Are the reading wars relevant in remote and low-income reader communities?

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Learning to read, and developing a lifelong engagement with reading, requires access to quality reading material, and plenty of it. But when it comes to explicit literacy instruction, there has historically been heated debate around what are the optimal approaches and texts to develop literacy in young readers. Encompassing both pedagogy and philosophy, and inflamed by contentious and contradictory research, this discussion is so divisive it is commonly referred to as the ‘reading wars’.¹

The ‘wars’ pit systematic educational texts against less structured, creative varieties of books for early readers. The discussion has significant impacts on education policy, funding and resource creation. On one hand, evidence shows that instruction in phonics and core language building blocks is essential to early literacy acquisition.² On the other hand, research also recognises that new readers learn best when exposed to texts they are excited to read.³ Indeed, enjoyment of reading was the best predictor of reading achievement in a cross-country comparison of OECD literacy assessments (PISA).⁴

In affluent environments, readers come to expect that a library will offer them all kinds of reading experiences in fiction and non-fiction, basic and advanced, and across a wide range of subjects. But in low-income or remote environments where poor availability, or the complete absence, of books and educational materials is commonplace, government or iNGO education programs tend to focus on providing smaller collections of books strongly tied to reading acquisition. This is logical for short-term educational outcomes but does little to foster a longer-term culture of reading.

Library For All supports children on an education journey that goes beyond the mechanics of literacy towards a holistic ability to learn and be interested in learning. This Working Paper surveys academic and NGO research activities in support of LFA’s approach to library development. It takes a fresh look at the ‘reading wars’, interrogating current thinking on the types of reading materials required for literacy improvement in the context of remote and low-income communities.

³ Kathryn H. Au, “Promoting Ownership of Literacy,” Reading Today 26, no. 6 (2009)
What kinds of books are needed in a library for emerging readers?

Library For All’s understanding of what makes a high-quality book has been unpacked across the Working Paper series. Considerations such as cultural appropriateness, inclusion and accessibility, and language concerns are crucial in any discussion of library creation for communities experiencing resource poverty. This emphasis on defining ‘quality’ alerts us to the common misconception that children’s books are simplistic texts. Learning to read is a task of immense complexity⁵ and reading material offered to children needs to meet that challenge.

For those looking in from outside the worlds of education and literary research, it might seem surprising that children’s books could draw the attention of complex theoretical debate. But if a book is being asked to both teach a child to read and spark their lifelong love of reading, it follows that the contents must be constructed with some level of science and sophistication.

The battleground: phonics vs rich text content focus

For over 200 years, in the English-speaking world, and particularly since the 1960s, pundits have questioned the benefits and limitations of two principal approaches to the types of books prioritised for children at the early literacy stage: a phonics-focused reading approach, in which the sounds that letters and groups of letters make is taught before longer texts; and a ‘whole of language’ approach which emphasises the progressive discovery of word meaning through experiences in a literacy-rich environment. Alignment with one side or the other influences everything from the creation of books and educational resources, through to education policy, funding and classroom practice. This is highly significant in a situation of limited funding when resource providers may not be in a position to provide a varied resource library.⁶

Phonics instruction can be taught in several ways⁷ but generally takes the form of repetitive exercises encouraging readers to familiarise themselves with the building blocks of language, beginning with decodable words that can be ‘sounded out’ – “S-A-T spells sat”. Theoretically, this develops foundational reading strategies that can later be deployed with longer and more complex texts.⁸

The purist ‘whole of language’ movement peaked in the 1980s and ‘90s and has since been

⁵ Rastle, and Nation, “Ending the Reading Wars.”
⁶ Rastle, and Nation.
⁷ Rastle, and Nation.
replaced by a more moderate blended reading approach, but this school of thought continues to prioritise reading with and to children from a wide range of ‘rich text’ sources. It sees reading acquisition as a sort of learning-by-osmosis whereby the more words children are exposed to, the more they will come to familiarise themselves with common words and quickly come to understand other parts of language, like grammar and punctuation (which may come considerably later in a phonics-focused approach).

In longitudinal studies, pure ‘whole of language’ teaching has revealed deficits in the problem-solving tools readers need to interpret new words out of context. It also potentially disadvantages students with additional learning needs, such as dyslexia. Phonics-based language teaching is back in favour, though it riles those who see reading as something more dynamic than a mechanical exercise in decoding.⁹ “Teaching children to correlate letter combinations with sounds […] is not teaching them to read,” says one 2013 study.¹⁰

In 2021, several Australian states have introduced a compulsory phonics screening check in year 1 (with students approximately 6 years old) to ensure readers are achieving functional literacy benchmarks. The same testing approach has been in place in the UK since 2011, where it has provided strong evidence of the benefit for phonics instruction on reading accuracy, but reveals decreasing competency in reading comprehension. Arguably, when teachers are required to steer more of their early years classroom time towards testable phonics, other elements of reading receive less attention.¹¹

So, these ideological ‘wars’ are not over, but they generally make headlines only in the guise of an ‘either/or’ approach to reading instruction. In reality, in a high-income environment, like Australia, children benefit from a multi-faceted approach. Classroom teaching may begin with phonics instruction in some form (and there are many), complemented by a guided runway of levelled readers highlighting high-frequency vocabulary and ‘sight words’ (words that are common, but not necessarily decodable). These beginnings are then complemented with exposure to rich text illustrated books that drive up interest in reading, with additional benefits to literacy acquisition through adding new vocabulary, figures of speech, grammatical sophistication, and visual literacy challenges.

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⁹ Mitchell, “The Reading Wars Are over and Phonics Won.”


In low-income spaces, faced by extreme low literacy, many education programs understandably favour the phonics-based approach in an effort to rapidly secure those foundational word-decoding tools for new readers with an unstable educational future. This is also driven by the instructional style of classrooms where adequate time for rich text is not part of the school curriculum, and teachers have limited opportunity to deviate from prescribed lesson plans. But there are several reasons why a more blended approach might be advantageous in resource-poor environments.

The perspective is different for a resource poor environment

One reason to advocate for a blended approach to content delivery in a resource-poor environment is to drive up reading motivation. ‘Today a reader, tomorrow a leader,’ said US journalist Margaret Fuller. Similarly stirring quotes abound regarding the power reading acquisition brings to a young person’s social and economic future. Without doubt, literacy is empowering\(^\text{12}\), but some have argued that assertions around reading as an essential social good are underpinned by a class-based sense of reading as ‘cultural capital’ that is unattainable in low-income communities. Education is considered ‘a measure of elite’\(^\text{13}\) in affluent countries – book ownership may even have social class implications in some spheres.\(^\text{14}\) Additionally, affluent readers exist in text-rich environments, with access to books, along with plentiful visual and auditory literacy opportunities, from television to billboard advertising. Not only does this drive up literacy, it drives the impetus to learn to read in order to make sense of the world around you.

In such spaces, it is easy to see why children might aspire to become ‘readers’. This is not necessarily a universal truth, especially in areas where the benefits of learning to read may be harder to visualise when there is not an immediate daily or environmental need — or where basic survival needs, like food or shelter, are not guaranteed. In short, we cannot assume that everyone wants to learn to read. To create lifelong learners in an environment where there is not necessarily an existing reading culture, we need to find ways to provide reading inspiration; a runway of opportunities as well as school-based foundational texts. Even in affluent countries, children’s enthusiasm for reading may decline as they get older and are faced with other distractions. In one study of those young readers who did enjoy reading for pleasure (and who

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\(^{12}\) Castles, Rastle, and Nation, “Ending the Reading Wars.”


will therefore continue to achieve literacy improvements) 59% said they did so because they could choose books they enjoyed, once beyond the basics.\textsuperscript{15}

This can be illustrated with a cycling analogy. Phonics instruction has been likened to using training wheels; it’s a frustrating but necessary first stage that, once conquered, creates confident, independent riders in the longer term. But what happens if you only ever have exposure to that frustrating, beginner’s bike? What motivates you to keep learning? A great library offers readers this training environment, but also a range of bigger and better ‘bikes’. Whilst in training, there are exciting adventures on the horizon, hopefully supported by role models who are expert riders, showcasing clear examples of the benefits to pushing on through the training stage. Ideally, they will not only learn to ride, but learn to love riding and have a strong desire to get better, and travel further, over time.

A second significant consideration is the high degree of uncertainty and inconsistency likely to accompany the implementation of literacy instruction in many remote, low-income and low-literacy spaces.

Phonics instruction, in its most comprehensive form, is a complex science. In English, the language is divided into (and taught as) 44 distinct units of sound – phonemes – including short vowels, long vowels, single consonants, and grouped consonants (like ‘sh’). These 44 phonemes are represented by over 250 graphemes – that is, the letter or letter group that corresponds to the sound. So, the phoneme /f/ has 4 related graphemes – f (as in funny), ff (as in giraffe), ph (as in phone) and gh (as in enough). Whilst students obviously learn the alphabet, they are not taught to read in alphabetical order (a, then b, then c). Rather, this system commences reading instruction via the most easily identifiable sounds that offer a large number of word combinations. For example, the graphemes s, a, t, p, i and n are commonly taught first, boosting young readers’ confidence as they find themselves able to read sat, pat, pin, tap and so on, before they are gradually introduced to other more complex grapheme/phoneme combinations.\textsuperscript{16}

For maximum benefits, teachers need training in an overall program of language deconstruction, not just small sets of decodable readers.\textsuperscript{17} Additionally, for students to take on board a


recognition of these phonemes, they need exposure to accurate and consistent pronunciation of the sounds. If teachers have a variety of accents, or struggle with literacy themselves, there is significant room for error in this early ‘building blocks’ focused reading approach, despite its proven efficacy in other environments.

Similar challenges beset conventional levelled education resource sets in resource-poor communities. In high-income countries, these are generally sold commercially as bundles with lesson plans, flash cards and, crucially, assessment tools as part of an integrated system. Each levelling system may have up to 30 distinct levels, developed against an explicit range of benchmarks across word count and sentence complexity. Heavy teacher intervention in terms of benchmarking is one of the keys to success, as differentiated learning means identifying the right level at the right time for a child to advance appropriately in their skills development.

If a child enters the classroom reading system at a point where reading is too challenging, or too easy, they may disengage from the learning process. At the right level, a book should teach, challenge and encourage problem solving and interpretation, without being overwhelmingly difficult. Ideally, over time, the child will learn to self-extend, choosing diverse books to expand the skillset honed through these formulaic early tools, but this relies on excellent encouragement by teachers in the earliest stages.

Furthermore, in affluent countries, levelled readers and phonics programs are supplied with explicit teacher guidance activities, into classrooms with small enough student numbers to facilitate differentiated reading opportunities. In a low-income country, this may look more like very large, and transient, student attendance, combined with minimally trained, and transient, teaching staff. Thus, while traditional education books form an essential component of a library, they will not be maximally effective without considerable intervention.

Across all book supply and development approaches, a final but highly significant consideration is cultural relevance. The importance of young readers being able to ‘see themselves in stories’ is increasingly recognised as vital in terms of education equity and validation of diversity, but it also has literacy implications. When readers struggle to connect with texts, they are less proficient in reading them. Reading – and particularly reading comprehension – requires a student to draw on their background knowledge and experiences to make links between letters, sounds

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and meanings. Hence, whether delivering phonics books, sight word readers, or illustrated picture books, the highest value will be derived from matching vocabulary and imagery with local contexts.\(^{21}\)

Library For All has, therefore, chosen to provide a guided runway of reading levels that are not specifically curriculum aligned, but which provide a general guide to teachers, students, parents and carers around book levelling. LFA books include a combination of phonics/decodable, high frequency and rich text writing styles, acquired and curated with a specific cultural community in mind. In a situation of minimal intervention, students can self-select books at a level that appeals to them, and progress through reading levels in accordance with their own confidence and interests. Where intervention is available, LFA books can be selected to complement classroom activities around phonics or other country-specific language teaching approaches.

**Conclusion**

Despite huge variation in education approaches around the world, there are some core values at stake in the literacy space. The quest for automaticity is one. That is, readers should, over time, reach a point where letter and sound recognition is effortless, and the reading quest is for additional vocabulary rather than foundational acquisition.

Additionally, the hope is that reading will be performed at a fluid pace, with high levels of comprehension and/or strategies for researching and determining meaning of new words.\(^{22}\) Some call this the progression from learning to read, to reading to learn. Additionally, most education literature agrees in principle with a desire not only to foster reading, but to create ‘readers’; that is, people who want to read, whether for further knowledge gain in their personal areas of interest or ambition, or purely as a leisure pursuit.

The establishment of libraries, including reading intervention programs and classroom book sets, is informed by persistent re-examination of education more generally, and the regular adjustment of global policies and frameworks around approaches to literacy. Importantly, limited funding always forces concessions to be made.

Considering this evidence summary, however, it seems the ‘ideal’ library in a resource-scarce environment should include a quantity of books sufficient to permit readers to enter at an engaging level and move up as their skills and interests evolve (see WP 3/21). As outlined in


\(^{22}\) “Best Practices for Developing Supplementary Reading Material.”
LFA WP 2/21, these books must also be culturally accessible, including a majority of books that reflect the lived experiences of new readers. These books must include both instructional texts (decodable/sight words) and more complex or imaginative texts (rich texts), across a range of levels and thematic areas.

About the Working Paper Series

This Working Paper was published by Library For All as part of our evidence-based approach to the design and delivery of educational resources. Papers in this series showcase the quantitative, qualitative, and speculative research activities that inform our operations, from product development to program delivery. Read more from this series at libraryforall.org.

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Dr Cain Gray is an authority on cross-cultural library collection management. She brings specialist knowledge of translation and adaptation methodologies, and culturally specific publishing agendas, to her curatorial oversight of LFA’s publishing operations.

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We won’t stop until every child can learn, does learn and enjoys learning.

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