



THE

Heart-Centered

TEACHER

Restoring Hope,
Joy, and
Possibility in
Uncertain Times

REGIE ROUTMAN

An **Eye On Education** Book

The Heart-Centered Teacher

RESTORING HOPE, JOY, AND POSSIBILITY
IN UNCERTAIN TIMES

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CHAPTER 5

Developing Professional Knowledge

- ❖ Becoming professionally knowledgeable
- ❖ Transforming teaching and learning
- ❖ Considering the science of reading
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Becoming professionally knowledgeable

Let me say this straight-out. This is a difficult time to be teaching. I know what you're thinking. We're already struggling with teacher burnout, families in crisis, and daily stresses. Developing professional knowledge is not high on the "to do" list. But hear me out. I'm not talking about professional development where an expert offers training on the new commercial reading program, transmits standardized, pre-determined knowledge, and focuses excessively on test scores and data. I'm talking about professional learning, where you and your colleagues get to examine literacy and learning as it relates to your students, at your school, in a collegial setting.

Ideally, it's teachers and leaders forming a schoolwide learning community to examine and discuss their beliefs and practices and engage in authentic learning. It's collaborative knowledge building for the purpose of more effective, equitable, and engaging teaching and learning. The professional learning community, or what I often call the professional *literacy* community, might just be two teachers from the same or different grade levels or subject area disciplines meeting over lunch, a grade level team convening at a common planning time, or an after-school meeting devoted to a common interest or concern. Professional learning done well is enjoyable and makes your life easier, more manageable, and more satisfying.

When I began teaching, my professional knowledge was scanty. I did not yet see knowledge—especially collaborative knowledge—as crucial to being a successful teacher, that is, one who met the interests and needs of all my students in a kind, compassionate, and equitable manner. Based on my undergraduate university "training," I knew how to use a teacher's manual, write a structured lesson plan, and follow directions in the packets of ready-made materials. I did not know how and why different approaches worked. I did not know how to tailor instruction for each

student, raise expectations, or teach responsively to the students in front of me. For the first decade or so of my teaching, that seemed to suffice. I believed I was a good teacher, and no one told me differently. I never thought to read a professional book, and that is also the reality for some teachers today.

It was only when it became obvious to me that I was not meeting the needs and interests of the students I was teaching that I reached out for help. At home, with my two young children, I was reading captivating books to and with them, but in school, there was no emphasis on “real” reading and I began to question, “Why not?” My particular work situation at the time was as a reading specialist in a high poverty school, pulling out small groups of primary grade students that were failing to learn to read. The commercial skills program that I was expected to use focused on drilling kids in phonics exercises, skills-in-isolation. That is, except for lots of word work, there was no “reading” involved or expected. There were no actual books! There was also no professional study going on where I was teaching, at least not any I remember. Faculty meetings were devoted to rules, procedures, upcoming events, open house, and the like.

What I needed was high quality professional learning. If you are a teacher, educational leader, literacy advocate, librarian, or deeply concerned and/or involved with kids and literacy, knowing how to teach and support readers and writers so they become competent, self-monitoring, joyful readers and writers requires a solid foundation of theoretical and practical knowledge accompanied by a big dose of compassion and kindness. Parents fit in here too, for their knowledge and behaviors about literacy impact their kids. If, as was true for me years ago, you are in a situation without positive opportunities for quality professional development, professional books are especially important as a way to jumpstart your professional growth.

Also, if you want to continue to be a fully-informed educator, you will find a way to keep up with the latest research, approaches, and trends and then apply your professional judgment to your own teaching/

leading context. In addition to professional books, I read professional journals, news articles, online texts, reputable blogs, and educational research via Twitter. I also listen to podcasts. I want to share with you the authors and books that transformed me as a learner and teacher and that still resonate today. That is, the methodology and research remain solid and applicable. If you do not yet have seminal books and authors who have impacted your teaching and learning, the books I share are still relevant. You will also want to get current recommendations from knowledgeable colleagues and reliable sources.

My first professional reading began out of a need to know. In particular, I was searching for a better way to teach reading. In that search, I learned about the literacy and language work that was going on in New Zealand and Australia, especially the groundbreaking work of Don Holdaway, Brian Cambourne, and Marie Clay. Each was committed to literacy and language learning for *all* children—ensuring optimal conditions for learning, early intervention when needed, and joyful learning. Each wrote in great, replicable detail about creating an equitable and caring learning and language environment, explicitly teaching phonics and other necessary word solving skills in meaningful context, reading for meaning right from the start, assessing learners in the midst of teaching, and mindfully adjusting to meet the interests and needs of the learners. These authors became my early—and lifelong—mentors. Reading and studying their work made it possible for me to develop my own theory of learning for teaching and thinking, which remains integral to the way I approach learners, instruction, and curriculum today.

Above all, the thinking and work of Don Holdaway was transformative. His seminal book, *The Foundations of Literacy* (1979), changed how I looked at literacy, language, and learning. I began to envision what a positive and joyful literacy environment might look like and entail for *all* students, including those in under-resourced schools with large populations of low-income students, Black students, and/or English

learners. I still consider this timeless book mandatory reading for gaining a foundation in understanding language learning and fostering it through a strategy-oriented style of teaching. See Chapter 6, “Championing the Reading/Writing Connection,” for specifics on Holdaway’s “shared-book-experience,” a powerful instructional approach that continues to be a mainstay of my teaching—across the curriculum. Along with *The Foundations of Literacy*, Don Holdaway’s *Independence in Reading* (1980) and *Stability and Change in Literacy Learning* (1984) also greatly shaped my thinking, especially as related to the human element. That is, first and foremost—before any subject matter—we are teaching unique human beings and relating content to their strengths, knowledge, interests, needs, and culture.

In the mid 1980s, Brian Cambourne’s work also provided invaluable insight into the language learning process and inspired my teaching, thinking, and learning. Cambourne’s discussion of “conditions for learning”—immersion, demonstration, expectation, responsibility, use, approximation, and response—are necessary conditions for all effective language learning. “Cambourne’s conditions,” as they are often called, provided me an invaluable visual and mental model for respecting each learner’s developmental level, concentrating on strengths, focusing on process, and encouraging “languaging”—opportunities for conversations and interaction—to name just a few principles and beliefs from his model. In *Made for Learning: How the Conditions of Learning Guide Teaching Decisions* (2020), with co-author and American teacher Debra Crouch, Cambourne has updated and expanded his original thinking. The authors challenge us to critically examine the effects of our literacy beliefs, practices, and processes around teaching and learning, and they provide numerous practical ideas and examples for applying the Conditions of Learning for ensuring meaning-making in the classroom. This is a must-read book for all educators!

At the same time that I was studying Brian Cambourne’s work, I was fortunate to be in one of the first groups in the U.S. to be trained as

a Reading Recovery teacher. Reading Recovery is the brainchild of educator, researcher, and psychologist Marie Clay. The research-based program was developed in New Zealand in the 1970s and is a short-term, one-on-one approach for teaching and accelerating the lowest-performing 1st graders in reading. For most of these readers, the impact is meaningful and long-lasting. Even though I had certification as a reading specialist, it was my Reading Recovery “training” that finally made me a competent and confident reading teacher. Crucially, I learned about the complexity of reading and comprehension monitoring, even for our youngest readers. Practically, I learned how to integrate phonics and word work with reading and writing delightful stories. Clay’s work is also notable for its emphasis on the role of early writing behaviors with reading. For all those seeking to become more knowledgeable literacy teachers, I highly recommend reading Marie Clay’s *Literacy Lessons Designed for Individuals: 2nd Edition* (2016).

Teaching children to write was an area I knew little about when I began teaching. Like most teachers at the time and still true for many teachers today, I never had a college course on teaching writing. However, in my reading and studying of professional books, Donald Graves’ work leaped out. His first book, *Writing: Teachers and Children at Work*, published in 1983, was an eye-opener. This practical text takes the reader through the process of children’s development as writers and gives teachers confidence, understanding, and strategies to support children in their writing development. I recall all these years later how while reading Don Graves’ book, I realized for the first time—and felt distressed about it—that I didn’t know anything personal about most of the students I was teaching and how that connection is necessary to fully support children as writers. In addition to Don Graves’ work, around the same time I also embraced the groundbreaking reading and writing work of Nancie Atwell, Donald Murray, Tom Newkirk, and many others.

Dorsey Hammond’s work also transformed and validated my teaching and teacher-research at a time when I needed clarity. I met Dorsey at the

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1982 International Reading Association Conference, where I attended his session on teaching reading comprehension. I was struck by his sensible, solid, in-depth approach to teaching reading and his unique inclusion of phonics as a core element but not as a singular emphasis. Teaching phonics in isolation was in vogue at the time, so it was refreshing and affirming to see and hear Dorsey's balanced perspective. Determined to learn more, I can still remember approaching him after his presentation and asking him if he'd be speaking anywhere near me, in the Cleveland, Ohio, area. He graciously invited me to attend a workshop at a local college as his guest. I've been learning from him ever since.

His brilliant book, *The Comprehension Experience: Engaging Readers through Effective Inquiry and Discussion* (2011), co-authored with mentor and author Denise Nessel, asks and responds to the essential reading question: "What kind of instruction best supports comprehension?" In the Preface (xiii), the authors write: "We think it's time to decrease the emphasis on skills and strategies and turn our attention to increasing learners' capacity to construct meaning." In the Foreword of the book, which I was honored to write, I state: "*The Comprehension Experience* is about teaching and empowering all students to think and deliberate at high levels while giving us educators the language and examples of exemplary teaching to make that happen" (vii). This classic text remains my favorite and most useful text for teaching reading—and so much more—effectively and joyfully.

Some other literacy notables whose work, thinking, and books I embraced early on were Frank Smith, Ken Goodman and Stephen Krashen. As well, I remain especially indebted to P. David Pearson and Richard Allington for their lifetime of research, its practical application to the classroom, and their respect for teachers. More currently, I also appreciate and have been influenced by the research of John Hattie, Nell Duke, and Linda Darling-Hammond, to name several, along with many literacy practitioners, such as Cris Tovani, Kelly Gallagher, Penny Kittle, Donalyn Miller, Larry Ferlazzo, and so many more.

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While professional reading was and is essential for improving our teaching and learning, it is not enough to effect sustainable, worthwhile change. I recognized such change was only possible with ongoing, embedded professional learning that was schoolwide. I learned that lesson in the early 2000s. I was being invited into schools and districts across the U.S. after the staff had read and done a book study on my books *Reading Essentials* and *Writing Essentials*. I distinctly recall being stunned at how limited teachers' literacy knowledge was *in spite of* their professional reading and study. Even though I believed my books were practical and easy to read, what was missing for teacher-readers was being able to directly *see* principled practices in action, *hear* the language of responsive teaching and assessment, *analyze* the lesson, and have an opportunity to "*try and apply*" in the classroom—with guidance and support.

That realization was the impetus for creating a weeklong residency model grounded in demonstrations, shared and guided experiences, and coaching in diverse classrooms. Teachers in the school were released to observe, along with the principal, in a primary grade classroom in the morning and an intermediate grade classroom in the afternoon. Before and after school each day, we gathered for a whole school, professional learning meeting. In the morning, the host classroom teachers and I would set the stage for what teachers would be observing; after school, we met to have conversations about what teachers observed and what their takeaways and questions were.

I made it a requirement that I would only return to a school for another residency if the principal and staff engaged in continuous professional learning and ongoing professional reading and discussion. Critically, one of my most momentous learning lessons from the residency work was that unless the principal knew literacy and teachers became leaders, whole school change was not possible even as it is necessary for sustaining literacy gains. That realization led me to alter the residency model so that the whole afternoon was devoted to working with, mentoring, and coaching the principal—especially in what I call

“instructional walks.” That insight also led to developing with colleagues a video-based literacy series to serve as a guide and scaffold for ongoing, school embedded, professional learning. You can learn more about that on page 109. Finally, the crucial insight, “Teachers must be leaders, and principals must know literacy” propelled me to write *Read, Write, Lead: Breakthrough Strategies for Schoolwide Literacy Success* (ASCD, 2018), with its specific details and procedures on embedding a Professional Literacy Community (PLC) culture into the school, led by a highly functioning school leadership team.

All of the preceding discussion—going back to my early professional learning—is to say that each of us needs to seek out, read, and apply research and practices from seminal, highly regarded texts and professional learning experiences that push our thinking. In my first book, *Transitions: From Literature to Literacy*, I write:

Where I am philosophically is based on the professional reading and reflecting I am doing, thoughtful discussions with my colleagues, direct observations of children learning, demonstration teaching I have observed, in-service-workshops I have attended, and lessons I have attempted and then assessed. All these activities are time-consuming when added to the daily teaching demands. But they are what keep me current, professional, and proud of what I do. All this needs to go on continually for me to keep growing professionally and personally.¹

This statement is as true for me now as it was 35 years ago. To be professionally knowledgeable is the hallmark of every conscientious and expert teacher. Once I began reading professionally, and especially after attending my first reading conference, I recognized how meager my knowledge was. After the knowledge boost from that first conference, I became committed to attending local, state, and national literacy conferences—whenever possible. I became dedicated to finding out everything I could about teaching and learning and,

in particular, about teaching reading where so many students were struggling to learn to read in the high poverty school where I was teaching. I also learned, as I was reading and studying the research, that research must be supported by scholarly consensus and also be relevant to our students. The decisions we make as teachers are only as good as our knowledge and application of effective teaching practices, subject matter, the learners we are teaching, informed experiences, and—not to be minimized—common sense. Lots of experiences, including mentoring—which we discuss later in this chapter—give us a feel for what works so that what we may think is intuition is really knowledgeable and sound judgment kicking in.

The most skillful and effective teachers in any domain take charge of their own professional learning, read professionally, collaborate with colleagues, and continually strive to do better. Today's times necessitate we educate all our citizenry well if we are to survive and thrive as a republic—and that includes ensuring that we educators engage in ongoing professional learning, and most of that needs to be job-embedded, on site.

We are living in a time when we are witnessing the backsliding of our liberal, multiracial democracy. If we agree that becoming an informed and activist citizen is a hallmark for preserving democracy, that must first be a goal and reality we educators and responsible adults embrace—if we hope to instill that belief and responsibility in our students and our children. I believe the goal of schooling is to educate learners who are able to think rationally and critically, set their own meaningful goals, know how to learn, monitor and assess their own progress, apply reading and writing for multiple purposes, dialogue and debate on a variety of issues, collaborate and communicate with others, and seek out, listen to, and respect differing points of view. This goal applies to all of us, not just our students and children.

Transforming teaching and learning

I've been teaching, leading, and coaching in classrooms, schools, and districts most of my adult life—studying the research, reading professionally, collaborating with colleagues, reflecting on teaching and learning, and documenting and sharing my learning. I've drawn some conclusions along the way that I hope, dear reader, may be useful and affirming to your own transforming process—in teaching, learning, and in living a good life.

When I'm talking about *transforming* teaching and learning, I mean the *process* of *changing* the culture, environment, conditions, resources, and power structure in a way that is a renewal, a change for the better for all participants, a way of being, learning, and living that adds significant value, respect, and equity to our intellectual, social, and emotional lives and wellbeing—including in our pursuit of happiness, in and outside of the workplace.

David McCullough, prolific author of prize-winning books on America's history, elaborated on what the founding fathers meant by the notion of “the pursuit of happiness.” McCullough noted, “As much as anything it meant the life of the mind and spirit. It meant education, and the love of learning, the freedom to think for oneself.”² The love of learning and the freedom to think for oneself. Doesn't that belief just say it all? Instigating a passion for learning and using that learning to reveal and express our own thoughts. Don't we desire those goals for all our students and loved ones?

Let's start with the role beliefs play in teaching, learning, and living as our beliefs shape and determine who we are and how we behave—in all areas of our lives. It took me a long time to realize how holding intractable beliefs can stymie progress and happiness, and that's as true in teaching as it is for living a good life. Throughout this book, I talk

about how our beliefs—for better or worse—determine our mindsets, behaviors, and actions. Our teaching practices reflect our beliefs-in-action. So it's critical, although it's not easy, to continuously examine our beliefs about teaching and learning and to do so schoolwide. While shifting our beliefs about teaching and learning is understandably a slow process, it's a necessary one. We cannot make significant and sustainable change schoolwide, in ourselves, and in those we serve and choose to influence without a belief system—a theory of learning based on research and experience—that serves learners equitably, respectfully, and joyfully. Accompanying such a belief system must be a mindset of high expectations for *all* learners, held by the adults working with the learners.

In my five decades of teaching, in addition to educators holding low expectations for students, I've found two related beliefs that teachers and leaders hold that work against students' optimal learning. The first is the belief that part-to-whole teaching, that is, teaching skills-in-isolation, leads to understanding of the whole. In fact, that belief-in-action makes it harder for students to learn and sustain anything of significance. A colleague offered an apt metaphor: "It's like putting all the pieces of a complex puzzle in front of students but never showing them the lid of the box." Without being able to visualize the end goal and result, solving the puzzle becomes an effort in frustration.

The second belief that makes learning more difficult is that if we explicitly show students how to do something, they are ready to do it on their own. For example, we might believe that through a demonstration or explanation, our explicit teaching will be sufficient for students to be successful when they try it/apply it on their own. This is often not the case. That is why it's so important to ask students what they took away from a demonstration, such as observing our thinking-out-loud as we are reading and/or writing a text. Charting that student feedback, for all to see, is a public assessment of students' learning and a guide for next steps—whether that be another demonstration, a shifting of plans, or something else. Most learners also need shared, scaffolded, and guided

experiences before we can expect them to successfully “do it.” The following chapter, “Championing the Reading/Writing Connection” will expand on that belief. Crucially, we must ensure the beliefs we hold and put into action in our daily practices are supported by scholarly consensus, are relevant for our students, and are worthy of the time and effort they consume.

So how do we allow ourselves to update deeply held beliefs? I’ve been surprised at how rare it is and how long it takes for most of us to shift our beliefs—and our practices. It was coming to that realization over many years that propelled me to develop a schoolwide, embedded, professional learning experience—a weeklong, school residency where I demonstrate effective, efficient, and joyful practices in K–6 classrooms. That residency model proved to be highly successful—not just in literacy achievement, but in developing a trusting and joyful school culture—and led to the development of virtual residencies.

With my esteemed colleague, literacy champion Sandra Figueroa, we co-wrote the research-based *Transforming Our Teaching* Series—the professional learning, literacy-centered, video-series that goes inside culturally inclusive classrooms to demonstrate and discuss what’s possible when we establish shared beliefs and apply those beliefs to principled, research-based practices. We created three projects in the series: *Reading/Writing Connections*, *Writing for Audience and Purpose*, and *Reading to Understand*. The students and teachers in the videos are from the actual weeklong residencies. In other words, the work is authentic. The professional Notebooks that accompany the virtual residencies unpack and make visible the how, what, and why of the lessons, the background of the students and school, the teaching points in each video, the language of responsive teaching and ongoing assessment, and how the teaching connects with required standards. Professional reading and discussion accompany each professional learning session. In my long career, the *Transforming Our Teaching* series is the work of which I am most proud.

Teaching is a political act

Transforming teaching and learning is a political act. In the 1990s, we were living through a crisis in education similar to the one we are living through in the 2020s. Then and now, policy makers, politicians, parents, and the media decried that kids today were poorer readers than in the past and that the failure to explicitly teach phonics was the major cause. I remember returning home from a literacy conference in 1995 where I'd been an attendee as well as a keynote speaker. I came away feeling disturbed by the acrimony in education, with teachers pitted against pundits, and shared my feelings with my editor Toby Gordon. "Why don't you write a political book?" she suggested, to which I replied, "I don't even know what that means." But the thought lingered along with some guilt.

I had been telling teachers *they* needed to take a stand, but beyond speaking out, *I* had not taken deliberate actions to confront the crisis. I agreed to write a "political book" if we could get it out quickly. I came to believe that with careful research, expert support, and my own teaching experiences, I could be a reliable narrator for sanity and sense in teaching reading. I wrote *Literacy at the Crossroads: Crucial Talk About Reading, Writing, and Other Teaching Dilemmas* in three months while I was teaching full time. It was released at the International Reading Association's annual meeting in 1996 and became an immediate best seller.

Book banning, censorship, what can and cannot be taught are all part of the politics of education. In many locales, school boards, parents, and superintendents seek to control what students learn and how they learn it. Teachers are increasingly being given less freedom to teach and less authority to make "acceptable" decisions—on curriculum, content, books, language—even as they are being held more and more accountable. In particular, giving students access to books and resources that encourage learners to think for themselves is seen as threatening the social order.

In today's overheated, educational climate, it takes moral courage to speak out, to not go along, to live our beliefs and stand by them, to protest. And yet, we need our collaborative audacity, resolve, and reasonable voices. We must get involved. We cannot wait for policies to change or for permission to transform. Plato said it best: "One of the penalties of refusing to participate in politics is that you end up being governed by your inferiors."

Start with doing what you can within your own classroom and setting to improve teaching and learning. For example, even with a mandated program, choose and use only the parts that are applicable for your group of students. Be quietly subversive when necessary. Keep in mind we need to raise compassionate citizens who bring high intellectual habits and critical thinking to deal with society's complex problems and political crises. We cannot waste brilliant minds on bits and pieces of "stuff" and egregious, time-wasting activities. It's well known that students who read well and write well do more reading and more writing, on authentic topics, most often of their choice. Ask yourself, "Is what I am doing helping students become engaged, determined, self-directed learners?" If not, change course. As noted throughout this book, a well-educated, thoughtful citizenry is our best hope for all of our futures.

As we know, teaching well is not just about technique; it's about integrity and compassion, engaging hearts and minds, and questioning what doesn't work or make sense. We can continue to learn from research and practitioners while not abandoning what we know to be true and necessary. The most effective teachers put students before programs and find a way around harmful mandates. That is, they are "positive deviants";³ they find a way to make a "worthy difference." They don't change their practices on demand or because the pendulum is swinging. In *Literacy Essentials*, I write: "The educational pendulum

will always swing, but we must not! We may shift a bit to the right or left, based on relevant research, experience, and the beliefs we hold, but if our foundation is rock solid, the shift will be an intentional, well-informed movement and not a full tilt.”

Beginning with becoming professionally knowledgeable, to questioning research that has not been peer reviewed and independently evaluated (that is, the researchers and publisher were not involved in the study of its effectiveness), to writing letters of protest as an informed group, even small steps can make a difference. A story, a blog, an editorial, a podcast, speaking out at a school board meeting can be a radical act. Telling our stories and speaking our truths have the potential to inform our constituents, encourage activism, and change our world. But change won't happen without our relentless advocacy. Teaching is a political act.

Ask yourself: “How can I make a worthy difference?” “How can I make my work really matter?” Don't just complain; become part of the solution. Atul Gawande, surgeon and prolific author, who coined the term “positive deviant,” acknowledges:

Arriving at meaningful solutions is an inevitably slow and difficult process. Nonetheless, what I saw was: better is possible. It does not take genius. It takes diligence. It takes moral clarity. It takes ingenuity. And above all, it takes a willingness to try.

I give the last words here to renowned scholar and one of my literacy heroes, P. David Pearson: “Whatever you do, do not shrug your shoulders in the hope that this iteration of the debate, this pendulum swing, will, like its predecessors, fade into the shadows of historical curiosity. This one is exceptional, and it requires exceptional response on our part.”⁴

Considering the science of reading

Like clockwork, the old rallying cry “Schools are failing to teach our students to read” returns every few decades or so with an unchanging message: “We now have irrefutable, scientific research on the most effective way to teach reading.” These days that evidence is called the “science of reading,” and the debate centers on the need to shift from what many call “balanced” reading beliefs and practices to “structured literacy.” First of all, teaching reading has never been a fixed process or a one-size-fits-all process. Science is not a unified or final set of facts but is rather an imperfect process that is always evolving, based on the latest research and our professionally informed instruction, observations, and experiences. Uncertainty is part of the process, as it always will be when human beings are intricately involved.

The “science of reading,” for those who might not know what the term means, has been used by some in the field to prioritize the systematic, explicit teaching of discrete skills connected to sound-letter relationships, skills that are quick and easy to measure. Those skills include phonological awareness (which is the ability to identify and manipulate individual sounds called “phonemes” in spoken words) and phonics (which is applying letter-sound relationships to decode—to recognize and pronounce—written words). To be clear, such skills are necessary but insufficient for becoming a reader, one who thoughtfully applies strategies to make sense of text, chooses to read (mostly) books, and who self-monitors and finds joy in becoming a discerning reader. And, scientific reading research is not limited to word recognition—plenty of scientific research exists in the areas of comprehension, vocabulary, and more. We have known all this for decades.

Importantly, we have also known for decades that—along with phonics and word identification skills—readers need to be able to access a wide range of strategies and tools to comprehend text. Readers differ and have different needs; there is no one best way to teach children

to read—or to learn most things, for that matter. While evidence-based, reading research is important, translating such research into classroom reading instruction must be carefully implemented within a full and complete view of reading. Results of the research must also be supported by scholarly consensus and be relevant and meaningful for the actual readers and writers in our classrooms. Evidence-based research must also be supplemented with the observations of countless, experienced teachers—those who have consistent, clear success year after year in teaching children to read. Effective teaching of reading has always depended most on a highly knowledgeable teacher, one who has a deep understanding of reading as a complex, multi-faceted process, and one who adjusts teaching to capitalize on the strengths, interests, and the needs of the learner.

Evidence-based research studies that show the benefits and/or superiority of reading approaches dominated by phonics teaching are scanty or non-existent. If your school or district is investing in commercial reading programs with an over emphasis on phonics, check the highly respected What Works Clearinghouse: “The purpose of the What Works Clearinghouse is to review and summarize the quality of existing research in educational programs, products, practices, and policies.” Additionally, if we look back on the impact of the 2001 No Child Left Behind Act (in effect through 2015), five years after implementation, the billions of dollars of NCLB funding yielded students across the U.S. who, according to standardized tests, were good at sounding out (nonsense) words and decoding but who showed no measurable growth in reading comprehension. Those same results are consistent with other research that shows students who had more explicit instruction in phonics did not show significantly higher reading achievement on standardized tests than students who received a more comprehensive approach. No surprise here. A phonics-first approach to reading is too narrow. From the start, we must view learning to read as a language and thinking process, not just a sounding-out-words process.

Reading comprehension must be our first and primary goal in teaching reading, and phonics is but one necessary tool in this multi-dimensional process. This is why professional knowledge—along with experience and collaboration with colleagues—is so important. To raise our voices and do right by our students, we have to know research and how, when, and if to apply it to our actual students. Almost 40 years ago, renowned educator and researcher Don Holdaway warned about the same issues we are facing today related to scientific claims about reading. Here are a few of his wise and cautionary statements, still applicable today:

When a teacher is using a structured...program, whether out of conviction, insecurity, or through school policy, a number of unwritten, unsubstantiated, and sometimes quite false assumptions tend to operate:

- The series was written by “experts” and their judgments are superior to mine. (In fact, a reliable professional judgment must always be an on-the-spot knowledge-of-client judgment.)
- The sequence of skills and sub-skills has been scientifically ratified, and I should not depart from it to any significant extent for any child. (There is no scientifically ratified sequence of skills in reading development.)
- Task success for all children can be controlled by the devices and progressions built into the materials by those who are experts in readability. (No formula for readability can approach accuracy without taking into account the other agent in the transaction, the reader.)

If we view reading, as I believe we must, as reading for understanding—including for pleasure, information, enrichment, personal interests and goals—all of that can happen from the earliest stages. And, of course, decoding skills are necessary. However, there are just too many variables in teaching reading to teach all learners the same way or to simplify the teaching of reading by calling it an exact science.

The human element must be paramount in all we teach. The learners' interests, strengths, needs, choices, and how we respond to the learner are all key. Critically, and important enough to restate, science works best in tandem with the human side of reading—knowing and engaging the reader, building on the readers' strengths and interests, and embracing the “heart and mind” in teaching, learning, and living. What is also not given serious consideration in the “science of reading” is the text as a crucial factor in a reader's engagement, efforts, and success. Significant factors that affect the reader include student choice; equitable access to a wide range of books, texts, and genres (such as audiobooks, news articles, graphic texts); text features such as font size, amount of print on the page, length of text, format, supportive illustrations; background knowledge; vocabulary expertise; and language comprehension. Recent scientific research, for example, by Nell Duke and Kelly Cartwright, also includes the importance and impact of motivation and self-regulation by the reader, which is something that those of us who expertly teach readers have long known and incorporated without a scientific seal of approval.⁵ As well, learning to read requires an inclusive, equitable learning environment where students feel safe to take risks, ask questions, and offer their viewpoints. Again, but important enough to re-emphasize, reading is a language process and a thinking process, not just a reading-the-words process.

In teaching an adult learner to read during the pandemic (see Chapter 6, “Championing the Reading/Writing Connection”), it was not the explicit phonics and decoding that made him a reader, although we worked diligently on that, of course. It was listening to books, reading together, discussing what we read, and reading independently-with-my-support texts he chose that lit his imagination, inspired his interests and curiosity, and confirmed he was not alone in his life struggles. He drew inspiration and hope from the real-life characters we read about and talked about; their courageous actions gave him strength and the will to keep on reading and to strive to do better—in reading and in living. It was the overlap between the “science” part of reading

(including phonics as well as the focus on comprehension strategies, vocabulary, and self-regulation), and the “heart and mind” part of teaching and learning (the language, literature, and cognitive focus) that turned him into a reader. Interestingly enough, I found the same thing to be true more than 35 years ago when I was working with low-performing readers, and I document that experience in my first book *Transitions: From Literature to Literacy*.

In my five decades of teaching reading as a classroom teacher, certified reading specialist, specialist for students with learning disabilities, and Reading Recovery teacher, my colleagues and I have successfully and joyfully taught both the decoding and the comprehension—often in tandem. I have written many well-researched and well-received books on teaching reading and writing equitably, responsibly, and joyfully. I have co-authored a video-based, literacy series to explicitly show how it’s done in diverse schools and classrooms and how students and teachers can do it all, right from the start—the phonics and decoding, the comprehension, the reading and writing for authentic audiences and purposes, and the love of reading. However, such an integrated outcome is only possible if we teachers and leaders are professionally knowledgeable, take ongoing responsibility for securing and growing our knowledge, and share what we learn with others.

Without solid knowledge of research and principled practices, we cannot assess the quality and usefulness of any instructional program or assessment for our students or be able to advocate for better, equitable practices. As one example, at this writing some states are requiring a reading fluency test at the end of grade 3 as a major determinant for whether or not students go on to grade 4 or repeat grade 3. What I’ve learned from decades of teaching reading is that fluency is an excellent predictor of reading comprehension in the earliest grades but is an unreliable predictor for older students. For example, a grade 4 student could have low fluency scores and still have satisfactory comprehension. Also, many states are requiring that *all* kindergarten through grade 5 teachers

and beyond receive intensive training and certification in the “science of reading” with its focus on explicit teaching of phonemic awareness and phonics. Certainly, teachers need to have this knowledge so they can use it judiciously but, again, it’s a limited focus on one aspect of reading. Teachers also need to teach kids how to be strategic as readers. Both are necessary; it’s never been an “either/or” stance.

Given the over-reliance on intensive phonics these days, it’s important to revisit an award-winning reading study by Sheila Valencia and Marsha Riddle Buly. The researchers examined the reading profiles of a random sample of 108 entering 5th grade readers who had failed the end-of-year 4th grade state reading assessment. Their findings showed that for 58% of the students in the sample, phonics and word identification were not an issue. Where they did need support was with meaning and/or fluency. The findings confirm that readers who struggle do so for different reasons. It’s also important to keep in mind that instruction and intervention(s) meet the needs of students both in focus and intensity.

Looking across many studies of student-instruction interactions suggests that instruction targeted to students’ area of need produces gains in that area. However, when instructional time was spent on skills and abilities in which a student was strong, no additional growth was detected. So, although instruction that targets a student’s specific needs will increase learning, misdirected instruction may actually waste valuable instructional time. Students’ areas of need change over time, and our instruction and assessment must adjust to meet those current needs.

Keep in mind that the call for phonics-first teaching has occurred before—in the 1960s, the 1990s, and now in the 2020s. Almost 30 years ago, distressed by the politics of literacy and, in particular, an exclusive focus on phonics, I wrote *Literacy at the Crossroads* to set the record straight, take a stand, and to add a voice of reason to the polarizing, national “reading wars.”

The largest national assessment of reading confirms that U.S. students are competent at literal levels and incompetent at critical and analytical levels. (still true)... Our task is clear. Despite the public outcry that we are not teaching the basics, the irony is we are overfocusing on discrete skills and superficial learning at the expense of not teaching our students how to interpret, evaluate, analyze and apply knowledge.

(p. 6)

It is up to us as informed teachers, learners, and leaders to question assumptions and apply research, principled practices, and commonsense knowledge to the actual readers, writers, and thinkers we are teaching. There is no commercial reading program that can meet the needs of all learners, all the more reason for all educators and policy makers to be highly knowledgeable about research, reading processes, and reading instruction. Even when we talk about the “science of reading,” we need to acknowledge that the scientific research must include a convergence on all aspects of reading, not just decoding skills, and that science can be imperfect. For helpful guidance in how, when, and why to apply reading research to inform instruction, see “The Science of Reading: Making Sense of Research” by Tim Shanahan.⁶

I am reminded of how the journalists on the Editorial Board of *The New York Times* are described as being “informed by expertise, research, debate, and certain longstanding values.” Yes! Research is important, but it’s only one of many factors to consider when deciding how and what to teach. And who we are teaching, the learner, is of utmost importance—the expectations we hold, our relationship, our compassion, and our knowing the person we are teaching, not just the subject matter. Keep uppermost of mind: *In meeting the interests and needs of all students, an informed teacher’s research-based, practical knowledge and experience are superior to any packaged program.* Any program, at best, provides a workable framework.

Without solid professional knowledge, it's difficult to scrutinize the validity of a researcher's claims and how that research might—or might not—apply to our own particular situation and context. Without deep professional knowledge, it's difficult to determine the quality and usefulness of a commercial program we are expected to use. Finally, remember that you are the most important person for reaching and teaching your students, and you must be fully informed to do so. Value your own examined experiences, teacher research, and reflections. Expert teachers customize their teaching to fit their students' interests, strengths, and needs and to dignify students' language, intelligence, and efforts. Such teachers actualize research as they also optimize engagement, curiosity, and joyful learning.

Seeking out mentors

As part of being professionally knowledgeable, I depend on mentors to continue growing as an educator. That mentor might be a peer, an author, or a leader in the field. What's important is to look for a "proficient other," someone you admire to support your efforts and competencies as a teacher and a learner. That person need not be at the same grade level, teaching the same discipline, or even be in the same profession. What is paramount is that the mentor be someone you trust who is invested in your achievement and growth and wants you to find your own voice, vision, and victories. A good mentor will also be a careful observer, an excellent coach, and a confidence booster. Also of great import, an effective mentor provides feedback that is strength-based, timely, kind, actionable, and useful. No matter how long we've been teaching or working at a particular job, and no matter how much we excel, we all need role models and mentors to keep on growing.

To be clear, when we talk about a "mentor" we are mostly talking about a long-term, one-on-one, coaching relationship between mentor and mentee, with mutual interactions around principled practices. When we talk about a "coach," we are usually talking about short-term guidance and focus on a specific goal, as in the story that follows.

I remember reading about renowned surgeon, writer, and public health researcher, Atul Gawande, who at the height of his illustrious career realized that he was no longer getting better as a surgeon and had the data to prove it. He writes: "Professional athletes use coaches to make sure they are as good as they can be. But doctors don't. So why did I find it inconceivable to pay someone to come into my operating room and coach me on my surgical technique?" Gawande notes that opera singers, such as Renée Fleming, have voice coaches, and virtuoso violinist Itzhak Perlman relies on his wife's "outside ear,"

her sensitive and critical listening, to tell him how his playing sounds to an audience.

Acknowledging that a coach might be useful for increasing his surgical skills, Gawande sought out a retired surgeon he deeply admired and had a personal connection with to observe him in the operating room. Because the observing physician sat at an angle where he could see what Gawande could not, he was able to observe, inform, and guide Gawande who was then able to make enhancements, even mid-surgery—with patient positioning, lighting, better use of the surgical assistant. To be sure, these were small and nuanced improvements, but they reduced his complications rate and saved more lives. Gawande’s coach, like all excellent coaches, was 100% present as observer and listener and used conversation and thoughtful questioning to discuss “What worked?” and “What didn’t go well?” It is by asking relevant questions—not giving solutions—and involving the learner in thoughtful dialogue that causes learners to think and problem solve. Gawande notes, “Coaching done well may be the most effective intervention designed for human performance.”

Like Gawande’s coach, the most effective mentors coach and ask questions that cause us to be metacognitive, that is, to think about our thinking, which can lead to greater effectiveness and learning. In addition to questions such as, “What went well?” and “What was the strongest part of the lesson?” (focusing on strengths first), also consider questions such as, “What did you notice about your students’ reactions to the lesson?” and “Is there anything you might have done or said differently?” (focusing without judgment, on practices that might be questionable). Helping the learner identify and evaluate their actions—whether it’s a teacher or child—is crucial for recognizing what practices and language enhance learning or discourage learning, and what steps we might take for improvement.

My own work confirms that teachers who are mentored well are more effective and have greater job satisfaction, and their students achieve more—including on standardized tests. I have witnessed firsthand what happens when teachers no longer have a principal, teacher leader, or mentor who is invested in their professional learning. The teachers, who may already be quite effective, maintain effectiveness but don't tend to move to a higher level of efficacy. They also lose some of their enthusiasm for teaching. One teacher told me, "Without professional learning, there's no longer any sense of excitement in our school about learning." One outstanding teacher I know well, who was missing having a mentor, set up a support network to meet monthly with several trusted colleagues to discuss articles on research and practice, including their own practices. They also began observing each other and giving valued feedback.

Even if your school or workplace has an instructional coach, a mentor serves as a personal guide to your unique situation, interests, and needs. If you are working in a school without a suitable mentor, think about reaching out to someone in another school. If that's not possible, consider virtual mentoring and conversations with someone you respect. Do what you can to ensure you are paired with a mentor willing to actively listen and respond to your concerns, support your efforts, work collaboratively and respectfully with you, and help you grow professionally. If you are inexperienced or new to the profession, you might seek out a teacher who is just a few steps ahead of you in knowledge and practice. That partnership might feel less overwhelming than working with the most skillful teacher you know.

Regardless of where you work, if you are in a setting without opportunities for quality, relevant professional learning and study, seeking out a mentor will be crucial to ensuring optimal instructional

effectiveness. Especially if you are working in isolation, recognizing strengths and areas for improvement is made easier with another set of eyes and ears and ongoing conversations with a trusted colleague.

The truth is that all of us can benefit from working with an excellent mentor.