



Teachers Criticize Their Colleges of Ed. for Not Preparing Them to Teach Reading

By Madeline Will · blogs.edweek.org · 4 min

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Last month, an audio documentary and article

provocatively titled "Why Aren't Kids Being Taught to Read?" sent shockwaves through the education community.

The premise of the story, reported by American Public Media's Emily Hanford, is that scientific research has shown how children learn to read. But many teachers either don't know that science or resist it.

"Most teachers nationwide are not being taught reading science in their teacher-preparation programs because many deans and faculty in colleges of education either don't know the science or dismiss it," Hanford writes. "As a result of their intransigence, millions of kids have been set up to fail."

Research shows that to learn how to read, children first need to be taught how letters represent speech sounds. But in many classrooms, teachers don't spend enough time on phonics, preferring to let students guess words from context clues and develop a love of reading through practice, rather than rote instruction, Hanford reported.

The "whole language versus phonics" reading wars have

been raging for decades: Do we need to explicitly teach students how to read, or will they pick it up through enough exposure to good books? Studies have "failed to find a positive relationship between encouraging reading and either the amount of reading or reading achievement," states a 2000 report from the National Reading Panel. On the other hand, the federally funded report concluded that phonics lessons do help students become better readers. (There has been limited widescale research on the subject since then.)

Now, many educators advocate for balanced literacy, an approach to reading instruction that emphasizes student choice of texts, independent reading (also known as sustained silent reading), and group discussions. The approach includes some phonics, but does not make that a focus.

That approach is still the norm in many classrooms and teacher-preparation programs, Hanford reports. For instance, in 2014, the former New York City schools chancellor pushed for schools to reinstate independent reading time.)

While Hanford's piece has received some criticism, it has struck a chord among teachers and other education advocates online. Some have begun sending open letters to the deans of their schools of education, complaining that they were not adequately taught how to teach reading.

Patricia James, a teacher who majored in elementary and special education at Arkansas State University, published an open letter to the school's dean on Arkansas' Decoding Dyslexia Facebook page.

"While I feel like most of my teacher preparation was very good, I can say I was totally unprepared to teach reading, especially to the struggling readers that I had at the beginning of my career in my resource classroom," she wrote.

Reading, James said, should not be a guessing game, and it becomes one with the balanced literacy approach. She concluded: "I find it disheartening and sad that teachers in the field are more knowledgeable about current research and practices than your professors."

After that, Robert Pondiscio, a senior fellow at the conservative Thomas B. Fordham Institute, followed suit, penning an open letter to the current dean of Mercy College, where he received his teaching credential.

"To earn my degree, I had to demonstrate my 'passionate commitment to learning' and show proof that I was a 'reflective practitioner,'" he wrote. "[T]here's no visible evidence, in my portfolio or in my memory, that suggests any attention to psychology, cognitive science, language development, or the rich body of research in those fields that might shape our views of teaching and learning."

On Twitter, teachers shared similar stories with Hanford:

*I find this so interesting that almost all of us were not taught to teach reading in our programs. I thought it was just me. We learned about read-alouds and vocabulary strategies, but were pretty much told if we get the child to enjoy reading, they will read.--
J.D. Ramsey (@writerramsey)*

I was taught almost nothing of any real use about how to teach reading. Most of what I've learned was

PD I paid to take or self-taught. I teach 2nd now and I'm a firm believer in a balanced literacy program. And yes, my 2nd graders still need systematic, explicit phonics.-- Vix in NV (@vix_cee) October 14, 2018

It was a sad mix of "history of literacy the wars"...followed by extensive focus on how to do a good "read aloud"....and finally how to use a writers notebook. In short, we were told many things theoretically about reading but never once looked at explicit phonics instruction.-- Mr. G (@MrGmpls) October 14, 2018

According to the National Council on Teacher Quality, only 37 percent of elementary and special education programs appear to be teaching scientifically based reading methods to preservice teachers.

Teachers, do you feel like your college of education adequately prepared you to teach reading? Did you learn phonics instruction? Let us know in the comments.

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