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United States

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The reading wars

American schools teach reading all wrong

Mississippi, a state not often associated with pioneering reforms, is teaching the rest of the country to read



Eyevine



HONICS, WHICH involves sounding-out words syllable by syllable, is the best way to

P teach children to read. But in many classrooms, *ff-on-ics* is a dirty sound. Kymyona Burk, who implemented Mississippi's statewide literacy programme, says that some teachers have had to sneak phonics teaching materials into the classroom, like some kind of *samizdat*. Teaching reading any other way is "malpractice", says Ms Burk. And yet for reasons that include politics, partisanship and personal experience, most American children are taught to read in a way that study after study has found to be wrong.

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The consequences of this are striking. Less than half (48%) of all American adults were proficient readers in 2017. American fourth graders (nine-to ten-year olds) rank 15th on the Progress in International Literacy Study, an international exam. And that was before covid-19 closed schools. According to UNESCO, American schools were closed either fully or partially for 56 weeks, compared with 47 in Canada and 27 in the United Kingdom and China. In theory the need to make up for lost schooling could be an opportunity to try something new. But America remains stuck in debate about teaching children to read that has been rumbling on for decades.

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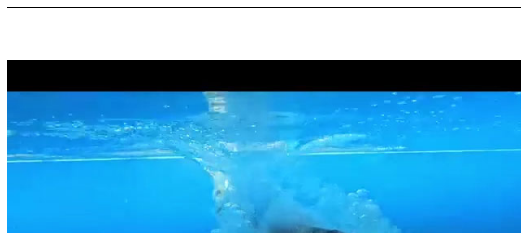
Some advocate teaching symbol-sound relationships (the sound *k* can be spelled as *c*, *k*, *ck*, or *ch*), known as phonics. Others support an immersive approach (using pictures of a cat to learn the word *cat*), known as “whole language”. Most teachers today, almost three out of four according to a survey by the EdWeek Research Centre in 2019, use a mix called “balanced literacy”. This mash-up of methods is ineffective. “You can’t sprinkle in a little phonics,” says Tenette Smith, executive director of elementary education and reading at Mississippi’s education department. “It has to be systematic and explicitly taught.”

Mississippi, often a laggard in social policy, has set an example here. In a state once notorious for its low reading scores, the Mississippi state legislature passed new literacy standards in 2013. Since then Mississippi has seen remarkable gains. Its fourth graders have moved from 49th (out of 50 states) to 29th on the National Assessment of Educational Progress, a nationwide exam. In 2019 it was the only state to improve its scores. For the first time since measurement began, Mississippi’s pupils are now average readers, a remarkable achievement in such a poor state.

Ms Burk attributes Mississippi’s success to implementing reading methods supported by a body of research known as the science of reading. In 1997 Congress requested the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development and the Department of Education to convene a National Reading Panel to end the “reading wars” and synthesise the evidence. The panel found that phonics, along with explicit instruction in phonemic awareness, fluency and comprehension, worked best.

Yet over two decades on, “balanced literacy” is still being taught in classrooms. This method, based on Kenneth Goodman’s “whole language” theory developed in the 1960s, views reading as a natural process that is best learned through immersion, similar to learning to speak. Goodman argued that reading is a “psycholinguistic guessing game”. He claimed that proficient readers do not identify every element in a text, so whole-language instructors encourage pupils to guess unknown words. Imagine a child is reading the sentence, “The rider leapt onto the back of his h___”, but is stuck on the last word. According to this philosophy, a child would be encouraged to look at pictures in the text and think about what would make logical sense as the next word, based on the meaning of the sentence, grammar rules and the spelling of the word.

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For most of the 20th century, reading methods were based on theory and observation. But advances in statistics and brain imaging have debunked the whole-language method. So why is it still being taught? One reason may be its appeal to personal experience. To the teacher who is a proficient reader, literacy seems like a natural process that requires educated guessing, rather than the deliberate process emphasised by phonics, explains Mary Clayman of the DC Reading Clinic, which trains teachers in Washington, DC. Teachers can imagine that they learned to read through osmosis when they were children, she explains. Without proper training, they bring this to classrooms.

Politics is also to blame, says Timothy Shanahan, who was one of the authors of the National Reading Panel study. Balanced literacy continues today as a political compromise among teachers and administrators. “It settled down the reading wars,” Mr Shanahan explains. “You give everybody something they want.” The compromise extends to teacher-training programmes too. Teachers College, Columbia University has two reading programmes: one is based on the science of reading and includes phonics, while the other is sending out teachers skilled in debunked balanced literacy.

Phonics has also become partisan. But (as was not the case with covid-19) here the Republican Party is on the side of science. Many states have noticed Mississippi’s success and have passed similar legislation. North Carolina passed a literacy bill in April mandating instruction based on the science of reading; Alabama’s literacy law, passed in 2019, does the same. Tennessee and Florida plan to leverage federal covid-19 relief funds for their science-based reading programmes. Each state has a Republican-led legislature. All but North Carolina have a Republican governor.

Meanwhile, Democrats worry that these literacy policies will hurt racial minorities and disadvantaged pupils, explains Ms Burk. In California, a Democratic state senator proposed removing a certification exam required for elementary-school teachers. The exam, implemented by Pete Wilson, a Republican governor, in the 1990s, assesses mastery of phonics, but has a high failure rate. Some blame this

exam for California's teacher shortage in low-income schools. Keeping pupils is also a concern. Mississippi's bill holds back third-graders who do not achieve reading proficiency. Opponents worry that this will also hurt minority pupils most.

Ms Burk disagrees. "This is an equity law," she says of Mississippi's much-imitated programme. "These things are already happening in our higher-performing schools, but they're not happening in our lowest-performing schools." Implementing good reading policy in states is difficult, warns Mr Shanahan. "I love this idea of the states being this laboratory of democracy where we try things out in one state, and if it works, we take it someplace else," he says. "But if you're going to do that, you actually have to take what those successful states did. Not just a piece of it. All the hard parts." ■

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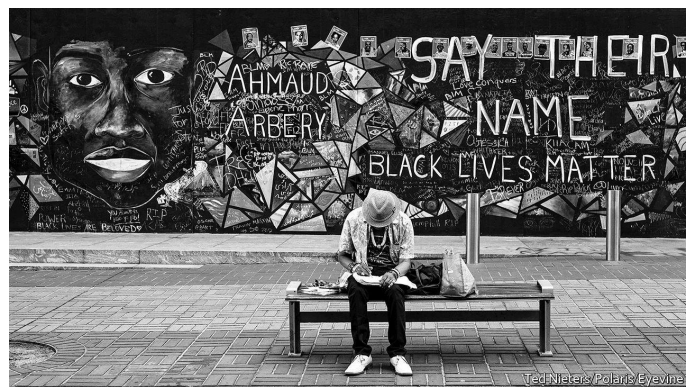
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