

Myths and Misconceptions about literacy

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- 1. There is no need to worry if a child does not seem to 'catch on' to reading in the first three years of school because eventually it will 'click' and he/she will catch up to the other children.**

Not true.

Research has shown that of the children struggling with reading in year 1, 88% will still be struggling in year 3. Children who don't make good progress, or completely fail, to learn to read in the first 2 years of school are likely to continue to struggle. They will gradually fall further and further behind the other students, and unless rescued by intensive intervention, will end up leaving primary school with very poor reading skills. These children are likely to be disadvantaged for the rest of their school careers and beyond.

There are a few reasons why some children struggle with developing reading skills in the early years, but none of them are overcome simply by waiting. Some children suffer from frequent ear infections, resulting in intermittent deafness, which can make most classroom learning difficult, but especially affects language development and isolating sounds in words. Others have language, attention or short term memory difficulties which can make the classroom a very frustrating learning environment. Unfortunately, the most common reason for early literacy problems is actually lack of appropriate instruction in the essential skills like phonemic awareness and phonics. These children are called 'instructional casualties' by learning difficulties academics. Their difficulties have been created by the school teaching program.

I have a new student who is in year 6 and has almost nonexistent reading and spelling skills. Joseph can read and write a few high frequency words and knows the sounds of the single consonants, but has no idea how to handle the vowels in words.

His history is a familiar one. He had ear infections as a young child with undiagnosed intermittent deafness, which made learning phonics skills in the first 2 primary grades very difficult, if not impossible. Unfortunately, or I should say disastrously, no one at his school made the effort to teach him the essential skills once his ear problems were overcome. He has tried to learn to read by whole word memory and guesswork, but this has not worked and now, unless his parents and I can rescue him, he has a bleak future. Joseph has been seriously let down by the education system. It is not the child who has failed but the school.

The ideal time for children to learn basic literacy skills is in the first three years at school. During the prep/kindergarten year children should develop their phonemic awareness by learning to identify individual sounds in words like the 'c', 'a', 't', in cat and to blend those sounds into words. Phonemic awareness is a necessary prerequisite to learning phonics skills, which involve linking each letter of the alphabet, or groups of letters, like 'ar' or 'ch', to one or more sounds, so that words can be read or written by blending the sounds into words. This enables children to read and write simple phonetically regular words like 'bed' and 'stop'. During this first year of school, children should also learn to recognise about 40 high frequency words like 'said' and 'they' which are not easy to sound out. In Year 1 and

Year 2 they can further develop their phonics skills and work on reading fluency and comprehension and spelling skills, so that by year 3 the basic skills are in place. At his stage children should be able to use their reading skills for the enjoyment of books and to further their learning across the curriculum.

All schools teach the recognition and writing of the letters of the alphabet using direct instruction and most also teach recognition and writing of the high frequency words like 'the' and 'they' the same way. However many schools then replace the direct instruction with immersion methods, which require children to develop their reading and spelling skills through experience, rather than through systematic explicit teaching of the skills. Children, like Joseph, who start to flounder at this point, will effectively drown if their teachers continue to expect them to pick up the skills from classroom reading and writing activities.

This disaster can and should be avoided with an early intervention program for children at risk, or showing signs of difficulty. Individual or small group teaching, targeting the essential skills, can ensure that they master reading skills just like everyone else. This intervention should start as soon as difficulties are detected, or even earlier, if screening tests reveal risk factors such as attention, memory or language difficulties.

Children like Joseph, struggling with hearing sounds in words and blending sounds to make words (phonemic awareness), must be helped to develop these skills so that they can use them for reading and writing. They must also be taught the letter-sound combinations (phonics) to the point that they are automatic, and words can be decoded at fluent reading speed. This takes time to learn and apply, but every child can do it, given appropriate instruction and guided practice. Some children do need daily small group or even individual teaching to master the skills and this may be required for a short or extended period, but for those that need it, the extra teaching and practice is vital and can make the difference between success and failure at school.

It is very important that children at risk of literacy failure are not be encouraged to rely on visual memory of whole words or guessing from context and pictures, as Joseph was, as these strategies do not lead to success in the long term. Even though progress might seem frustratingly slow, for eventual success, the phonics skills must be developed and sounding out words must remain the first strategy for reading and writing unknown words. It is a pity that Joseph was not given this assistance any stage of his primary school career.

Learning literacy skills requires a level of effort and practice similar to that naturally used by the child in learning a first language. Small children spend many hours a day practising language and building up their general knowledge. It is very important to encourage children to maintain this drive for learning, so that they can continue to be active learners and practise literacy skills beyond the formal lesson. The way to do this is to make learning personally rewarding and fun. 'Fun' does not mean that exercises always have to be embedded in games, as quick paced exercises presented in a cheerful, non threatening way can also be fun. Nothing spurs children on to further effort more than seeing their own progress – and nothing discourages them more than repeated failure.

Most of all, children struggling with reading skills for any reason should not be left until 'it clicks' and be expected to pick the skills up themselves when they are ready. It won't happen

2. Children can learn to read the same way that they learn to talk, by immersion.

Not true.

Children learn to talk instinctively, as long they hear speech and have the opportunity to practise it by interaction with people. Children learn language by working very hard at it, every waking moment from babyhood. They listen to the language of their family, copy it, make connections with meaning and grammatical patterns and, most of all, they practise and practise and practise. Little children depend heavily on their family members to provide the feedback that guides them in making language decisions.

Unfortunately, while language is an essential base for the development of literacy, reading and writing are not acquired by instinct – they must be taught.

There are other factors which make written language more difficult to learn than spoken language. Spoken language is obviously a verbal skill and thus uses different parts of the brain to written language, which has both visual and verbal elements, and spoken and written language also use different kinds of memory.

It is only in recent history that everyone was expected to acquire literacy skills, but now every child must learn to read and write to a certain level to be able to participate in the modern world. People commonly avoid activities that they are not naturally good at, like singing, public speaking and sport, but children cannot afford to opt out of learning to read and write. They must acquire the skills no matter how difficult it proves and they must receive the teaching that is needed even if it means small group or individual instruction.

Because reading is a complex task with several component skills that need be learnt separately and then co-ordinated, it must be taught directly and systematically. A few children pick up the skills easily, but most need explicit direct instruction with plenty of supervised practice. The major components of this instruction are phonemic awareness, phonics, sight word recognition, fluency and comprehension strategies. For spelling there are rules to be learnt as well.

Expecting children to acquire these skills through exposure to text in interesting books, lots of encouragement and a few helpful hints simply does not work. After 25 years of the whole language method dominating the teaching of literacy, Government statistics show that about 50% of children leaving school have poor reading skills and between 10% and 20% have serious difficulties. This clearly indicates that it is time to abandon this way of teaching and return to the scientifically proven method of direct instruction of basic skills, including phonics.

3. If the whole language method works for some children and the phonics method for others, a combined approach should work for all children.

Not true.

Whole language and phonics based methods are diametrically opposed and cannot be effectively combined. According to educational theorists, 'whole language' is a so called 'top down' method and phonics based methods are 'bottom up' methods. 'Top down' means that the child is presented with the complex skill to be acquired in its whole form and is required to learn it by working out the component skills, through trial and error, gradually getting closer to the target skill, with effort and environmental feed-back. 'Bottom up' means that the component skills are directly taught, starting at the simplest level and gradually developed and combined through guided practice, until the whole complex skill is mastered.

Language is learnt 'top down', assisted and motivated by instinct, but most other life skills including sports, music and literacy are best learnt by a 'bottom up' method. Teaching reading by a 'top down' method requires children to work out the letter and word patterns and rules for themselves while 'bottom up' methods teach those patterns and rules. The main feature of whole language teaching is that children are taught to use guessing from pictures and context as the first strategy for reading an unknown word, while phonics methods teach children to sound out the word as the first strategy.

Another feature of the 'whole language' method is the incidental introduction of letter sound relationships and spelling rules as they occur in reading material, such as in Big Book class reading activities. A few children benefit from this informal style of teaching, but most need a more direct approach with structured practice following the explicit teaching of the component skills.

The reading of small books for the practice of skills and the development of fluency and comprehension also differs. Whole language recommends the use of small attractive books with plenty of pictures and context clues to support the guessing of unfamiliar words, but with no control on the complexity or phonetic regularity of the words. Children learning to read by a phonics and rule based method can enjoy these books and can often decode the words even if they are complex. However they get more benefit from books that are more vocabulary controlled to ensure that they can decode the words with their current skills. Phonetically difficult words in these books are usually limited to the high frequency words that are read automatically because of frequent exposure and spelling knowledge.

A compromise between the two approaches is likely to result in compromised skills, particularly the phonics skills, which should be taught explicitly and systematically and not incidentally. All children benefit from direct instruction in phonics skills, and it is vital for children at risk of difficulties with reading. Using 'guessing from context strategies' for word identification as taught by the whole language method, is actually counterproductive for children developing their reading skills as it does not lead to long term success. When people talk about a combined approach they usually mean adding a bit of phonics to a 'whole language' program, but while a little phonics is better than none, it does not compensate for the inadequacies of a method that has failed countless children in the last 25 years.

4. Children should use strategies to learn to read according to their natural strengths and weaknesses.

Not true.

Susan was a bright girl, keen to be a good reader, who decided some time in year 1 that she was so good at remembering words that she didn't have to bother with phonics for either reading or spelling. Fortunately in Year 2 her faulty strategies were picked up in a routine screening test and she was assigned to a learning support group to practice phonics skills and their application in reading. Without this intervention, Sandra would almost certainly have faltered in her apparently normal progress in reading by Year 3. She would most likely have lost interest in reading for pleasure, and started to avoid reading tasks because it had become too hard to visually remember every word, which was the only skill she had developed. Fortunately this crisis was avoided for Sandra by good teaching.

Heather was not so lucky. She had happily relied on her whole word recognition and guessing from context as her only strategies for reading and when she moved to a new school in Year 4, it was found that both her reading and spelling accuracy were very poor. Heather was not actually aware of her inadequate skills, but her parents were and they were very worried. Heather was placed in a learning support group for intensive practice of reading and spelling skills and with the help of her parents, was back on track to become a successful reader and writer by the end of the year.

Joseph found phonics extremely difficult in the early years because of intermittent deafness, so he was encouraged to use only whole word recognition as his reading strategy. Unfortunately no-one made the effort to teaching him phonics skills, even when his ear problems were overcome and he was left to stay a virtual non-reader right through primary school.

In a team sport like cricket, people develop their strengths and can sometimes avoid having to work on their weaknesses. So someone who is very good at bowling specializes in that skill, and as long as others in the team are good batsmen, does not have to feel he/she is letting the team down if they rarely make high score with the bat. However all members of the team are required to develop their fielding skills, even if they do not come naturally because every cricketer needs that skill. In the various football codes, there are specialists, but most of the team must have the basic ball skills and are required to work on all skills, particularly their weaknesses, to hold their place in the team.

Some activities like music and art rely on talents, which are natural strengths, coupled with skills practised under the guidance of a teacher, for excellence. Even the highly talented in artistic fields must practise the component skills to perfect them. Not everyone needs to be a musician or artist for a fulfilling life, so people without natural strengths in these fields often avoid them altogether or persist for a while and then turn to other activities.

However, reading is a complex task consisting of several sub-skills which have to be coordinated automatically at the speed of fluent reading. Recent developments in brain science have shown that everyone uses the same skills, in the same order, for accurate and fluent reading. The first step is letter shape recognition, which is then linked to the letter sound, which is followed by phonetic synthesis of the word, which results in word recognition. This is then linked to a meaning for the word which is confirmed from context.

Some high frequency words and groups of letters like digraphs and suffixes are recognised instantly as if they were single letters, but most words are phonetically analysed for recognition. There are two significant facts here. The first is that phonics is an essential

component skill used by every fluent reader. The second is that in the reading process, the attachment of meaning to a word comes last, so advising children to guess a word from its probable meaning is teaching them to go about the process the wrong way even if they are initially good at it.

It is clear that all children need to develop and use phonemic awareness and phonics skills even if they are not naturally good at them. Those who initially find the learning of these skills difficult can master them with extra help, usually involving more practice and more time. Children who use only visual skills for reading by the whole word method seem to succeed at first, but fall behind at about year three because they can no longer rely on memory to recognise and learn new words. By not teaching children the basic skills that are need for mastering of reading, or by advising children to concentrate on visual recognition of words and guessing from context, well meaning teachers are encouraging them to bypass the development of phonics skills with disastrous results.

5. The main determinant of a child's success with reading is the home environment.

Not true.

Children with low vocabularies and general knowledge and who have had limited experience with books and rhymes are at a disadvantage when they start school, but skilled teaching can overcome this. Most children, even those from low social economic backgrounds attend preschool where they can develop their language and phonemic awareness skills. All children can learn phonemic awareness in the first year of school and develop the required phonics skills for reading and writing with systematic direct instruction and plenty of practice. Some may need extra practice and one to one teaching regardless of their home background.

6. When faced with an unknown word a child should note the first letter of the word and then look at the picture or the rest of the sentence to decide what the word says.

Not true.

The first strategy to use is to sound the word out using phonics knowledge. If that produces a word that does not make sense in context then the child should check his sounding out or think of a word that is almost the same but would make sense. Guessing from context without first sounding out the whole word is inefficient and leads to inaccurate reading.

7. There will always be a percentage of children who don't learn to read regardless of the teaching methods used.

Not true

Given systematic direct instruction in phonics and other skills in the classroom, almost all children will learn to read to a functional level. Some will need some extra teaching and practice in the classroom and a few will need some one- to-one teaching outside the classroom, but all children should be able master the necessary school during their primary school years. All that is needed is good teaching.

8. Failure to learn to read is associated with low intelligence.

Not true.

Highly intelligence children can have difficulties with learning to read. Often it is the very bright children with good visual memories who struggle because they do not learn the essential phonics skills that are needed to decode unknown words. On the other hand, children who struggle with reading usually think they must be stupid.

9. Practising phonograms and sight words is boring.

Not true.

Children enjoy rote learning exercises especially when they can see how it helps them learn. Of course practice exercises should be short and restricted to skills or knowledge that do need the practice.

10. Reading books that are decode-able or vocabulary controlled is boring.

The stories need not be boring, particularly if they are short. They are extremely beneficial to children who need practice in context with decoding skills. Children enjoy reading them because they can see their own improving mastery of reading using phonics.

Not true.

11. The best way to learn spelling words is to write them out over and over again.

Not true.

Writing the same word repeatedly, requires the child to simply copy the word without actively recalling the spelling from memory or sounding out the word if it is not already stored in memory. This does not help the storage of the word in long term memory. On the other hand, being asked to write a word from memory or by sounding it out, with instant feed- back of the accuracy, does help in the memorizing of the word.

12. Homework in the primary years is valuable because it prepares the child for the heavier load of homework in the secondary years.

Not true.

Homework is only useful if it provides needed practice of skills learnt in class that day. A few minutes daily practice of spelling words that are not already known, number facts and reading skills, all with the supervision of a parent is helpful. Of course, reading for pleasure and information should occur daily, whether it is set as homework or not.

13. We can learn how to spell words from reading them.

Not true.

Reading and spelling are two quite different processes. We can read a word many times and yet still not remember how to spell it. Children need to learn to spell each word by writing it using phonics skills and spelling rules as well as visual memory. Writing a word in a sentence is a very good way to practice the spelling of the word.

14. Reading to children at home can stop once the child is learning to read.

Not true.

Sharing a book, story or poem with a child can and should continue as long as it is an enjoyable experience for the participants. Children develop their vocabulary and a love of literature from these experiences.

15. Nursery rhymes are old fashioned and are not understood or enjoyed by the modern child.

Not true.

Nursery rhymes are an important part of our culture. Children naturally love them and they are very helpful in developing phonemic awareness and a sensitivity to language.