

# Leadership, Literacy and Logic

By Pamela J. Bernardo



The U.S. The Department of Education defines the five domains of literacy as phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension as universally agreed upon important elements of reading and writing instruction (Herrera et al., 2021). While the list is not stated as domains in any

priority order, why is “comprehension” listed last? Is that because phonemic awareness, phonics and fluency are traditionally the first domains or concepts to be introduced? When speaking and listening vocabulary are challenges for many learners, particularly the underserved, in the quest to master reading and writing, why are we not paying attention to the domain of “comprehension”? So . . . the “reading wars” continue, sadly.

As educational leaders, we cannot ignore the barrage of information surrounding us relative to this issue of literacy. Phrases such as scientifically research-based, science of reading and all the other terms out there confront us. Describing and determining what we should stand behind in terms of the achievement and acquisition of reading, writing, speaking and listening skills for the learners in our charge is lofty and arduous. But more importantly, how do we equip the teachers in our charge, with the professional development and instructional tools they need to accomplish this, when the “wars” continue?

In his article, *A Brief History of ‘The Reading Wars,’* Brian Cambourne recounts the work of Chall (1967) in the two-pronged debate between ‘Method A’ versus ‘Method B’ arguments - ‘code-based’ versus ‘meaning-based.’ Debates continue as an either or, rather than using the vast amount of medical, scientific, anecdotal and observational data over the past 40+ years.

Cambourne continues his timeline of events in the *Reading Wars* through the 70s, 80s, and the important early, mid, and late 1990’s, with the evolution of “whole language” and the concept of debate turning into a full-blown “war” in the world of education related to the teaching of reading. Phrases such as evidence-based, scientifically proven, data-driven, etc., became words in our collective educational lexicon. The real question is, “Why is reading education so pedagogically confused? The answer to this question lies in history as well as in different understandings about what reading is” (Cambourne, 2021).

Over the past 40+ years, educators have been participants in a myriad of professional development, training, data collection and directives related to programs, assessment, written curriculum and the like. Rarely have they had the opportunity to debate, talk, demonstrate, collaborate

and design relative to literacy in their respective disciplines. As educational leaders, collaboratively using the data, providing vision and designing instructional practices based on the defined needs of the students, we are charged with and cannot deflect that priority.

Rachael Gabriel in her article titled, “*Leadership for Literacy,*” stated, “Starting conversations about the reading, writing, and discussions that support student learning across grades and content areas doesn’t require a reading specialist’s degree or expertise in every content area. It requires a commitment to ask and wonder about how literacy is being used for learning throughout the day” (Gabriel, 2021). This is the challenge for building, district and other educational leaders to provide meaningful professional learning experiences for teachers of all disciplines, to be confident to weave literacy opportunities into all content in order to provide on-going experiences for students to read, write, talk, question, consider and investigate. That is our commitment as educational leaders.

From Cambourne (2021), “. . . Until the community comes to some agreement on what these terms actually entail in the 2020s and beyond, the same theoretical squabbles will continue to plague education. Such theoretical arguments are not helpful for the teaching profession or the teaching of reading. To date, not enough attention has been paid to educators’ experiences and their evidence in helping children learn to read in classroom contexts.”

*Science should inform – not dictate – practice* (Riley, 2020). As building principals, curriculum directors, superintendents, or other educational leaders devoted to student successes as literate learners, we have a responsibility to lead, not in a war zone, but in a culture of deliberate and



thoughtful planning with a focus on achievement for ALL. Through purposeful and continuous examination of instructional practices based on explorations and collaboration, we can successfully support our students and instructors.

With the future of generations of readers and writers at stake, the key is in the professional development, experiences, continued studies of how humans learn to read and write and the emphasis and importance placed on quality educational opportunities for ALL.

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After many years in public education, as a teacher, building principal, professional developer, adjunct professor and now coordinator, I suggest: Let's dispense with the "reading wars," but focus on instructional practices to support literacy development. Let's commit to working with teachers and staff to understand literacy development and how that looks over chronological and developmental years. Let's leave the idea of narrow focus of phonological awareness, phonics and word work, and call attention to other priorities to include language development, student writing, culturally responsive teaching, the careful selection of classroom texts, the needs of bilingual and second-language learners and on and on (Heller, 2022). Let's focus on literacy in all of its forms through the lens of instructional practices based on observation, assessment, collaboration and commitments to teachers, which then translates to student success. As leaders, let's set vision, goals and plan annually for the variety of areas in our wheelhouse. Literacy should be the umbrella for which all goals and visions sit beneath. How else can we ensure successful global literate citizens?

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