



# THE Reader

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## The Settled Science of Teaching Reading

By Marisa Ramirez Stukey, Gina Fugnitto, Valerie Fraser, and Isabel Sawyer

Educators have been discussing the “right” way to teach reading for decades. While “balance” was called for nearly 20 years ago, dissension has reared its head again and arguments are breaking out among educators on social media. At the heart of the disagreement is the dichotomy between phonics instruction (the explicit teaching of letters and sounds) and a whole language approach (a focus on discovery and making meaning). While “whole language” as a term is not often used now, there are many who believe the term “balanced literacy” is simply a substitute for whole language.

In spite of the current discussions, the science on this instructional issue is settled. Castles, Rastle, & Nation (2018) lay out that there is a clear progression to effective literacy instruction. First and foremost, children need to understand the principles of spelling-sound correspondences and to solidify a store of high-frequency words to read words and phrases fluently. Most children need explicit teaching to build this knowledge. After decoding and high-frequency words are established, more attention can be devoted to comprehension with a focus on making meaning. Castles et al. (2018) offer a logical and research-based model. In spite of this research, educators remain without consensus about what is most important—phonics instruction or a focus on comprehension.



Marisa Stukey



Gina Fugnitto



Valerie Fraser



Isabel Sawyer

Another current topic of discussion is the part knowledge plays in learning to read. While the importance of knowledge has been clear for over 40 years (see Cervetti & Wright, in press), current curriculum conversations have included demands to “build a body of knowledge.” In this discussion, often only one way to build that knowledge is acknowledged: using connected text sets around specific topics. Research tells us, however, that there are many ways to build a body of knowledge and connected text sets is only one.

Our goal in this article is to wade through the soundbites, Tweets, and blog posts, and outline the settled science of teaching reading. While the arguments rage on, students are impacted (both negatively and positively) and teachers are often left unsure as to how best to teach. We hope to shed light on the issues and offer guidance and instructional considerations—all based on research. While we certainly won’t address all the issues, we will tackle two topics in particular that have surfaced

recently—explicit and systematic phonics instruction and building a body of knowledge.

### Revisiting and Rethinking the “Fab Five”

The National Reading Panel (NRP) report in 2000 identified the “fab five” of reading. The NRP identified instruction in Phonics, Phonological Awareness, Fluency, Vocabulary, and Comprehension as the elements research indicated were necessary for proficient reading. Unfortunately, the NRP did not prioritize the elements. While each of the five is essential, they are not equal. Comprehension is always the ultimate goal of reading and all of the other elements are in service of making meaning from text.

Explicit and systematic instruction in decoding (phonics, phonological awareness, and fluency) and vocabulary building are critical in achieving comprehension. Inherently misunderstood in the NRP report is that the purpose of instruction in phonological awareness, phonics, and fluency is to ensure that these

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*The Reader* is the scholarly journal of the Arkansas Literacy Association and is designed to serve as a resource for Arkansas teachers. Opinions expressed in articles and studies herein are those of the respective authors and do not necessarily represent the views of the ALA Board or members.

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## Letter from ALA Chair Kelly Hogan

When I look back on the year 2020 as a whole, I am reminded of the phrase, "May you live in interesting times." There is a lot of debate about where the phrase actually comes from. Does it have its origins in the East or the West? Is it meant as a blessing or a curse? I have often found myself using the word "interesting" as a euphemism when describing what it has been like to live through 2020. It certainly has been an interesting time to be the Chair of ALA. We were compelled to make decisions I never dreamed of making, compelled to change our programming entirely to fit the needs of our members during these "interesting" times.

It has been interesting, to say the least. We have survived, and are currently still battling, the dual epidemics of COVID-19 and racial injustice. We have seen our entire way of life altered, and everything that we were so certain of, has been flipped upside down. If you are an educator, you should be given a gold medal and a six-figure bonus for all that you have accomplished this year. Living through 2020 has shown us just how valuable our profession truly is. Living and working through this year has shown us that we are strong and capable of anything.

I have a cousin, who lives in Dubai, which is several time zones ahead of the United States. When the clock struck midnight in Dubai, she texted me and said, "Happy New Year. I'm sorry to say that 2021 doesn't feel any different." She was obviously making a light-hearted joke about the struggles of 2020, and I sent back a laughing emoji in response, but I have to disagree with her. 2021 does feel different. It feels more hopeful because now we are stronger and more resilient, ready to face whatever the year may throw our way. We now have a greater understanding of our value, as human beings and as educators.

Our Chair-Elect, Kacy

Barden, has chosen "Change the World... One Reader at a Time" as her theme this year, which perfectly fits our vision for 2021. We know literacy is essential, that it can change people's lives and minds. We know that the work we are doing is making a difference. So when the year 2021 becomes interesting, for better or worse, we know that we are on the right side of history, making the world better...one reader at a time.



### **Arkansas Literacy Association Membership**

[www.alaliteracy.org](http://www.alaliteracy.org)

\$20

Includes State and  
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For details, contact Jill Fields  
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### **International Literacy Association Membership**

[literacyworldwide.org](http://literacyworldwide.org)

Student: \$29 • Online: \$44

For information about starting  
a reading council in your area,  
contact Jeanne Trawick at  
[jeanne@alaliteracy.org](mailto:jeanne@alaliteracy.org).

### **ALA membership is now easily renewed online!**

Members should update their  
information and profile  
by logging in at [alaliteracy.org](http://alaliteracy.org).  
Your ALA member number is now  
listed on your mailing label.

# Letter from ILA Coordinator for ALA Jeanne Trawick

What a year!

I have a friend who teaches high school. One of his students is returning to school this semester after having chosen to be at home during the fall due to the pandemic. Apparently the student has had an extremely difficult time at home - and is deeply sad. The disconnect has adversely affected him. I'm sure you've seen — and felt it, too.

For years the research has shown that the number one factor influencing student performance the most is not the program or approach of instruction, but the teacher. You. Yes. We've known that you powerfully touch the hearts and minds of students and lift them like none other. This year, more than ever, that has been true. You have lifted students, their parents, and entire communities who've learned more clearly the value of what you do. You are the connecting piece — the nurturer, the confidant and safe place, the coach, the helper that "lightens" the load of so many.

This pandemic has shone a spotlight on how essential you are as an educator. Thank you. We know you have been stretched in new ways and learned so many new ways to deliver content, encouragement and support to learners and their families this year. Thank you for your devotion to your profession and to your students, families and communities.

Please consider this letter a huge eight-second hug! (At least 8 seconds!) Please consider this letter a huge massage and spa treatment. Please consider this letter a bonus. You deserve them all...and chocolate! Lots of chocolate!

How can we support you in new and meaningful ways in this season that we are walking through? We as an ALA Board want to support and help you as much as we can. It is our hope that this issue of *The Reader* gives you valuable and practical information you can use in your teaching practices. I'd like to thank all the contributors

and editors for adding their time and expertise to this issue.

We invite you to participate in all the Arkansas Literacy Association events and offerings: local chapter meetings and projects, statewide online book clubs, Student Writer's Showcase, Celebrate Literacy Awards, Technology Tuesdays, Arkansas Children's Book Awards and if you are a local council leader, Council Leadership Institute to name a few. We are dedicated to developing literacy leaders and providing excellence in literacy research and professional development statewide.

We cannot wait to see you at our 49th Annual Literacy Conference: *Change the World - One Reader at a Time* online July 23. What a motivating and practical conference Kacy Barden, Tammy Gillmore, Lyndsey Laster and the ALA Conference Committee members are planning for you!

Please follow us on Facebook for the most current events and information. Also, if there is a way we can help you, please email us: [jeanne@alaliteracy.org](mailto:jeanne@alaliteracy.org) or [ala@alaliteracy.org](mailto:ala@alaliteracy.org).

Did you know that the International Literacy Association has resources available that are practical and helpful specific to this "season" of challenges? They have weekly teaching resources and blog posts. They are also drawing from their

network of expert professionals from around the world who are offering webinars, journals and forums for educators on a variety of relevant topics through their website. Some are free and some are not. Their fall literacy conference that was planned for Indianapolis, Indiana 2021 has been cancelled. I hope you will take a look at these free weekly instructional resources: <https://www.literacyworldwide.org/get-resources/instructional-practices>

Thank you for continuing to be the light, the virtual hug, the safe place and hope our students need during this challenging time. Amanda Gorman, National Youth Poet Laureate, inspired us all at the presidential inauguration in January as she read her poem "This Hill We Climb." Her new book *Change Sings* comes out this spring. I think of each of you in her book title and in these words from her poem —

*"For there is always light  
if we are brave enough to see it,  
if we are brave enough to BE it."*  
Thank you for singing through change and for being light.

We see you.

We thank you.

We are proud of you.



A promotional graphic for the Arkansas Literacy Association's 49th Annual Literacy Conference. It features a central illustration of a young girl with dark hair, wearing a purple and white dress, sitting on a globe and reading a red book. To the right, the text reads "Arkansas Literacy Association 49th Annual Literacy Conference" in blue, followed by "Change the World..." in large, stylized orange and blue letters. Below this, a yellow banner contains the date "Friday, July 23, 2021". At the bottom, the phrase "One Reader at a Time" is written in purple, underlined with a yellow wavy line. The Arkansas Literacy Association logo is also present on the globe.

## Call for Manuscripts for ALA's *The Reader*

### Guidelines

*The Reader* is the scholarly journal of the Arkansas Literacy Association. It is designed to serve as a resource for all Arkansas reading teachers.

The editors are looking for manuscripts that take as their topic issues relating to literacy in primary through secondary education. It is the hope of the editorial board that reports of quality research and practice will be published from schools within the state of Arkansas and the nation. Submitted manuscripts might take the form of (but are not strictly limited to) original empirical articles, theoretical analyses, literature reviews, and reports of successful practices in education.

Each issue of *The Reader* features emerging research of special interest to Arkansas reading teachers. Abstracts of Action Research Studies conducted by students at Arkansas universities also are considered.

### Manuscript Submissions

Authors should follow the guidelines in the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association (current ed.) when preparing manuscripts. Manuscripts should not exceed 15-20 pages, including references, tables, and figures, and citations.

In addition to email addresses, web site address, and fax numbers if available, authors should include physical addresses and telephone numbers as well. Authors also should list two to five key words to identify the contents of their paper. Submit manuscripts in Microsoft Word format or Google Doc, via the Google Form on the ALA website at <https://ara8.wildapricot.org/Call-for-Manuscripts/>

Amy Thompson  
amythompson@alaliteracy.org

## Creating Advocacy and Collaboration Through a Higher Education Literacy Council

By Monica Riley

Anyone who has been in higher education for any length of time understands the term 'working in silos.' We tend to focus on our content, our classes, our assignments, and our students without lifting our head to deeply support the work of others and collaborate to improve our own work. True, we are generally collegial, but collaboration is different and more difficult and.... messy. There is a certain vulnerability that comes with true collaboration and I strongly believe that we cannot advocate for our work or for our colleagues if we cannot engage in the messy work of collaboration. The kind of collaboration that leads to change and advocacy is difficult with colleagues with whom we share an office suite and see every day. It becomes even more difficult with colleagues from other universities.

The 2017 Right to Read Act, Arkansas Code 6-17-429 brought a new opportunity for collaboration across Colleges and Schools of Education in Arkansas. The law forced Educator Preparation Programs to analyze and review practices of teaching the Science of Reading so that teacher candidates were prepared to pass the required Foundations of Reading exam.

I moved to Arkansas in the fall of 2017 and began my tenure at the University of Arkansas-Fort Smith (UAFS) as the Executive Director for the School of Education. I moved here from Mississippi, a state that had been tackling literacy issues for several years and who passed a similar Right to Read Act in 2013. I had served on a Higher Education Literacy Council in Mississippi and began a search for something similar in Arkansas. When I was unable to find a collaborative group for higher education faculty, I talked



with my colleague April Evans about the possibility of a Literacy Roundtable to discuss how each university planned to make curriculum revisions. With the support of the administration at UAFS and the Arkansas Association of Colleges of Teacher Education Dean's Council, we invited two literacy faculty from every educator preparation program in Arkansas for a roundtable discussion. The first Arkansas Higher Education Literacy Roundtable met on the University of Arkansas Fort Smith Campus on April 25, 2018. The roundtable was a great success with attendees requesting future meetings. Since that time we have met at least once each semester at five different universities across the state and through Zoom®. As the group became formally established and began having regularly scheduled meetings, continuing to host literacy "roundtables" did not seem appropriate so we changed our name to Arkansas Higher Education Literacy Council. You may hear someone still refer to our collaborative meetings as literacy roundtable. Regardless of our title, our purpose is clear: we are professionals collaborating to improve literacy instruction for children in Arkansas.

Professors of literacy who serve on the council are K12 teachers at heart and only left the classroom to hopefully have a greater impact on the children of our state. I'm thrilled with the level of transparency, the vulnerability, and the 'messy' collaboration that take place when we come together and are determined to tear down the silos to develop excellent classroom teachers who will be catalysts for moving the needle of literacy skills for the children of Arkansas.

**Dr. Monica Riley** is the Executive Director of the School of Education at the University of Arkansas-Fort Smith. Dr. Riley has been in education for over 30 years. Her PhD is in elementary education with a minor in reading.

# Second Annual - Writer's Showcase

## Topic: The Book That Changed My Life



By Avalyn Breedlove

The book that changed my life is the bible. The bible has a lot of great stories that give examples of how I should live my life. Because of the bible, I know that I am loved and will live forever. There are a few people from the bible I have learned from and want to be like, for example, Noah and Moses, but most of all, Jesus. Jesus has made a big impact in my life. But all of the stories about the people from the bible, both good and bad, have inspired me to be a better person and to try to be more like Jesus.

There is a bible verse that means a lot to me. It is John 3:16. 'For God so loved the world that he gave his only son so that whosoever believes in him shall not perish, but have eternal life.' This bible verse means a lot to me because it is saying that God gave his only son to die on the cross to save us from our sins so that we can go to heaven. God loves everyone so in the world so much that he sent his son to die on a cross just so that we could go to heaven. The verse also says whoever believes in him shall not go away or perish. It also says that if you believe in him, then you will also have eternal life and will live in heaven forever. John 3:16 is a bible verse that means a lot to me and I want to go to heaven just like the others that believed in God and sent to heaven. I want to share this verse with everyone so they have the opportunity to believe, like me.

Moses is a man that is in the bible and he means a lot to me because he led all of the slaves of Egypt. He means a lot to me because he risked his life to get some people out of miserable Egypt. Moses was very brave to lead the people out of Egypt. The Egyptians had kept the people slaves for a long time and wanted to go

home. They were very scared and sad when they found out that they would have to become slaves. Moses finally got the chance to get the people out of slavery at night while Egypt's king was asleep. This bible story means a lot to me because Moses was being a very good person because he had a right to help get the slaves out of slavery. I think Moses was a great man. He changed my life by trying to get the people out of Egypt and taking a big risk. Moses changed my life by doing a big thing, leading the people out of Egypt. Because of Moses, I want to have a role to keep everyone out of slavery and to be a leader for good with those I am around.

Another person in the bible that influenced me was Noah. He influenced me because of why he obeyed God. God told him to build an ark, but he had no idea what an ark was because he had never seen rain. He told his friends that God had told him to build an ark but his friends thought he was just joking. Noah also told his friends that water was going to fall from the sky and flood the earth. But his friends still thought he was being crazy. Noah listened to God even though the others didn't. He influenced me because he listened to God and knew that God was telling him the right thing to do. Noah was a good person because he did what was right and I want to be like Noah.

Listening to God even though others are not doing the right thing, may not always be easy but is right. I want to make sure that I always do the right thing. Remembering this story helps me make the right choice even if my friends think I am silly or wrong.

But the person that is in the bible that changed my life the most

First Place

Grades 2-3

Sequoyah Elementary

Arkansas River Valley  
Literacy Council

is Jesus. Jesus is the most important person in my life because of what he did. Jesus died on the cross to save us from our sins. That is an amazing thing for someone as important as him to do. Jesus had done many amazing things. He has made a paralyzed man walk, let a ninety-nine year old lady have a baby, and even just helps and continues to help people stop sinning. Sin is the only thing that can separate us from Him. Jesus gave his whole life just for us to go to heaven and live with Him forever. God made a way for us to live with him or to live in hell. God wants the best for us and to live with him for eternal life and not with the devil. The devil has tempted Jesus many times but all of those times, Jesus ignored him. Jesus did not want to listen to the devil even when it was hard. He has changed my life because he always is in control of me, helping me make good choices each day. Because of him, I know that I have life that will be forever.

The authors in the bible create so many pictures in my head of what might have happened back then. They want you to learn not to act like some of the people in the bible that do not have God with them. The bible also

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# Second Annual - Writer's Showcase

## Topic: The Book That Changed My Life



By Bella Madden

Books have always been special to me because reading is one of my favorite things to do. This past year I read the longest book I have ever read. My goal was to read the entire Bible in just one year. In meeting my goal and reading the Bible, it changed my life.

The Bible tells about how the Earth was created. Once there was an empty space, unformed, no light, and everything was dark, but God evidently had a plan. Out of nothing He formed the earth and created the universe.

God not only created the Earth and animals, but he created people. The first woman and man created were Eve and Adam. Adam and Eve, along with all the people in the Bible, lived considerably different than we do today.

These people groups either lived in stone houses with mud roofs or tents. There weren't grocery stores, so they had to either grow their own food or hunt for it. These people ate all sorts of fruit, vegetables, nuts, and meat from animals and what animals produced like eggs, honey, and milk. There weren't any utensils, so you had to eat with your fingers. At the end of the meal you would have to wash your hands just like at the beginning.

Clothes were expensive because it took so much time to make them. People who were poor had only one pair of clothes to wear while rich people had many choices to pick from. Everyone wore sandals unless someone didn't have enough money to buy them.

There was a vast amount of work to do. Children had to help with numerous chores.

Boys would work with the animals and learn how to hunt. Girls

would learn about cooking and gathering or planting foods, making clothes, and caring for younger children.

Boys started school at around six years old. Boys were also taught a job around twelve years old. Sadly, girls didn't receive the privilege of attending school because it was thought that girls didn't need it. Most of the people thought it was not important for girls to know the things that were taught in school. Girls married when they were significantly young at around thirteen.

They had hardships too. There was no medicine to help people get better from their sickness because they had no knowledge of medicine. If there was a drought, then there would be little food and their animals would die. These people also had to deal with wars. Even though people might have been peaceful, many times quarrelsome people marched in and invaded their inhabitations. A king usually governed the people. These troublemakers could have caused problems for power. They might have wanted to conquer that part of the world and overthrow the ruling king or the ruling people.

Most people worshiped or believed in God, but unfortunately some people didn't believe in God. Instead, the wicked people worshiped idols. But the godly people stayed holy by not worshiping idols and God was pleased with them.

Did you know that many, many years after the first family was created, a very special man named Jesus was born? Jesus was significant because He was not only a man, but He was also the son of God. Everything shifted with Jesus. He wants us all to have love, joy, peace, patience, kindness,

First Place

Grades 4-5

Home School

Three Rivers  
Literacy Council

goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. He wants us to love our neighbor as ourselves. He has transformed people's lives by dying on the cross for them, including me and my family.

Reading the Bible has altered me in many ways. After reading about the different people groups, I am particularly grateful for the way we live today. I am thankful for medicines and hospitals. I am glad we have grocery stores and stronger houses. I am appreciative for inventions like air conditioning and microwaves. I am also thankful for better education like paper, pencils, and computers.

Other ways I have changed is I now act differently in Bible class. I used to always try to be first, but then when I read about how Jesus always put himself last, patiently waiting until He got His turn, I now have self-control and don't push to the front as much as I used to. In my other classes I try to help others when they are having trouble understanding or finding something because one of the fruits of the spirit is goodness.

I like true friends, don't you? If you want a true friend, you must

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# Second Annual - Writer's Showcase

Topic: The Book That Changed My Life



By Laura Grace Files

Books can have an amazing influence on people. They can open people up to new possibilities, adventures, and ideas. One book that has had a major influence on how I perceive people and what I believe can be achieved is *The War That Saved My Life* by Kimberly Burbaker Bradley. It is about a crippled girl during WWII who has to teach herself to walk in order to survive. This book is eye opening to what people can do if they put their mind to it.

One way my life was changed by *The War That Saved My Life* is it altered the way I look at people. Before I read this book I thought people with disabilities were unable to play sports, drive a car, and many other things that might come naturally to humans without any physical limitations. Now looking back I have a completely new outlook on what people can do if they put their mind to it. In the book Ada, the main character, has a birth defect that hinders her walking ability, but she knew that if she desired to see the other side of the war she would have to learn to walk. When she first taught herself to walk she could only

walk a few feet, but she continued to persevere and eventually she was able to walk about two miles to her brother's school from where she was evacuating. I was astounded to discover that anything was possible for anyone if they had confidence in themselves, and determination to seek a happy ending.

Another way *The War That Saved My Life* has changed my life is because it changed my perspective on what I believe is possible. Ada was a girl who couldn't walk, she could only crawl, but with the right attitude she was able to push through the pain and hardship, and she was able to walk. Not only was she able to walk, but she kept her brother safe, got herself out of harm's way, and learned to ride a horse. She achieved all of this within a very short amount of time which astounds me, because so many times in my life I have just given up, but it is crazy what hard work, a positive attitude, and the right environment can do to a person. For example, one time in my life when I really wanted to give up was when my baby sister was up all night and I had to go to school

First Place  
Grades 6-7

Holy Souls School

Arkansas River Valley  
Literacy Council

the next day exhausted, and ready to quit. However, the thing that kept me going was volleyball because it has always been an outlet even if I was extremely tired. This book is inspiring to me because she did what seemed impossible and overcame all odds to do what she wanted.

In conclusion, *The War That Saved My Life* changed the way I perceive people and what I believe can be done even if it seems impossible. It gave me a new outlook on how to not give up, and persist until I achieved my goal. This book is very inspiring because it taught me not to judge people on looks. It also is an astonishing story about what humans are capable.



## Arkansas Diamond Charlie May Simon

Go to ALA's Website  
to preview the  
2020-2021 reading lists:  
[alaliteracy.org/bookawards](http://alaliteracy.org/bookawards)



# Second Annual - Writer's Showcase

Topic: The Book That Changed My Life



By Savannah Chance

A great book has the ability to put life into perspective. Often, a reader never realizes how meaningful a book is until they finish it. The novel *She Said Yes: The Unlikely Martyrdom of Cassie Bernall* was that book to me. It was influential because the main character, Cassie, and I both hold strong Christian beliefs.

My experience with this book commenced when I was in the 5th grade. On January 26, 2016, I was baptized and began my spiritual journey with God. My faith in Him grew along with my love for reading. It was during this time that I became more interested in books about real-life events. In 2018, when I was in the 8th-grade, many school shootings were taking place across the country. Our public school systems were altered as a new need for protection was put in place. Near this time of adjustment, we were about halfway through the 2018-2019 school year. My school's curriculum requires students to read a certain number of fiction and non-fiction books each quarter. It came time for me to get my non-fiction points for the quarter, so I scanned the shelves and tried to select a book. There were so many choices: I was having difficulty choosing. I eventually

relied on my librarian Mrs. Russell's recommendation and checked out *She Said Yes* by Misty Bernall. Now I know what you are thinking. It sounds like a book about a wedding proposal, but it happens to be about the life and amazing courage of Cassie Bernall in the Columbine High School massacre of 1999. This book astounded me in how much I could relate to Cassie. The book is told from Cassie's mother, Misty Bernall's, personal point of view, thus helping the reader understand how a parent must feel while experiencing a tragedy like this. Cassie was only 17 years old at the time of her death. She was so young, but not afraid to advocate what she believed in, which was God. Cassie's story is inspirational, predominantly for young adults seeking to expand their faith and sort out their lives. On the day of the shooting, Cassie was in the school library when she heard gunshots. Two boys, Dylan and Erin, stormed the library. To protect herself, she proceeded to crawl underneath a library table with another student when one of the intruders asked if she believed in God. Cassie did not deny the question. Immediately following her answer, she was shot point-blank.

First Place

Grades 8-9

Mammoth Spring High

White River  
Literacy Council

Her story encourages readers of all ages to stand up for what they believe in. I am sure that even if one does not have religious affiliations, they can still connect to this book. Cassie's story is one that every reader can learn from. It helps motivate us to not be afraid of speaking up for our beliefs. I believe Jesus came to Earth, suffered, bled and died so that we may one day go to Heaven. I know deep in my heart that if I am ever asked if I believe in God, I will say yes just like Cassie. My trust in God and my outlook on life changed after I read this powerful book about a young girl who wasn't afraid to stand up for her faith and God. Like Cassie, a gun will not sway my Christian beliefs.

4th Annual Writer Showcase Topic  
To Be Released Soon  
on ALA's Website!

# Second Annual - Writer's Showcase

## Topic: The Book That Changed My Life



By Jack Papera

"There is no story that is not true, [...] The world has no end, and what is good among one person is an abomination with others." (141) Numerous books have affected me in numerous ways, yet only one has changed me. *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe permanently changed the way I view the world because it showed me that life isn't polarized, there's no specific good or bad, on a spectrum of black and white, the world is in shades of gray. *Things Fall Apart* also taught me that everyone thinks that they're the protagonist in their own story.

*Things Fall Apart* takes place in the early twentieth century in Nigeria, amongst the native Igbo people. During this same time English missionaries were attempting to colonize the same part of Africa where our story takes place. The "protagonist" in our story is an Igbo villager named Okonkwo, whom is revered as part of his villages aristocracy.

Okonkwo does many bad things throughout the book such as: Beating Ikemefuna (his adopted son) when he refused to eat, beating his wives, shooting at one of his wives during peace week, the slaying of Ikemefuna, beating Nwoye (his first son) for attending the christian church, and beheading a messenger at the end of the book out of rage. Yet, even though he does these bad things, the point of view of the book is his, it's told through primarily his perspective, with his emotions, his thoughts, and most importantly his beliefs. As a reader I learned to quickly love Okonkwo, his rebellious nature and willingness to stand up for what he believed in appealed to me, but just as quickly I realized the things he did were

wrong, or at least by my standards they were. You see that's when my views on absolutely everything started changing. Soon I started reading books, watching movies and TV shows, and even analyzing aspects of my life and thinking "What would it be like from their perspective?" "Am I the good guy in this situation?", and then it hit me. Life isn't polarized like that, nothing ever is, nothing is good or bad, or black or white, it's all just gray. You see we judge the aspects of others based on our own morals and ethics, or the perspective we have on a situation, yet this is the most flawed system of all, since our experience in life teaches us those morals and ethics. How can we see anyone other than our allies, who usually have a similar perspective on things as the protagonists if we haven't been through their upbringing and the formation of their ideals and values? The honest answer is, most of us can't. We choose to see life as so polarized because it's so much easier, so much simpler, than understanding. A situation which I like to think is, what if I were born in completely adverse standards to those I was actually born into. Or in simpler words think of it this way: Imagine that whatever circumstances you were born in eg. race, nationality, sex, appearance, socioeconomic class, etc. were completely opposite, would you still have the same beliefs, morals, values, and customs?

"Then they came to the tree from which Okonkwo's body was dangling."(207). To someone from western cultures native Igbo culture can seem indecorous, or unfamiliar and primitive, but to the people of the Igbo culture that was their values, morals, and way of life. Just like we

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don't understand most things that are unfamiliar to us. For example the Igbo people have one sacred week during the year in which no harm is to be done to anyone (peace week), or you could note the abduction of a young boy (Ikemefuna) to satiate the "eye for an eye" civil system the Igbo culture uses. Other than the peace week and Ikemefuna's abduction notable customs include the extreme use of physical harm and corporal punishment, and the religious intolerance of Christians. Yet, Okwonkwo was revered throughout Umuofia (an Igbo village in Nigeria), he had many titles, yams, and wives (symbols of reverence), and after he hangs himself and his friends discover his body one of them (Obierika) says "That was one of the greatest men in Umuofia." (208) in reference to Okonkwo, but he committed all of these heinous acts. As did his adversaries, the missionaries. They did things such as murder and torture villagers (including Okonkwo), malignantly persuaded villagers into Christianity, and eliminated Igbo tribal customs that have been around for generations. Yet, they both see each

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# George, Jazz, and Harvey:

## Advocating Against Banning Books in Public Schools

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### Abstract

Each year, books are challenged and/or banned from public school libraries across the country and most recently there has been an increased number of books with diverse characters banned from public schools. Removing books from public schools restricts students' abilities to read and reflect upon these texts. Students have a right to access books depicting characters and events that they can relate to and characters and events that they can learn from. Teachers should be advocates against censorship and advocates for access.

### Introduction

Public schools have an obligation to provide students with access to information. As noted in the Library Bill of Rights, it is the duty of all libraries to provide materials and information presenting all points of view and materials should not be removed because of partisan or doctrinal disapproval (American Library Association, 2019). This includes access to books written about a variety of subjects – even subjects that some consider to be controversial. Books containing “controversial” topics can often be the most thought provoking books to read. Despite the need to provide students with access to these texts, books are routinely challenged and/or banned from public school libraries across the country.

Removing books from school libraries restricts students' abilities to read and reflect upon these texts. This negatively impacts all students because it prevents students from seeing themselves in the books and it prevents students from learning about others from reading the books. As Smolkin and Young (2011) note, “such books are seen as self-affirming mirrors for children of a given culture and as windows into other lives for children outside that given culture” (p. 217).



All students deserve the opportunity to see themselves in literature. For these students, books become “mirrors” that reflect their own lives (Bishop, 1990). Sometimes those “controversial” texts are the ones that students can relate to the most and removing them also removes the chance for a student to connect with a text. In addition to giving students the opportunity to see themselves in literature, other students (not those necessarily with the same characteristics as the ones found in the text) can learn from reading these types of texts. These books become “windows” to new information and help readers develop an understanding and an appreciation of the diversity that exists in their school, town, state, country, and the world (Bishop, 1990). Books are sometimes the only place where readers may meet people who are not like themselves and who, therefore, offer alternative worldviews (Tschida, Ryan, & Ticknor, 2014).

All children have a right to access books that reflect their own images and books that open less familiar worlds to them (Bishop, 2012). However, books are routinely challenged and banned in public schools throughout the country. “Censorship is particularly harmful in the schools because it prevents student with inquiring minds from exploring the world, seeking truth and reason, stretching their intellectual capacities, and becoming critical thinkers” (National Coalition Against Censorship,

2013, p. 1). Therefore, teachers should be equipped to advocate for access to books of all types for all students.

### Background

Censorship is defined by the American Library Association (2017a) as the “suppression of ideas and information that certain persons – individuals, groups, or government officials – find objectionable or dangerous.” When a person deems a book's content to be objectionable or dangerous, pressure is put on school libraries to suppress and remove that information from public access “so that no one else has the chance to read or view the material and make up their own minds about it” (American Library Association, 2017a). Despite the pressures put on school libraries to censor material, Article 3 of the Library Bill of Rights notes that “libraries should challenge censorship in the fulfillment of their responsibility to provide information and enlightenment” (American Library Association, 2019).

In 1982, the Supreme Court of the United States ruled in *Board of Education, Island Trees v. Pico* (1982) which addressed the removal of certain books from a public school library by the Board of Education members who felt the books were “anti-American, anti-Christian, anti-Sem[i]tic, and just plain filthy” (Board of Education, Island Trees Union Free School District No. 26 v. Pico, 1979). In its decision, the Court ruled that local school boards may not remove books from the library shelves

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“simply because they dislike the ideas contained in those books” (Board of Education, *Island Trees v. Pico*, 1982). The Supreme Court’s ruling in 1982, however, did not cease the challenges made to books in public school libraries.

Typically, in a school setting, a book is “challenged” by a parents who “disapprove of language or ideas that differ from their personal values, but demands can emerge from anywhere across the religious, ideological, and political spectrum” (National Coalition Against Censorship, 2013, p 1). The challenge is reviewed (typically by the district school board). The school board (or other group) either denies the challenge (leaving the book in place) or approves the challenge (resulting in a ban of the book). There is no uniform process for this, so schools/districts can resolve challenges using whatever policy (if any) has been adopted.

While parents do have some rights to direct their own child’s education, they have no right to impose their judgments or preferences on other students (National Coalition Against Censorship, 2013). In despite of this, in recent years, multiple challenges (some proving successful and leading to a ban) were made to books throughout the United States for various reasons. Alexie’s *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* (2007) was removed from a high school supplemental reading list after parents complained that it was “anti-Christian” (American Library Association, 2014a). Green’s *Looking for Alaska* (2006) was challenged, but retained, at a high school because it was labeled “too racy to read” (American Library Association, 2014b). In 2018, Thomas’ *The Hate U Give* (2017) was banned from districts in Texas and South Carolina because of its focus on police brutality (American Library Association, 2018a). In 2017, *To Kill A Mockingbird* was removed

from the school district in Biloxi, Mississippi because it made people “uncomfortable” (American Library Association, 2017c). Each of these incidents represents the continual controversy in our society over what is appropriate literature in public schools.

Further, recent research has indicated that the type of books that are challenged and/or banned has experienced a shift. While twenty years ago books that depicted drug use, sex, or offensive language were most often included on the American Library Association’s list of the most banned/challenged books, more recently it has become books containing diversity as a theme that have begun repeatedly being banned/challenged. Books that focus on different races, religious minorities, people with disabilities, LGBTQ, etc. have pushed out books with offensive language, drug use, and sex on the lists of the most banned/challenged books. Begley (2016) notes that the shift “seems to be linked to demographic changes in the country – and the political fear-mongering that can accompany those changes” (p. 1). According to the American Library Association (2019), in recent years, the most challenged books include books about transgendered people, books containing homosexuality, and books featuring Muslim characters.

For example, in 2015, a group of parents in Florida requested the removal of *The Librarian of Basra: A True Story from Iraq* (Winter, 2005) from the schools in the Duval County School District. The book is based on the true story of Alia Muhammad Baker, a librarian who saved 30,000 books from the Basra library’s collection before the building was burned in a fire. The book was awarded one of the American Library Association’s 2006 Notable Children’s Books (American Library Association, 2007) and was chosen as the city of Philadelphia’s

“One Book, One Philadelphia” book (Free Library of Philadelphia, 2017). Despite its message of courage and determination, the parents that challenged the book’s inclusion in the school library found it “inappropriate for promoting another religion that is not Christianity” (Thompson, 2015; American Library Association, 2015). In 2019, Gino’s *George* (2015) was removed from district libraries in Kansas and other schools around the country because its transgendered main character was causing “confusion” (Cramer, 2018). Further, challengers demanded that the book be removed from the state of Oregon’s “Battle of the Books” optional statewide contest for students (American Library Association, 2018b). As one book reviewer noted, “readers going through a similar experience will feel that they are no longer alone, and cisgender (non-transgender) readers may gain understanding and empathy (Brush, 2015, p.1). Denying students access to this text means that non-transgendered readers miss the opportunity to “learn what it means to be an ally, while transgender readers can envision a sense of community and support as they live authentically” (Cramer, 2018, p.28).

In addition, despite a message of anti-bullying and acceptance, *I Am Jazz* (Herthel & Jennings, 2014) was one of the top ten most challenged books of 2015, 2016, and 2017 (American Library Association, 2019). The book is based upon the life of co-author Jazz Jennings and her experience as a transgender child. According to the American Library Association (2017b), the requests to remove the book from public schools throughout the country were based upon the depiction of a transgender child, offensive viewpoints, and being unsuitable for children. In 2015, in response to a transgender child enrolled in the school, an elementary school in Wisconsin planned to read the book to its student body to educate and inform the students of the

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topic (American Library Association, 2017b; American Library Association, 2016). The school was threatened with a lawsuit if the book was read (American Library Association, 2017b). Despite the school's cancellation of the reading, the local library held the reading which was attended by 600 community members and one of the authors (American Library Association, 2017b).

Further, according to the American Library Association (2019), one of the top ten most challenged books of 2016, 2017, and 2018 was *Drama* (Telgemeier, 2012). This graphic novel depicts the story of a middle school girl who deals with, among other things, her "crushes" at school. The story contains a scene where a male student has to take over the role of the female lead in the school play at the last minute – resulting in an onstage kiss with another male. This onstage kiss between two males in the school's musical performance resulted in multiple challenges against the book. According to the American Civil Liberties Union of Texas (2016), the book was challenged at a junior high in Texas due to its "socially offensive" nature – and the book was banned from the school. In 2020, the book was challenged, but ultimately retained, in schools in Laramie County, Wyoming (American Library Association, 2020). In addition, in 2019, a parent in Virginia complained about the use of *Pride: The Story of Harvey Milk and the Rainbow Flag* in a second grade classroom (National Coalition Against Censorship, 2019a). The picture book was read aloud as a part of the district's anti-bullying curriculum and used to explore civil rights and fighting against bigotry. The book's challenger noted that it had not been reviewed as required for materials deemed potentially "sensitive" but the advocates for the book assert that because it is a civil rights story and

does not contain references to sex or violence that it should not be labeled as "sensitive" and thus should not require a review (National Coalition Against Censorship, 2019a).

This shift in banning books containing these types of diverse characters threatens the opportunities for students to learn about themselves and the world around them. Representation of various groups in literature can promote tolerance and acceptance of all human difference (National Coalition Against Censorship, 2019b). In today's society, it is essential that students have access to books that depict these types of diverse characters – so that they can relate to those characters or learn about others from those characters. Reading these types of books can enlighten and empower readers. However, they must first have the freedom to read those books, so advocating for access is essential.

## Advocating for Access

It is the responsibility of a library to serve everyone (Jacobson, 2016). Further, it is the responsibility of those in positions of authority and influence to protect students' rights to access books. It is imperative that students have access to texts depicting all types of ideas and people – including ones like themselves and ones unlike themselves. Many students may not live near a public library and many may not have internet access at home, so the school library becomes one of the main resources for students to learn about themselves and the world around them. Therefore, the "gatekeepers" must be advocates for all students and support access for all kinds of books in the school library.

To increase advocacy in schools, administrators, librarians, and teachers must be made aware of potential censorship challenges by being taught the legal rights of students, the types of censorship that frequently occurs,

the arguments for and against banning books from school libraries, the various policies that may be in place, etc. If a school has an environment that advocates for access to books, all individuals can be prepared to advocate for access on behalf of the students if the need arises. With book challenges increasing in recent years, censorship in public school libraries is too important of a topic not to be prepared for. Four ways to empower the school community to advocate for access to book include:

1. Avoid "Restricted" Sections. In order to accommodate the concerns of individuals who find books inappropriate, some school districts have implemented "restricted" sections where "controversial" books are kept and can only be checked out by students with parent/guardian permission. Restricting books "significantly reduces students' access to a range of available, high-quality literature" (National Council for the Teachers of English, 2018, p.1). Further, this practice encourages the belief that the content within those texts is "wrong" or "forbidden." For example, if a school library shelves a book about a family with same-sex parents in its "restricted" section, a student with a similar family dynamic is taught that a family like that is so different, abnormal, and unacceptable that special written permission must first be obtained before he can read the book. Further, it conveys to other students the same message – that book about families such as those are so offensive that they cannot be kept on the same shelf as books about "acceptable" families. This segregation of the books can create a further divide among students – from those students feeling like their lifestyle is inadequate to possibly reinforcing that notion to other students who see that books containing that content do not

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deserve a place on the “regular” shelf in the library. And, this type of practice “leads parents, teachers, and entire school districts down a slippery slope toward censorship” (National Council for Teachers of English, 2018). While designating sections as “Young Adult” or “Older Readers” is acceptable, restricting access to books is not. Making texts available to all students (without the stigma of being “restricted”) might provide students with a sense of being “accepted” and might send the message to others that differences are valued.

2. Require Reading and Discussion. According to the School Library Journal’s Controversial Books Survey (2016), the majority of challenges originate from parents, especially in elementary schools. More specifically, 92% of challenges in elementary schools and 80% of challenges in high schools are made by parents (Jacobson, 2016). In order to have an informative, productive conversation about the challenged book, the challenger (most often a parent) should be required to read and discuss the book with a group of other parents, librarians, teachers, students, etc. Some challenges may be made without the challenger having read the entire book, but just having read a paragraph. Without full knowledge of the entire text, the challenger cannot have an informed opinion about it. Further, a discussion about the book’s content will give the challenger an opportunity to hear how the book may be a positive resource for students – perhaps in ways the challenger had not thought of before. Listening to teachers, librarians, and, in particular, students discuss the text may provide an opportunity

for an eye-opening discussion that may result in the dismissal of the challenge.

3. Develop Written Rationales. A parent or community member can gain information on a book through flawed and highly subjective outsiders (National Council for the Teachers of English, 2018). This information can be based on a biased or misinformed perspective and results in a narrow and negative view of the book, regardless of its literary worth. Rather than relying on an outsider’s view of the book, a written rationale of a known controversial book can provide accurate information regarding its merit and why it is included in the library’s collection. A written rationale can “articulate the important themes and ideas that such books highlight and that have well served thousands who have read, taught, enjoyed, and benefited from them” (National Council for Teachers of English, 2018, p.1). A thoroughly developed rationale for a book’s inclusion in the school library can be a powerful tool to deter challenges.
4. Empower Librarians. Librarians play a powerful role in censorship. Unfortunately, once a librarian has been involved in a formal book challenge, he or she may be intimidated by books that may be controversial (Jacobson, 2016). As a result, many librarians choose to self-censor by choosing to not purchase a book for the library’s collection based upon the threat of a potential challenge in the future (Jacobson, 2016). More than 90% of elementary and middle school librarians have passed on purchasing a book because it may contain controversial material (Jacobson, 2016). Further, many districts have either cut or “deprofessionalized”

the position of the librarian – leaving more room for challenges because there is no professional in a position to defend a book. Begley (2016) notes that there are fewer librarians with the knowledge to use the language of intellectual freedom. Librarians should be the school experts on censorship, should have a clear policy in place, and should understand the rights of students and the responsibilities of the library.

The American Library Association ([www.ala.org](http://www.ala.org)) offers free resources, including infographics, templates, and webinars discussing why some popular titles have been banned, different ways a book can be censored, and how to advocate against censorship. These resources are designed for teachers, librarians, administrators, and even students to help support the school library in fulfilling its mission to provide access to books. Further, the Intellectual Freedom News (<http://ala.informz.net/ala/profile.asp?fid=3430>) is a weekly compilation by the American Library Association’s Office for Intellectual Freedom and includes current book challenges, articles about privacy, internet filtering and censorship, ALA activities, conferences and institutes, products, online learning opportunities, awards and grants, international exchanges, etc. In addition, the Banned Books Week Coalition ([www.bannedbooksweek.org/coalition](http://www.bannedbooksweek.org/coalition)) is an international group of organizations committed to increasing awareness about book banning through education, advocacy, and the creation of programs related to book censorship. Like the American Library Association, the Banned Books Week Coalition offers resources to support the inclusion of books in public schools, including events (both virtual and on the ground), kits with practical information, and social media tools. These resources can be used year-round and by various groups involved in education and advocacy related to

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supporting the mission of the school library.

## Summary

Students have a right to access books depicting characters and events that they can relate to and characters and events that they can learn from. Denying students the opportunity to access information encourages and reinforces ideas that certain topics are unacceptable and limits students' understanding of the world around them. Schools should strive to be a place where access to information is encouraged rather than limited. Advocating for access to books is one way schools fulfill their responsibility to the students and to society.

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# Closure: Committing to Make a Change in the Classroom

Amy Earls Thompson, Ph.D., Assistant Professor and Nancy P. Gallavan, Ph.D., Professor, University of Central Arkansas

As educators continue to reflect and improve upon their practice, we would be remiss if we did not focus on the importance of closure in order to solidify student learning and bring the lesson full circle (Ganske, 2017; Bulger et al., 2002). Educator preparation programs have espoused effective learning experiences include the introduction, modeling (I Do), guided practice (We Do), independent practice (You Do), closure, and assessment. This I Do, We Do, You Do approach is known as the structured release of responsibility (Beers & Probst, 2017) – a descendant of the gradual release of responsibility (Pearson & Gallagher, 83). Examining other parts of a lesson, the introduction establishes purpose based on the objective(s) and motivates engagement customized for a specific community of learners. Modeling allows for direct instruction and practices that spark curiosity and strengthen connections. Assessment monitors and measures progress via formative assessments and post assessments. The closure is important to not skip so that student engagement and reflection can be maximized.

Most teachers value and include all of these lesson components. However, some teachers tend to minimize, omit, or use closure for transitions to upcoming activities many times due to time constraints. Why do we not make room or time for closure? Would we omit the I Do or We Do and consider the lesson successful and effective? This question is left unanswered. Limited research is available on lesson closure and how effective teachers close their lessons (Ganske, 2017; Webster, C. et al, 2009). Research on lesson closure dates back to the 80s and early 2000s and generally is in the subject areas of math, science, and physical education. What about literacy?

Closure encompasses one of the most powerful components



Amy Thompson



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of the learning process intentionally positioned immediately before post assessment to revisit the content and practices, review the connections and learning, and reinforce the concepts and outcomes. Taking five to ten minutes to bring closure to the lesson “can be sufficient pause to help students bring together key takeaways from the lesson, to think about what was important in the lesson, and to consider how their learning can help them be better readers and writers beyond this lesson and this day.” (Ganske, 2017, p. 99) Closure involves orally asking every student a meaningful question relevant to the learning experience and allowing time for every student to respond. Teachers can visually record responses (on a graphic organizer or via technology) and/or offer a few words for clarification. However, teachers serve as facilitators who model listening and learning as students respond to the questions.

## Basic Guidelines

Closure can be accomplished with three essential steps: (1) Name Cards: before the lesson, write each student’s name on one 3x5 notecard using a pen that does not bleed through the notecard. Otherwise, students can see the next name coming up and that could result in a lack of attention if it’s not their turn. Name cards need to be the same size and color. (2) Closure Questions: before the lesson, write the same number of questions as number of students. (You may write additional questions allowing for

options to differentiate appropriately.) (3) Two Containers: during closure, place name cards and question cards into two containers. Draw a card from each container and ask the student the question. Remind all students to listen carefully and interact respectfully. Demonstrate and reinforce these expectations fairly and consistently. Be aware of your intervention and feedback as all students are watching and listening. Nod your acceptance of the student’s response and continue with closure to ensure you call on every student and use time wisely. If students are off-task, utilize the extra questions and draw a name from the pile of cards of students who have already been called. This strategy helps maximize engagement and avoids students thinking they are “finished” after their names have been called.

## Variations for Face-to-Face Classrooms

As you increase your confidence and competence preparing for and conducting closure, you can enhance and expand your strategies many ways:

- Place or allow students to place themselves with a partner or small group to collaborate when answering the question.
- Ask all students a single question and to write a short response. Collect and distribute the responses for other students to read aloud, or let students crumple their responses into a small ball that students toss to another student to read aloud.
- Show students the way to record their responses on a large graphic organizer, i.e., Venn diagram, tree diagrams, concept maps, timelines, etc.
- Display multiple large sheets of paper around the room with different questions printed at the top of each sheet. Assign students to a particular sheet or allow students to select a question to

*Continued on page 8.*

# Closure: Committing to Make a Change...continued

Amy Earls Thompson, Ph.D., Assistant Professor and Nancy P. Gallavan, Ph.D., Professor, University of Central Arkansas

write their responses.

- Instruct students to write closure questions during independent practice that you use during closure.
- Prepare questions with multiple answers. Use the same question with three students in a row to continue providing unique responses.
- Vary questions so some responses are examples, rather than information.
- Reverse the closure procedure by drawing a student's name and stating a response. Then call on students to ask relevant questions.

Pose an open-ended question that requires students to make individual connections. Invite students to mingle and talk finding someone with similar (or opposing) connections. Distribute dry-erase boards or iPads to write their responses and hold up for you to conduct a quick visual check of the answers. Discuss any misconceptions.

## Variations for Online Classrooms

Closure must be included during online learning experiences too. Begin with the basic guidelines; follow the online format functions to call on individual students and/or place them with partners or small groups to answer the questions. Ask questions aloud and post questions via the chat function so students can hear and see the question. Use the chat function and screen share to record students' responses. Allow extra time for students to hear and read your questions to enhance online connections and comprehension.

## Benefits of Closure

As you strive to increase engagement, connections, and achievement for every student, committing ten minutes to fortify student understanding of the objectives reaps many benefits. Effective closures enable you to quickly assess comprehension of student learning coupled with thoroughness of your teaching. Students are excited to share their discoveries with peers, which carries over when telling their families what they learned that day in school. Most important, closure provides a time for students to digest their learning and to realize why it is important (Ganske, 2017). Closure is a component of planning and teaching that we can't afford to leave out.

## Apps for closure in face-to-face and online classrooms include

- BoardThing <https://mindmappingsoftwareblog.com/boardthing/>
- Edmodo <https://www.edmodo.com/>
- FlipGrid <https://info.flipgrid.com/>
- Loom <https://www.loom.com/>
- Padlet <https://padlet.com/>
- Post-It Plus [https://www.post-it.com/3M/en\\_US/post-it/ideas/app/](https://www.post-it.com/3M/en_US/post-it/ideas/app/)
- Stoodle <https://blogs.umass.edu/onlinetools/community-centered-tools/stoodle/>

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# The Settled Science of Teaching Reading...continued from page 1.

*By Marisa Ramirez Stukeley, Gina Fugnitto, Valerie Fraser, and Isabel Sawyer*

processes become so automatic, students will not need to devote significant amounts of cognitive energy to them while reading. This automaticity leaves the cognitive energy for making meaning from the text.

While reading the words on the page has been a goal of early elementary instruction for some time, the role of vocabulary and comprehension has often been minimized in the early grades. Teachers are often told to teach kindergarten, first-, and second-grade students to “learn to read,” and after third grade, students “read to learn.” In fact, research tells us that children should be reading to learn from the very beginning of their school career (Houck & Ross, 2012). Building knowledge and an expansive and rich vocabulary are critical elements of comprehending text.

## **Explicit and Systematic Instruction in Decoding**

There is no question that instruction in decoding leads to better readers. To develop as readers, students need instruction in the foundational skills to decode text and comprehension skills to make meaning of text. In her widely publicized article, Hanford (2018) states, “The basic assumption that underlies typical reading instruction in many schools is that learning to read is a natural process, much like learning to talk. But decades of scientific research has revealed that reading doesn’t come naturally.” This is settled science. In fact, it is so settled that prominent journals will no longer publish studies testing the effectiveness of phonics instruction (Hanford, 2018).

In their seminal work, Snow, Burns & Griffin (1998) state, “there is converging research support for the proposition that getting started in reading depends critically on mapping the letters and the spellings

of words onto the sounds and speech units that they represent. Failure to master word recognition impedes text comprehension.” Students must learn that words are made up of sounds, that letters represent sounds, and that there is a relationship between letters and the sounds they represent. They must also learn to rely on that knowledge in order to decode effectively so that they are able to read fluently and make sense of the text they are reading.

Learning to read seems effortless for approximately 5 percent of the population (Young, 2018). These “spontaneous readers” can give teachers a false sense of security. The terms “Third Grade Wall” or the “Fourth Grade Slump” arose because by third and fourth grade, “spontaneous readers” often struggle because they can no longer rely on other cueing systems to support their decoding. An additional 35 percent of the population is able to learn to read relatively easily. This group of students can also give teachers a false sense of security. These students may be able to decode “cat” easily but when they encounter a complex, polysyllabic word like “catastrophic,” they have no strategies or knowledge for how to decode it. This situation points to the need for explicit instruction in polysyllabic decoding. Unfortunately, phonics instruction often ends at the simple alphabetic and spelling-sound phase of the continuum.

In polysyllabic decoding, sounding out words from left to right and recognizing basic sight words are not successful strategies in unlocking text (Just & Carpenter, 1987; Shefelbine, Lipscomb, and Hern, 1989). Students need instruction in the third phase of reading development, the polysyllabic-morphemic phase, in which they learn to read by syllables and morphemic units (Adams 1990; Shefelbine 1990). Students who are unable to decode polysyllabic words

effectively pronounce fewer affixes and vowel sounds correctly, disregard large portions of available letter information, and are two to four times as likely to omit syllables as they read (Shefelbine & Calhoun, 1991).

Instruction at this more sophisticated phase includes:

- Morphemes
- Syllable types
- Syllable division rules
- Implications of the schwa

This instruction also needs to incorporate the flexible application of all that a student knows to decoding. Students “must strategically apply and broaden their knowledge base to accommodate the increase in complexity that comes with multisyllabic words” (Heggie, 2017). Students’ increased ability to analyze and read polysyllabic words along with opportunities to read frequently and widely will impact their ability to comprehend text (Shefelbine, 1990).

Ultimately, the goal of reading instruction is not phonics proficiency. It is “to get students to the point where most of the words they encounter are automatically recognized so that their attention can be devoted to making meaning” (Rasinski, 2019). We do a disservice to students when we do not provide effective phonics instruction that allows them to develop the word-recognition strategies necessary to develop as fluent, automatic, proficient readers.

## **Small-group, Differentiated Instruction**

There is a clear path to becoming a fluent reader who decodes accurately and automatically. The path includes explicit instruction on a continuum of foundational skills—the simple alphabetic phase, the spelling-pattern phase, and the more sophisticated polysyllabic and morphemic phase. Furthermore, the settled science has shown us that

# The Settled Science of Teaching Reading...continued

By Marisa Ramirez Stukey, Gina Fugnitto, Valerie Fraser, and Isabel Sawyer

the traditional, whole-class phonics lesson is not the way to develop fluent readers. Students come to school with a variety of literacy experiences and knowledge about letters, sounds, books, and vocabulary, but whole-class phonics instruction assumes our students all have the same instructional need. Whole-class phonics is an “instructional misstep [that] means that fewer children will develop strong word-reading skills. In addition, ineffective phonics instruction is likely to require more class time and/or later compensatory intervention, taking time away from the growth of other important contributors to literacy development” (Duke & Mesmer, 2019). Snow et al. (1998) also assert that “...intensity of instruction should be matched to children’s needs. Children who lack these understandings should be helped to acquire them; those who have grasped the alphabetic principle and can apply it productively should move on to more advanced learning opportunities.”

## **How should we teach phonics, if not whole class?**

Use data to determine the students’ instructional needs along the foundational skills continuum; not all students need to start at the beginning. Use this same data to group students for small-group differentiated phonics instruction. In their article, Duke & Mesmer (2019) affirm that “some children are able to develop letter-sound knowledge more quickly and efficiently than others” and advise providing differentiated phonics instruction.

Follow a clear scope and sequence. Both the content and sequence are essential in phonics instruction. A scope and sequence allows us to place students at their instructional point of need, teach in a systematic way, and adjust the intensity of instruction. As Duke & Mesmer (2019) assert, “across decades, evidence has accumulated

to suggest that systematic phonics instruction with a scope and sequence will produce better outcomes than instruction that does not follow a scope and sequence.”

## **Rely on explicit instruction.**

“There is evidence that explicit instruction that directs children’s attention to the phonological structure of oral language and to the connections between phonemes and spellings helps children who have not grasped the alphabetic principle or who do not apply it productively when they encounter unfamiliar printed words” (Snow et al., 1998). “[E]xplicit instruction is direct, precise, and unambiguous (e.g., telling children what sound the letters /sh/ represent together, rather than making the connection indirectly or asking them to figure it out themselves)” (Duke & Mesmer, 2019).

Respond to the needs of the students. On-going observational and assessment data allows us to respond to the students’ needs and support their word-reading development (Duke & Mesmer, Winter 2018-2019). Snow et al. (1998) further clarify, “because the ability to obtain meaning from print depends so strongly on the development of word recognition accuracy and reading fluency, both of the latter should be regularly assessed in the classroom, permitting timely and effective instructional response where difficulty or delay is apparent.” Give students the opportunity to apply their learning immediately in connected text. The National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance (NCEE) recommends students practice reading new and familiar words or word parts in text “as soon as students can decode simple words” (Foorman, et al. 2016). Duke & Mesmer (Winter 2018-2019) affirm, “the evidence is clear that young children benefit from opportunities to read text that emphasizes letter-sound relationships they have learned

to date. This reinforces the value of their hard work and of using decoding to read words.” The research is clear: students need differentiated, explicit, and systematic decoding instruction that is connected to text.

## **Comprehension: Building Knowledge and Applying Strategies**

As with explicit and systematic phonics instruction, the role of knowledge in comprehension is also settled science. Without a body of knowledge, it’s infinitely harder to make sense of text and, in fact, controlling for other factors, knowledge plays the largest role in comprehension (Cromley & Azevedo, 2007; Ozuru, Dempsey, & McNamara, 2009). In addition, the knowledge one has supports learning and retaining new knowledge.

In many classrooms, teachers utilize “activating prior knowledge” as a part of the reading process. However, activation of prior knowledge is significantly different than building a body of knowledge. Activation presumes the student already has background knowledge that needs to be brought forward. Building a body of knowledge, on the other hand, supports students in learning and deepening knowledge in topics they may or may not have been exposed to in the past. Building knowledge systematically adds to students’ knowledge base and supports their comprehension.

Current conversation around this topic may lead one to believe that there is only one way to build knowledge— through connected text sets. Cervetti & Heibert (2019), however, offer multiple knowledge-building practices that both increase comprehension of the current text and build students’ knowledge base to increase comprehension in the future. The first of their knowledge-building practices is wide reading. Reading volume has long been associated with general world knowledge (Stanovich &

# The Settled Science of Teaching Reading...continued

By Marisa Ramirez Stukey, Gina Fugnitto, Valerie Fraser, and Isabel Sawyer

Cunningham, 1993). The more children read, the more they learn about the world (Sparks, Patton & Murdoch, 2014). Plenty of time for independent reading is one way for students to increase their knowledge base. A second and equally important way is teacher read alouds that introduce students to new topics and vocabulary. Wide reading also contributes to students' vocabulary, which, in turn, increases their capacity to learn more from texts they read (Stanovich, 1986). Another knowledge-building practice is to ensure that students have exposure and access to engaging and conceptually rich texts, especially non-fiction. Informational texts are essential for students to build wide knowledge of the world (Anderson & Guthrie, 1999) and support students in both a deeper and wider view of particular topics. Students who are exposed to informational texts through read-aloud are often more likely to choose those kinds of texts for their independent reading (Dreher & Dromsky, 2000).

One way to ensure that students use their knowledge to comprehend texts is to ensure that higher-level questions and dialogue are a guaranteed part of reading instruction. A recent study indicated a shockingly low amount of time is devoted to students talking, listening, reading and writing about text (Jeong, Gaffney, & Choi, 2010). When students have regular and ample amounts of time to engage in both teacher-led and peer-to-peer discussions involving sophisticated texts and tasks, they deepen their knowledge and comprehension (Driver, Newton, & Osborne, 2000; Pappas, Varelas, Barry, & Rife, 2002).

Explicit comprehension strategy instruction is clearly connected to building a body of knowledge. The strategies of "making connections" and "inferring" rely on existing knowledge and integrating that knowledge with

new information from a text to build deeper understandings. A significant body of research links students' knowledge with comprehension of text (Langer, 1984; Long, Winograd, & Bridget, 1989; Stevens, 1980). Students' schematic knowledge base is activated when reading similar representations of familiar concepts in text (Pressley, 2000). Building on the schematic representations that students have as well as activating and linking those representations to text comprises the strategy of making connections.

Readers use their knowledge of the world in many ways to comprehend text. One way is to make inferences about the text and better recall information that is both literal and inferential (Pressley, Johnson, Symons, McGoldrick, & Kurita, 1989). A significant number of studies demonstrate the effects of training students to use their prior knowledge to make inferences (Brown, Smiley, Day, Townsend, & Lawton, 1977; Hayes & Tierney, 1982; Omanson, Warren, & Trabasso, 1978; Pearson, Hansen, & Gordon, 1979).

Another significant strategy that contributes to comprehension is visualizing—the direct action of making a mental image as one reads. Prior knowledge is essential to being able to create visualizations and students who are taught to visualize while reading are better able to make inferences, predict, and recall both literal and inferential information from the text (Center et al., 1999; Gambrell & Bales, 1986; Gambrell & Jawitz, 1993; Pressley, 1976; Sadoski, 1985; Truscott et al., 1995). Making a mental image contributes to retaining new learning since the information is stored as an image rather than words (Pressley et al., 1989; Sadoski, 1983). The settled science of comprehension instruction tells us that students need to continually build a body of knowledge and that they build that

knowledge through various avenues. In addition, identifying the knowledge and integrating it with comprehension strategy instruction is a powerful, evidence-based part of comprehensive reading instruction. Knowledge and the act of building on that knowledge using comprehension strategies are linked.

## Next Steps: Connecting Research to Practice

Unfortunately, current conversations about the science of teaching reading have been reduced to sound bites, Tweets, oppositional letters, and blogs. Many times, the conversation devolves into "sides" where instructional approaches are relegated to an "either/or" choice. We advocate that there is no either/or. There is absolutely an AND. Students need explicit and systematic instruction in decoding. Full stop. They also need ample amounts of time to read and be read to so their knowledge, vocabulary, and love of reading builds. Full stop. Students need a wide range of knowledge about the world. This knowledge is essential to their growth as readers and thinkers. There isn't only one way to build that knowledge. There are many ways and as educators, we should take advantage of them all. Full stop.

Given what we know, our efforts should be devoted to ensuring that teachers have access to the research results and are given the tools that allow them to actualize this research with their students. Instructional time in classrooms should be supportive of the developmental process of reading on a continuum of learning—with more time devoted to decoding in the early grades and more time devoted to comprehension in the upper grades. That said, comprehension instruction is still absolutely necessary in our early grades—it's not an either/or, it's an AND. The science is settled.

# The Settled Science of Teaching Reading...continued

By Marisa Ramirez Stukey, Gina Fugnitto, Valerie Fraser, and Isabel Sawyer

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# Second Annual - Writer's Showcase

## Topic: The Book That Changed My Life



*continued from page 5.*

By Avalyon Breedlove

...created great images and examples of good people to follow for my own actions. Everyone should know about God. Even though I have heard the stories many times, I read them again. I will never stop reading the bible. God wants everyone to know him more and to know about all of the sacrifices he has made for us. Because of the stories in the bible, I have a relationship with him. The bible is the best book in the world to tell a story that happened a long time ago, but it is even just a great book to read and see what people did back in history. It gives good examples of mistakes that people made and how to learn from those mistakes. It is a great book to read to begin a relationship with Jesus, too. Overall, I think the bible is the one book that has changed my life.

*Continued from page 9.*

By Jack Papera

other as evil, and not because either of them truly are, since they both do good and bad things, but they see each other as evil because they are enemies.

In conclusion, the only book to change me thus far has been *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe. It permanently changed the way I view the world because it showed me that life isn't polarized, there's no specific good or bad, on a spectrum of black and white, the world is in shades of gray. *Things Fall Apart* also taught me that everyone thinks that they're the protagonist in their own story, and no one is, which is a truth I can't help but realize now that I have read the book.

Congratulations to all  
Writer Showcase Winners!

*Continued from page 6.*

By Bella Madden

...be one. I strive to be a true friend by having peace with a person even when there are hard times between me and that person. Some people might call that being a faithful friend. I apologize to my family and friends when I do something wrong against them and forgive them as well. No one likes to be around someone who is too proud, so I venture to be humble. If things are difficult for a person, I make it easier for them by being gentle with them. I have concern for them, show them sympathy, and cheer them up. I also love to be kind and share with others because that brings me joy. I also try to make things like cards or little crafts for others because that makes them feel special.

Changes in me have happened when I am with my family. I am devoted to my family in different ways. I deliberately spend my time with each of them so all of them know I love them. When my parents ask me to vacuum or help clean the house, I obey because the Bible states that we are to honor our mother and father. I also do it with a cheerful heart, give my full effort, and try to give my best. When my mommy asks someone to bring the trashcan in from the curb, I enjoy volunteering because I know that is a way I can help. I also help my sister clean her room since she doesn't really enjoy cleaning her room. I delight in taking care of my little brother when my mommy needs to do something by playing games with him.

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# March 16

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