

## Reading wars pit literacy instruction methods against each other

By [Shaina Cavazos](#)

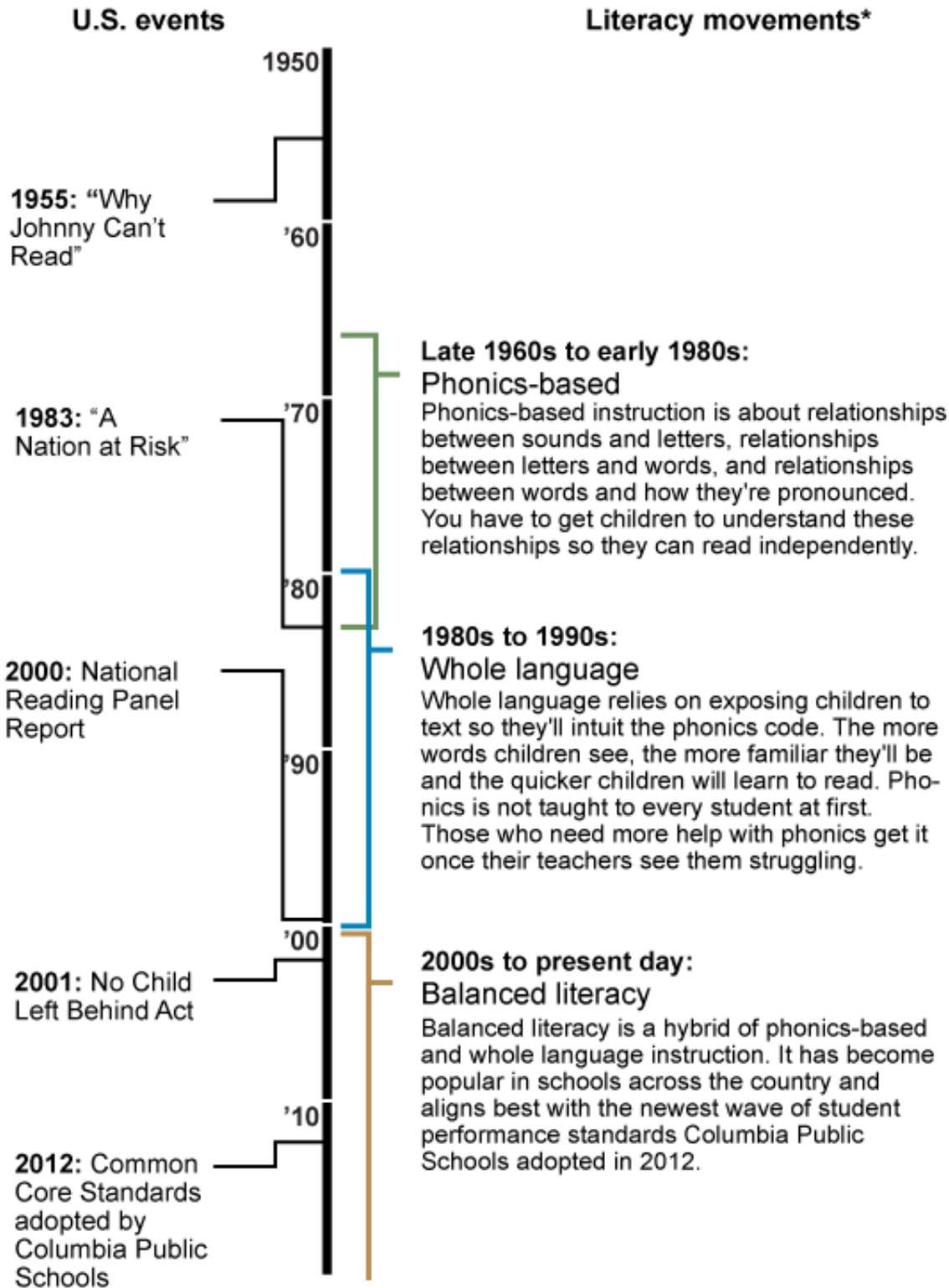
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*"Reading wars" have been waged in elementary schools for the past 50 years. Changes in the debate between different styles of literacy instruction are shown. Graphic by [Christina Trester](#)*

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*\*Time periods are approximate.*

Source: THE READING WARS, BY P. DAVID PEARSON, 2004

COLUMBIA — The most complex war you've probably never heard of has been waged in elementary school reading lessons for at least 50 years.

The "reading wars" pit what literacy experts call "phonics-based" instruction against "whole

language" instruction. Battles over which approach is more effective have raged in academic ivory towers, but changes in educational policy that brought about the No Child Left Behind Act and new curriculum standards marched the war to the home front. If a child can't read and thus fails to perform well on standardized tests, schools take the hit in state accountability measures.

Now some experts are throwing their support behind a third player in the reading wars — [a hybrid of phonics-based and whole language instruction called balanced literacy](#). Some hard-core phonics advocates dismiss balanced literacy as little more than a facelift of whole language learning. Nevertheless, it has gained favor in schools across the country and is the method that aligns best with the newest wave of student performance standards adopted by Columbia Public Schools in 2012.

A three-sided battle over literacy instruction doesn't exactly call to mind images of cinematic warfare. But beyond academic grumblings, all agree on the enormity of what's at stake:

Children must learn to read.

## **Understanding each method**

To understand this battle, first a bit of terminology:

**Phonics-based** instruction is all about relationships. Relationships between sounds and letters, relationships between letters and words, and relationships between printed words and how they're pronounced. The key is to get children to understand these core relationships so they can read on their own.

To do that, a child first must learn **phonemes**, the smallest units of spoken language — for example the “duh” sound when sounding out "dog." Once beginning readers understand how phonemes work in spoken words, they have what is called **phonemic awareness**. When children grasp phonemic awareness and know their letters, they can tie together letters and sounds to read and spell words, which is using **phonics**. This lets them learn to **decode**, or understand the relationship between letters and sounds to pronounce written words.

For example, when decoding the word "dog," a reader must understand that the individual letters sound like "duh-aw-guh," and that together they create a written symbol that means the same thing as "dog," and that symbol, or word, stands in for a four-legged animal that barks.

**Whole language** instruction, sometimes referred to as the "**look-see**" method of learning to read, relies on exposing children to a lot of text in the hope that they'll intuit the phonics code.

The theory is that the more words a child sees, the more familiar those words will become and

the more quickly the child will learn to read. Phonics is not taught to every student when they are first learning to read; rather, students who show they struggle with phonics concepts get extra help. Phonics is present in whole language, it just never takes center stage.

**Sight words**, or **high-frequency words** — used in both whole language and phonics instruction — are what they sound like: common words that appear often in written text. Because they don't always sound like they are spelled, they tend to be memorized. "Of," "is," "are," "from," "said," "what," "it," and "said" are some examples of sight words. When readers see these words, they don't focus on sounding them out to understand them; they know what they are right away. That's the goal of sight words in action.

**Balanced literacy** uses elements of whole language, most notably those that weave phonics in and out of instruction instead of teaching it directly to every child. Much of what whole language, and now balanced literacy, focuses on is finding the best way to make students independent readers; whether that means using phonics, background knowledge, or sight words. If children can develop independence, they can learn to help themselves.

### **Rooted in history**

Scholars have always argued about multiple approaches to reading instruction. Phonics and whole language are rooted in reading instruction practices that go back at least as far as the 18th century. The relative popularity of each has faded in and out for as long as American classrooms have existed.

The reading wars as we know them started with the release of a book in 1955 by Rudolf Flesch, an author and phonics advocate. "Why Johnny Can't Read" criticized reading instruction that prioritized sight words and literature over phonics and decoding. Methods that would later become whole language teaching were discredited, and phonics was king of the classroom.

That was the primary focus of public education for about 30 years, until the early 1980s, when whole language re-emerged and reigned until the late 1990s.

During whole language's most recent heyday in the 1980s, President Reagan's Commission on Excellence in Education released a study called "A Nation at Risk" in 1983. The report scrutinized curriculum content of American schools and achievement expectations of American students, implying that current instruction methods, including those used for reading, just weren't working.

In spite of "A Nation at Risk," whole language instruction lived on in most schools. A wave of primarily phonics-based instruction wasn't seen until 2001, when the "Reading First" program of No Child Left Behind offered grants to states and districts that applied "scientifically based

reading research" in their kindergarten through third-grade classrooms. No Child Left Behind, a congressional act passed in 2001 that set out guidelines to include phonics instruction, supported setting high standards for students and measuring their progress to encourage improvements in test scores and achievement.

Because research on education sometimes lacks the scientific rigor needed to prove a cause and effect, it's not clear to legislators and educators what qualifies as "scientifically based." However Linda Farrell, a founding partner of a phonics-oriented, Virginia-based consulting firm called Readsters, said phonics curriculum has the most evidence supporting it.

The National Reading Panel agrees. The panel was part of the National Institutes of Child Health and Human Development, and its report was commissioned by Congress to recommend the most effective reading instruction. The report, released in 2000, asserted that instruction involving phonemic awareness and phonics was most successful at teaching children to read and spell.

The report acknowledged that phonemic awareness and phonics are only two parts of a sound reading program, but they are the most important parts. They provide an essential foundation for children starting to learn to read.

Thanks in large part to the lasting effects of No Child Left Behind, the new trend in education policy is all standards, all the time. [The new Common Core State Standards](#) are the latest push for a unified baseline for academic achievement. Columbia schools adopted the standards in 2012. They are not federal mandates and are not related to No Child Left Behind. With new standards, new methods of instruction emerged, and balanced literacy now has the primary foothold in public schools across the country, Farrell said.

Farrell said that in the schools she's worked in, balanced literacy has a "pervasive" presence, and there isn't much difference geographically. She said the only schools that might have held on to strictly phonics-based curriculum would be ones that had grants from No Child Left Behind, which stated that children benefited from a strong phonics curriculum and rewarded districts that included it with grant money.

### **Falling in love with phonics**

Farrell can cite reading instruction history like some evangelicals can cite Scripture. But she did not start her professional life knowing anything about teaching others to read.

She was working as an investment banker and volunteered to teach adults to read. The program she was part of used whole language instruction, which was the primary pedagogy for adult learners. But Farrell grew frustrated after tutoring a student in her late 20s for three years with little evidence of progress. So she set out to find a better approach.

"I decided I was going to go figure out how they teach kids to read, and that's when I learned about phonics-based approaches," Farrell said. "Pure phonics-based approaches worked with about 25 percent of our adults, and when I learned to add phonological awareness to phonics it worked for almost everyone."

She fell in love with reading instruction, and in 2000, she left investment banking to become a reading consultant. She co-founded Readsters with a colleague, Michael Hunter, in 2009. She's a strong advocate for teaching phonics directly and from day one so children have a firm system for decoding, or putting together letter sounds to read print words.

"What the people who are supporting phonics believe is that language skills together with decoding skills will create reading comprehension," she said. "What the whole language people believe is that you can make up for poor decoding skills if you're really good at language and guessing your way through text."

Farrell explained that phonics proponents would start by having students read decodable books instead of storybooks that don't focus as much on foundational skills. The instruction would start with words with short vowels, then progress to harder words with two and three syllables and long vowels.

For example, a child might read lines of words like "rat, cat, bat, hat," and eventually move to "chat, chin, chip, chop." The children would only read words they had learned to sound out.

But Farrell would be quick to tell you she doesn't just view reading as a scientific, technical skill. Being read to and developing an appreciation for books is part of what motivates children to learn beyond the skills they practice in school.

"In first grade, I want kids to be read to beautifully to develop reading skills," she said. "Kids need decoding skills, foundational skills, to be strong to eventually be good readers."

## **Learning independently**

Richard Allington, a reading education professor at the University of Tennessee-Knoxville, believes strongly that instruction should vary based on the child and text in question. He doesn't think phonics is the be-all, end-all approach to teaching students to read. His research centers on effective instruction in the classroom, and his time teaching and directing was spent in low-income rural schools. Allington was a former fourth grade teacher, reading specialist and Title I director.

"We know teachers have to be paying attention to kids and take their cues from what the kid is

doing and provide him with instruction that, if he's off track and not attending to some aspect of the print environment, they direct his attention there," Allington said.

Relying just on getting decoding skills to the appropriate grade level doesn't improve reading achievement because reading is based on more than sounding out words correctly, Allington said.

"By and large, the biggest job is to develop self-regulatory skills, which is the ability to understand that when you are reading and something doesn't make sense, you stop and go back and try to figure out what it actually says," Allington said.

Teachers who don't stress self-regulatory skills and who insist on interrupting children while they read just foster learned helplessness, Allington said. The more a teacher, whether phonics or whole language, interrupts with pronunciation or the like, the more "disabled readers" you'll have.

"The worst part is they think they're helping, they think all this is instruction, rather than destruction," Allington said.

To become a successful reader, a child must gradually build his or her knowledge with plain language before advancing to more complicated words and sentences, Allington said.

"If you want kids to understand the Battle of Gettysburg, you need to start with an unchallenging text that might even be historical fiction, and perhaps some of the names of the towns and such," he said. "Then you bring in a second text that's a little harder, a little more complicated. By the time you bring the fourth or fifth book in, they've been introduced to all the words they would ever need to see, gradually, slowly and in rich context."

### **Prioritizing what's practical**

But what is the best method?

James Baumann, the Chancellor's Chair for Excellence in Literacy Education at MU, said so much confusion and haze surround the methods, especially balanced literacy, that the labels have lost their meaning. Teachers should use the methods that are most pragmatic, regardless of what's en vogue.

"Literacy is about as political as it gets," Baumann said. Literacy education, affected by issues such as high-stakes testing and teacher autonomy, is about more than reading instruction methods. A teacher needs to guide students so whatever they are working on, they engage in "meaningful practice," whether that means reading aloud, writing or learning to decode.

"It boils down to the quality of instruction in those classrooms with those children," he said.

Like Allington, Baumann is less hung up on the label for a method — whole language, balanced literacy, the like — and more concerned with how the notion of the "wars" keeps researchers and educators from focusing on what students need to be successful: districts that take the time to invest in quality instruction, administrators who care about supporting their staffs, and most of all, teachers who can spark that "Aha!" moment that turns a bunch of sounds and symbols into a story.

"They continue to have these horse-race battles about which method is best or which material is best or which program is best," Allington said. "It's like arguing which Protestant church is best."

*Supervising editor is [Jacqui Banaszynski](#).*