

There Is a Right Way to Teach Reading, and Mississippi Knows It

The state's reliance on cognitive science explains why.

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“Thank God for Mississippi.”

That's a phrase people would use when national education rankings came out because no matter how poorly your state performed, you could be sure things were worse in Mississippi.

Not anymore. New results on the National Assessment of Educational Progress, a standardized test given every two years to measure fourth- and eighth-grade achievement in reading and math, show that Mississippi made more progress than any other state.

The state's performance in reading was especially notable. Mississippi was the only state in the nation to post significant gains on the fourth-grade reading test. Fourth graders in Mississippi are now on par with the national average, reading as well or better than pupils in California, Texas, Michigan and 18 other states.

What's up in Mississippi? There's no way to know for sure what causes increases in test scores, but Mississippi has been doing something notable: making sure all of its teachers understand the science of reading.

Yes, there is a science to how people read. For the past several decades, in labs and classrooms all over the world, scientists have been studying how skilled reading works, what children need to learn to become skilled readers, and what's going on when students struggle. Reading is probably the most studied aspect of human learning.

But a lot of teachers don't know this science. In 2013, legislators in Mississippi provided funding to start training the state's teachers in the science of reading.

To understand what the science says, a good place to start is with something called the “simple view of reading.” It's a model that was first proposed by researchers in 1986 to clarify the role of decoding in reading comprehension. Everyone agrees the goal of reading is to comprehend text, but back in the 1980s there was a big fight going on over whether children should be taught how to decode words — in other words, phonics.

The simple view says that reading comprehension is the product of two things. One is your ability to decode words: Can you identify the word a string of letters represents? For example, you see the letter string “l-a-s-s” and you are able to sound it out and say the word.

You may have no idea what “lass” means. This is where language comprehension comes in. Language comprehension is your ability to understand spoken language. So, when someone says to you, “Let's have all the lads and lasses line up at the door,” you know that's what all the boys and girls are supposed to do.

The simple view is an equation that looks like this:

decoding ability x language comprehension = reading comprehension

Notice that reading comprehension is the product of decoding ability and language comprehension; it's not the sum. In other words, if you have good language comprehension skills but zero decoding skills, your reading comprehension will be zero, because zero times anything is zero. The simple view also says that if you have good decoding skills but poor language comprehension skills, your reading comprehension isn't going to be very good either.

The simple view model was proposed more than 30 years ago and has been confirmed over and over again by research. But a study in Mississippi several years ago showed that teachers were not being trained to use this model and that many professors and deans in colleges of education had never even heard of it. Now, through workshops and coaching paid for by state taxpayers, teachers in Mississippi are learning about the simple view and other key takeaways from the science of reading.

The simple view is critical for understanding how children learn to read. Most children entering school have very little decoding skill. They know the meaning of lots of words, but they don't know how to decode those words. If the goal is to get to reading comprehension, children have to learn how to decode. That's why people who know the science of reading call for an emphasis on phonics instruction in the early

grades.

Now, the simple view clearly shows that focusing *only* on decoding would be a mistake because that's only half the equation. Reading instruction has to include language comprehension, too. This means lessons and activities that expand children's oral vocabularies and knowledge, so they know the meaning of the words they can decode.

In my reporting on the debates about reading, I've found there's a lot of confusion in schools about the role of decoding in learning how to read. Teachers want their students to love reading, and phonics has a reputation for being rote and boring.

So, reading instruction tends to begin with having children focus on making meaning from text while giving short shrift to helping them develop the skills involved in reading words. Some children develop good word reading skills anyway. Research suggests that about 40 percent of children will learn to read no matter how inadequate the instruction.

What about the other 60 percent? The lack of skills instruction can be a disaster for them, especially for pupils from low-income families. When children from higher-income homes struggle to read, their parents will often pay for tutoring or specialized private school. But children from poor families tend to have no backup if schools don't teach them how to read words.

And while children from poor families often enter school at a disadvantage when it comes to language comprehension, if they're taught how to decode they've just been given their best shot at catching up because now they have the means to gain knowledge and expand their vocabulary through reading.

For years, everyone assumed Mississippi was at the bottom in reading because it was the poorest state in the nation. Mississippi is still the poorest state, but fourth graders there now read at the national average. While every other state's fourth graders made no significant progress in reading on this year's test, or lost ground, Mississippi's fourth-grade reading scores are up by 10 points since 2013, when the state began the effort to train its teachers in the science of reading. Correlation isn't causation, but Mississippi has made a huge investment in helping teachers learn the science behind reading.

And when children are taught in ways that line up with the science, they can learn.

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