DALE WILLOWS

REDUCING LITERACY FAILURE THROUGH TEACHER DEVELOPMENT: IMPLEMENTING A BALANCED AND FLEXIBLE LITERACY DIET

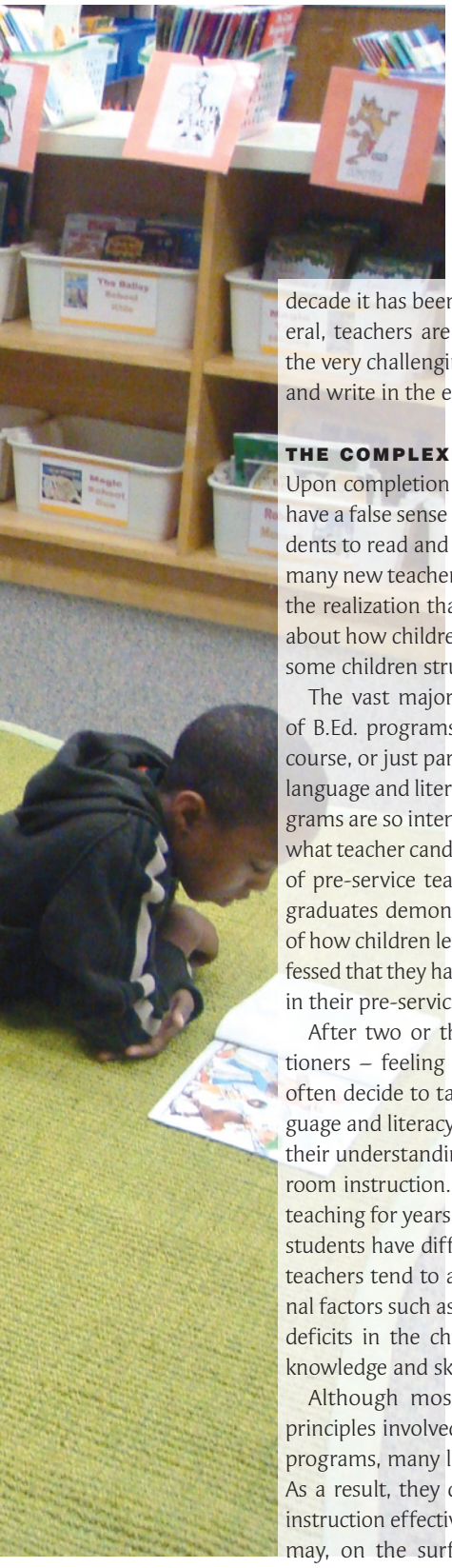
HOW CHILDREN FEEL about school and about themselves in the early years can set the stage for their future success in school and in life. Learning to read and write in those early years is pivotal: children who are not successful by the end of grade three have little chance of ever becoming fully literate. This failure diminishes their chances of success in virtually all other academic areas and leads them into a spiral of low self-esteem, school drop out, and poverty. Some children are more vulnerable than others to falling into this helpless, hopeless situation.

Increasingly, the amount and quality of reading and writing instruction children receive in school is recognized as a major contributor to rates of literacy failure. Children from 'at-risk' backgrounds, for whatever reason, are particularly vulnerable to the effects of inadequate instruction. Although there is a great deal of research evidence to guide educational practice in classroom reading and writing instruction, many teachers lack sufficient depth of understanding to implement effective programs, and, as a result, many already-at-risk students are launched onto a trajectory of failure as early as kindergarten. Some will never recover.

About five percent of children have serious reading/writing disabilities – and therefore predictably struggle in learning to read and write. In the early 1990s, alarm bells began to sound as evidence mounted that a much higher percentage of students was falling behind – in some cases 40 percent or more by the end of primary.

The 'prime suspects' usually presented to account for this large discrepancy included potential 'risk factors' such as lack of home literacy, poor nutrition, single parents, and poverty, as well as language and cultural differences between home and school. An exploration of these various potential risk factors resulted in a surprising conclusion: A position paper issued by the Canadian Psychological Association in 1994 suggested that students were falling behind *because reading instruction in the primary grades was not consistent with research evidence*. This view was echoed in a report from The International Dyslexia Association in 1997, stating that most reading difficulties could be prevented if teachers had a better understanding of how young children learn to read and how they should be taught. Over the last

EN BREF **Au cours des 40 dernières années, nous avons beaucoup appris sur la façon d'enseigner avec succès la lecture et l'écriture. D'après la convergence des preuves, si leurs enseignants possèdent des connaissances approfondies, il est possible d'enseigner la lecture et l'écriture à pratiquement tous les élèves au primaire, quels que soient les facteurs de risque comme la pauvreté et la langue maternelle. Les approches les plus efficaces comprennent la formation permettant d'acquérir la conscience phonémique et une méthode phonétique systématique et séquentielle en maternelle et en première année, dans le cadre de programmes équilibrés et motivants. De nombreux enseignants, toutefois, n'enseignent pas en fonction des preuves maintenant accumulées. Le défi consiste à veiller à ce que tous les éducateurs du primaire suivent des programmes préparatoires approfondis et un perfectionnement professionnel à long terme fondé sur les preuves de recherches à propos du quoi, comment, quand et pourquoi d'un enseignement équilibré et souple de la littératie.**



decade it has been increasingly acknowledged that, in general, teachers are not receiving sufficient preparation for the very challenging task of teaching their students to read and write in the elementary years.

THE COMPLEXITY OF LITERACY EDUCATION

Upon completion of pre-service, beginning teachers often have a false sense of confidence in their ability to teach students to read and write. In their first year or two, however, many new teachers – especially those in primary – come to the realization that there is much they do not understand about how children learn to read and write and about why some children struggle.

The vast majority of practicing teachers are graduates of B.Ed. programs in which they may have had only one course, or just part of a course, that focused specifically on language and literacy education. Moreover, some B.Ed. programs are so intense that the demands considerably exceed what teacher candidates are able to handle. In a recent study of pre-service teacher preparation in Ontario, many new graduates demonstrated only a superficial understanding of how children learn to read and write. A few of them confessed that they had "not even opened" the textbook assigned in their pre-service Language and Literacy course![1]

After two or three years of teaching, reflective practitioners – feeling the burden of their students' failures – often decide to take advanced courses in the areas of language and literacy and special education in order to extend their understanding and improve the quality of their classroom instruction. Other teachers, unfortunately, continue teaching for years without taking such courses. When their students have difficulties learning to read and write, these teachers tend to attribute their students' failures to external factors such as parent and community shortcomings or deficits in the children rather than to their own lack of knowledge and skills.

Although most new teachers have learned general principles involved in implementing language and literacy programs, many lack deep understanding of key concepts. As a result, they do not implement language and literacy instruction effectively and flexibly in their classrooms. What may, on the surface, seem relatively simple – teaching young children to read and write – turns out to be a very complex process. An evidence-based document titled *Teaching Reading IS Rocket Science* clearly laid out some of the dimensions of that complexity a decade ago.[2] To ensure the success of their students, teachers need to have a good understanding of the nature of that complexity.

Historically, in districts and schools with high rates of literacy failure, senior administrators – who often have less knowledge of the complexity of literacy education than elementary school teachers – have been seduced by 'magic answers'.[3] District and school administrators have long been looking for the ideal program for teaching reading and writing. With this 'best method', they have assumed, teachers need only implement the program and the problems of literacy education will be solved. The history of literacy education is rife with failed – and often very expensive – simplistic solutions.

In Canada, over the last decade, ministries of education and school districts have been shifting their focus toward 'building capacity' through the professional development of teachers and school administrators as a valuable investment for the future success of their students. Many administrators now recognize that the solution for teachers whose students are failing in literacy is not to buy a new program, but rather to provide opportunities for professional learning.

ADVANCES IN KNOWLEDGE

During the last decade, as well, three landmark reports have brought together what is known from research about how children can most effectively be taught to read and write: *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children (1998), Report of the National Reading Panel: Teaching Children to Read (2000), and Developing Literacy in Second-Language Learners: Report of the National Literacy Panel on Language-Minority Children and Youth* (2006). For each report, an independent panel of experts was assigned to review evidence from hundreds of studies in order to delineate the key components of effective literacy education. All three panels emanated from the U.S., but all had Canadian representation.[4] Although no comparable comprehensive research syntheses exist in Canada – in fact, the Canadian

government has recently discontinued support of the one major research organization committed to advancing understanding of literacy education[5] – the findings from these very significant reports have provided a basis for several provincial documents on literacy.

Based on the evidence in these research syntheses and other recent reports, it is now possible to design school programs in which nearly all students will be successful in learning to read and write in the classroom, and those few students who have significant learning disabilities can be detected early and provided with appropriate program adjustments.

Much of the message in these recent reports is not really new. What is new is that they clearly delineate the key evidence-based components of effective literacy education. They also specify that the most successful literacy instruction is 'balanced' in its presentation of these instructional components.[6] We now know that, to be effective, elementary literacy programs must include balanced and motivating instruction in phonemic awareness; systematic, sequential phonics; fluent, automatic reading of text; vocabulary development; text comprehension strategies; spelling and handwriting; and written composition strategies.[7] A strong recommendation, based on all of the reports, is that preservice and in-service programs need to prepare teachers to provide all of these components effectively in developmentally appropriate classroom instruction.

OBSTACLES TO PROGRESS

There has probably been more research on reading/writing instruction than on any other topic in education, and our understanding in these areas has advanced enormously over the last 40 years. However, despite the research evidence, the debate about how to lead children to literacy, especially how to start literacy education in the primary grades, continues. With minor variations in the terminology and details, the arguments have always been fundamentally the same. On one side are those who support a systematic introduction of the sounds of the language and the letter-sound connections, and practice using that knowledge in reading and writing, as a preliminary phase of literacy education; on the other are those who promote, from the beginning, a 'natural' approach to literacy acquisition that capitalizes on what children bring with them to the learning situation – their language, their personal bank of experiences, their thirst for knowledge and their love of good stories. Almost invariably these positions have been presented as though they represent an either/or dilemma.

Intolerance and polarization have characterized the phonics-vs.-whole-language debate, with extremists advocating either a rigid teacher-centered 'back-to-basics' approach or an uncompromising child-centered 'developmental' approach. Perhaps because learning to read and write are so important in our society and because parents, teachers, administrators, and researchers care so deeply about children's success, the topic of literacy learning has aroused deep emotion in virtually all constituencies. Passion has blinded many to reason and common sense. Probably no topic in education has stimulated more heated discussion in school staff rooms, at workshops and conferences, in the media, in books and journals, and on the Internet than how reading and writing should be taught, especially in the primary grades. Even today, when 'balanced literacy' has become the mantra of elementary literacy education, many classroom teachers are still not implementing instruction that is consistent with the evidence. Many are still inadequately prepared to – or averse to – implementing phonemic awareness training and systematic, sequential phonics as an essential part of the balance in kindergarten and Grade 1 instruction.

PRINCIPLES OF EFFECTIVE LITERACY EDUCATION

My work, over the past 15 years, has focused on pre-service and in-service professional development in literacy education. I have assisted schools and whole school districts in Canada and the U.S. to build capacity in their elementary staffs, including school administrators. From this work, a consistent pattern of results has emerged in every context: as educators' knowledge has increased, student performance has improved.

In this professional development – in order to avoid the simplistic and misguided 'great debate' about whether reading should be taught with an initial emphasis on phonics or whole language in the beginning stages of instruction – I have used a common sense 'food groups' metaphor. *The Balanced and Flexible Literacy Diet* framework draws on Canada's Food Guide (the Food Pyramid in the U.S.) to bypass the great debate and lead educators into a more productive way of thinking and talking about literacy. The goal is to help teachers and school administrators put research into practice in elementary schools by raising their understanding of the processes involved in learning to read and write and of the instructional practices that are most effective in the classroom. Within the framework, parallels are drawn between the requirements of a healthy diet and important considerations in effective literacy education. The simple notion underlying *The Literacy Diet* is that, in order to promote growth in literacy, we must provide the right amount and type of 'food for literacy', and we must ensure that every student consumes enough of the right literacy foods on a daily basis. The principles of balance and flexibility are key.

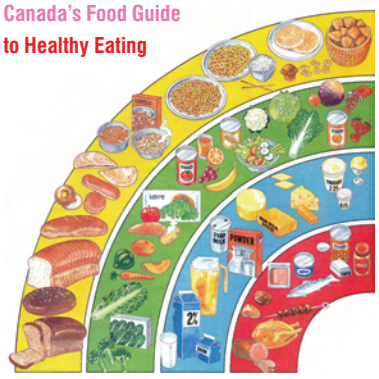
THE KEY 'FOOD GROUPS' OF THE LITERACY DIET ARE BASED ON WHAT WE KNOW FROM RESEARCH (AND PRACTICE) TO BE THE ESSENTIAL COMPONENTS OF EFFECTIVE READING AND WRITING INSTRUCTION.

Balance is essential to good growth in literacy. The literacy diet 'components' represent the equivalent of the food groups (e.g., grains, fruit and vegetables, meat and alternatives, dairy products and alternatives), and obviously no diet is balanced if it includes only one or two food groups. The key 'food groups' of *The Literacy Diet* are based on what we know from research (and practice) to be the essential components of effective reading and writing instruction. These components are required in appropriate proportions, complementing each other in fulfilling all literacy

FIGURE 1
LITERACY COMPONENTS AS "FOOD GROUPS"

Food Groups for a Healthy Diet

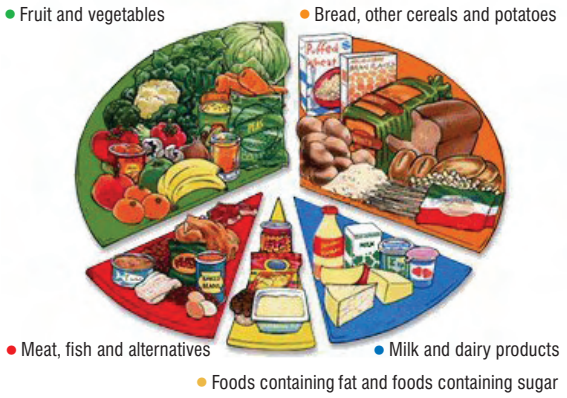
Canada's Food Guide to Healthy Eating



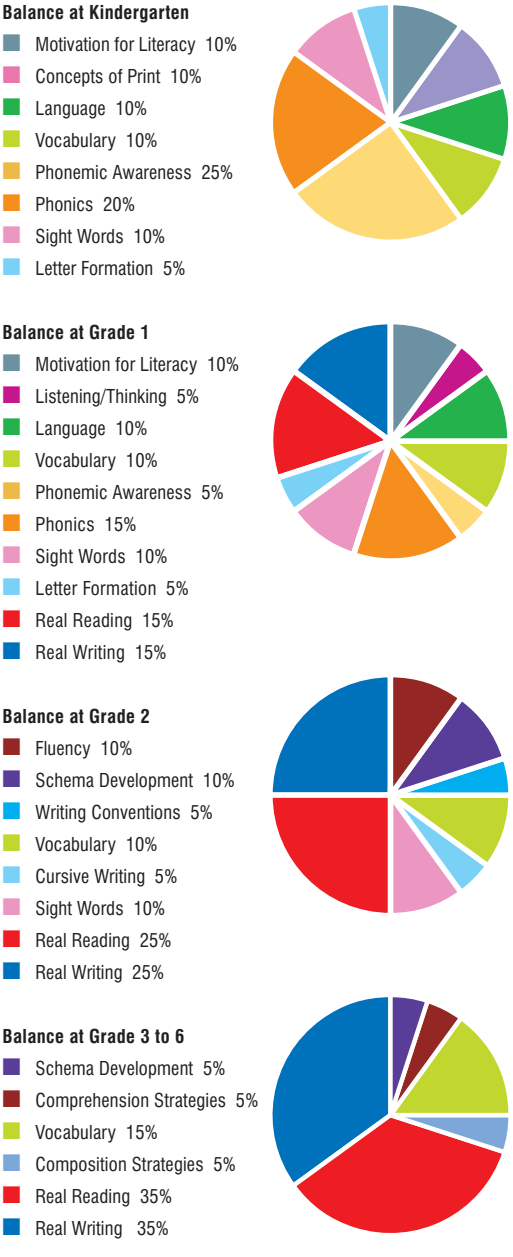
Food Groups for a Literacy Diet

- phonemic awareness
- explicit, systematic phonics
- fluent, automatic reading of text
- vocabulary development
- text comprehension strategies
- spelling and handwriting
- written composition strategies
- on-going assessment

FIGURE 2
DIFFERENT PROPORTIONS OF DIFFERENT FOOD GROUPS



CHANGING LITERACY DIET BALANCE AT DIFFERENT STAGES



Note: These pie charts are not to be taken literally; they simply depict the shifting focus of instruction across stages of literacy development.

nutritional requirements for growth. Classroom teachers need to understand what the components are and how, when, and why they must be provided to ensure the literacy success of their students.

Flexibility is necessary to satisfy personal preferences. As in any other diet, not everyone enjoys all foods for literacy. In *The Literacy Diet* framework, it is OK to say "I don't eat broccoli!" but it is not OK to say "I don't eat vegetables!" – for both teachers and students. There are many different 'nutritious' and motivating activities to provide each of the literacy diet components. Teachers need not throw out all previous classroom practices to create a more effective literacy program; they simply need to do a 'literacy nutritional analysis' and choose or create a balanced and appealing literacy diet for their students.

THE CONTENT OF EFFECTIVE INSTRUCTION

The content of *The Literacy Diet* reflects the findings of research-based reports concerning the most effective instructional practices for facilitating literacy acquisition from the early stages in kindergarten to advanced stages at the end of the junior grades. Whereas, in the past, beginning reading/writing instruction has vacillated between phonics and whole language approaches, largely based on the intuitions of educators and the pronouncements of gurus, the findings of the three independent expert panels now provide clear direction concerning how reading and writing should be taught in the early school years. The evidence is now in – the most effective approaches include phonemic awareness training and systematic, sequential phonics instruction in kindergarten and Grade 1 *as part of balanced and motivating programs*. Teachers who understand how to provide these components have the best chance of launching their students onto a trajectory of success.

Other essential, but less controversial, components of effective literacy instruction include teaching children to read with fluency, promoting growth in their vocabularies, and instructing them in the most powerful text comprehension and written composition strategies. Despite a wealth of evidence about how these various literacy components should be taught, many elementary teachers lack adequate preparation to implement them.

GETTING THE BALANCE RIGHT

Although learning to read and write do not reflect 'natural' developmental processes comparable to human maturation, it is helpful to consider literacy acquisition within a stage framework. Within *The Literacy Diet* metaphor, another useful concept based on Canada's Food Rules is that human dietary requirements change at different stages. For example, when children's bones are growing, they require more foods from the dairy group because these foods contain calcium. Similarly students at different stages of literacy development have different 'literacy nutritional needs'. As students progress through the stages, the components and activities in their literacy diet must change in order to promote growth. To be effective, teachers need to understand the requirements of the stages and provide their students with stage-appropriate 'foods for literacy'. Educators who understand this complexity are well prepared to teach the vast majority of students in their classrooms and to provide differentiated instruction for those who need 'special literacy diets' because of learning disabilities.

THE POWER OF UNDERSTANDING

I have come to appreciate, as a result of working closely with administrators and teachers over these last 15 years, that many educators are not very interested in the *why* of instruction because of the pressure of "what to do on Monday morning". However, understanding *why* is the most empowering aspect of professional learning. Without that understanding, teachers do not have the knowledge to adapt an instructional strategy to address various student needs. Without that understanding, teachers can become inflexible and dogmatic, unable to integrate new research-supported practices into existing approaches. Conversely, with understanding of the *whys* of literacy education, teachers become more competent and confident educators. The power of understanding is so great that a teacher with deep understanding of the processes involved in reading and writing could teach virtually all students with a chalk board and some old newspapers and magazines, whereas teachers who have 'the latest ' expensive literacy programs without such understanding may have little or no impact on their students' literacy levels.

Converging evidence suggests that with instruction from teachers who have a deep understanding, virtually every student can be taught to read and write in the elementary grades, irrespective of risk factors such as poverty and home language. The challenge now is to ensure that all elementary educators – school administrators as well as teachers – understand the *what*, *how*, *when* and *why* of providing a balanced and flexible literacy diet. I believe that this can be achieved if pre-service programs provide the in-depth preparation that teacher candidates need and if school districts support long-term, ongoing evidence-based professional development. The cost of improving pre-service and in-service professional development in literacy education may be great, but the consequences of literacy failure are immeasurable.

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Notes

1 Unpublished doctoral thesis (in progress), OISE/UT.

2 *Teaching Reading IS Rocket Science* (American Federation of Teachers, 1999) http://www.aft.org/

3 Many elementary school administrators have not taught for a number of years and some have never taught in primary. Relatively few have had advanced courses in language and literacy.

4 In the case of the Committee on Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children (National Research Council; http//:www.nap.edu), Keith Stanovich (OISE/UT), one of the best known and respected reading researchers in the world, was one of the committee members; in the case of the National Reading Panel (http//:www.nationalreadingpanel.org), Dale Willows (OISE/UT; the present author) was the only international member of the panel; and, in the case of the report concerned with second language literacy, the National Literacy Panel (http://www.cal.org/projects/archive/nlpreports/Executive_Summary.pdf), Esther Geva (OISE/UT), Fred Genesee (McGill University), and Linda Siegel (University of British Columbia), all top Canadian second-language literacy experts, were on the panel.

5 The Canadian Language and Literacy Research Network (see http://www.cllrnet.ca/).

6 See Michael Pressley. *Reading Instruction That Works: The Case for Balanced Teaching – Third Edition* (New York: Guilford Press, 2006).

7 Resources describing these essential components and explaining how to implement them are available in print (see *Put Reading First: The Research Building Blocks for Teaching Children to Read*, http://www.nifl.gov/partnershipforreading/publications/Cierra.pdf) and in webcasts and podcasts (see www.readingrockets.org).