance, they can conceal some reading proficiency issues. For example, many of these programs rely on

silent reading followed by the student's response to multiple choice comprehension questions on what was read. With less teacher involvement, students can advance in reading levels with "good guessing" on the comprehension questions. Dyslexia-related reading behaviors and other reading issues are often missed in this environment. All students need immediate feedback on their oral reading and careful monitoring of their comprehension. It is so important for teachers to continuously listen to their students read aloud for authentic progress monitoring. This may be a bigger contributing factor to the Nation's Report Card scores than we are willing to admit. •

READ ON : RESOURCES AND RECOMMENDATIONS



Advocate for early dyslexia screening for your child or students – as early as PreK if possible. This is very important, especially if there is any family history of reading problems or a history of early language delay for the child. For children identified to be at risk, the screening should be immediately followed by a dyslexia-specific intervention that includes a special focus on fluency (handwriting fluency and reading fluency). Phonological skills are not sufficient to produce fluent reading.



Advocate for explicit phonics instruction in your child or students' reading program to prevent reading failure.



Advocate for fluency training to be included in your child or students' reading instruction and/or intervention. It is a key predictor of school outcomes, and is often neglected in both reading instruction and intervention. Add timed handwriting tasks to daily assignments.



Spend as much time as possible with your child or student listening to them read aloud. Look for any unusual reading behaviors. Download our resource *What Dyslexia Looks Like by Grade Level*. These are not the same errors made by beginning readers. www.earlyliteracysolutions.com



After listening to your child or student read, ask a few comprehension questions about what they have read and ask them for a retell. They need to start with the main idea if it is an information article, rather than a detail. For a story, they need to give you the big picture before launching into any details. It must be retold in the proper order, not starting in the middle of the article or story. This activity also prepares them for the writing process, which is so difficult for struggling readers.



Make sure that there is not an overdependence on online data-driven platforms for instruction and progress monitoring. Use these programs to supplement/support the explicit instruction received.

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