# SHOWDOWN ON THE KANSAS PLAINS: THE READING WARS CONTINUE

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**Abstract**
The question of how children learn to read and how they can best be taught, has gained a significant amount of interest over the years. Cognitive research confirms there is a science-based approach to reading instruction. It provides answers to the decades-old question about how children learn to read and what is the best approach to teach them. Educational policy and practice has been slow to reflect the latest research regarding the science of reading. Instead, the field has been plagued by polarizing "reading wars" that have continued to widen the gap between research and beliefs regarding how children learn to read. As Kansas adopts the science of reading for the public school curriculum and begins the process of educating teachers, administrators, teacher educators, and other stakeholders, there will undoubtedly be misconceptions, and even cognitive dissonance, as personal beliefs about reading are challenged. The purpose of this article is twofold: 1) to inform the reader of the "great debate" or "reading wars" that have raged for several decades, and 2) to provide a better understanding of the conceptual shift needed to move us from a balanced literacy approach, as the best way to teach reading, to structured literacy. After decades of cognitive science research, structured literacy is now emerging as the most effective way to teach children with diverse reading abilities.

**Keywords**
science of reading, reading wars, teacher education, balanced literacy, structured literacy

According to the famous education reformer Horace Mann (1848), education is the great equalizer. Additionally, it has been said that learning to read is the new civil right (Hunter, 2012). Fulfilling the promise of an equitable and quality education to all students regardless of demographics or individual abilities has been a challenge not only in Kansas, but all over the United States. Currently in the state of Kansas, only 34% of fourth-grade students are able to read proficiently at their grade level with accuracy, fluency, and understanding (NAEP, 2019). Unfortunately, this percentage does not improve as students progress through their education. By the time students enter high school, approximately 32% read at grade-level proficiency.

As educators, it is often easy to identify many of the unfortunate realities our students face that devastatingly prevent them from obtaining an education that not only equalizes them, but allows opportunities for sustainable employment. Some educators may even feel powerless when considering the giant obstacles many of their students face. However, if the purpose of education is,

in fact, to be "the great equalizer of the conditions of men, the balance wheel of the social machinery" (Mann, 1848), and reading really is the new civil right (Hunter, 2012), then we as educators need to consider our personal beliefs about literacy acquisition and compare these beliefs and teaching practices to the decades of cognitive research in the field of literacy, collectively known as the science of reading.

For over a century, there has been an ongoing argument over what exactly are the best methods and approaches to teach reading. In what has been described as the "reading wars" and "the great debate" (Chall, 1967), politicians, policy makers, and other stakeholders continue to engage in the battle between phonics and whole language instruction. Understanding the basic tenets of both perspectives is essential in not only understanding the debate, but also in identifying personal beliefs that influence instructional practices in the classroom. As Kansas begins to implement changes developed around the science of reading, which consist primarily of scientific evidence around how reading develops and why some students struggle to read, it is necessary to understand the depth and breadth of the issues surrounding these reading wars that have been waged for generations.

In 1997, the United States Congress charged the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD), along with the Secretary of Education, with the task of appointing a panel of experts to evaluate the various approaches to reading (National Institute of Child Health and Development, 2000). The result of the panel's findings was "Teaching Children to Read: An Evidence-Based Assessment of Scientific Research Literature on Reading and its Implications for Reading Instruction" (National Reading Panel [NRP], 2000). Building on the recommendations from the National Reading Panel (NRP), the 2001 No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) included two literacy initiatives: Early Reading First and Reading First, whose missions were to enable all students to become successful readers.

Following its investigation, the NRP found that "phonics instruction produces the biggest impact on growth in reading when it begins in kindergarten or first grade, before children have learned to read independently" (NRP, 2000, pp. 2-93-94). The panel went on to report that systematic phonics instruction should be integrated within the curriculum in order to create a more balanced approach to reading instruction. However, interpreting what a balanced approach to reading actually looks like in the classroom is the nexus of the current iteration of the reading wars.

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The prominent orientations, phonics and whole language, dominate the argument about the best way to teach reading. Advocates of the phonics approach focus their efforts on the primary grades. Phonics can be described as a "bottom up" approach where students learn to decode the meaning of the text. Emphasis is placed on the ability to sound out words based on spelling and the orthographic mapping process. Reyher (2020) argued that once students get the basic skills down, they are able to read a wide variety of literature. This is especially true for those who come to school with large vocabularies. Reyhner (2020) added that while having knowledge of basic phonetic rules helps students sound out words, many words must be memorized as sight words because they don't adhere to the most complicated rules.

The whole language approach supports that learning to read is a natural process. Proponents argue that it is similar to learning to speak in one's native language. Based on constructivist learning theory, whole language is considered a "top down" approach where the reader uses background knowledge to interpret the text and determine meaning. Proponents advocate for literacy-rich environments and place emphasis on the meaning of texts over letter-sound correspondences.

Combining speaking, listening, reading, and writing along with using cues from the text to find meaning, phonics instruction becomes only one part of the whole language classroom, not an emphasis. According to Reyhner (2020), whole language places a heavy burden on the teachers to develop their own curriculum as it lacks the structure traditionally supplied by the scope and sequence, lessons, and graded literature found in basal readers.

However, decades of cognitive science indicates that learning to read is not a natural process. The brain is not wired to read in the same way that it is when learning to speak. It requires readers to crack the code through systematic teaching of phonics. While there are certainly more components to learning to read such as understanding the alphabetic principle, increasing vocabulary, deeper background knowledge, and reading fluently, just to name a few, knowing how to decode unknown words and crack the code with phonemic awareness and phonics knowledge is the essential first step towards becoming a proficient reader.

Offering middle ground to the battle between perspectives, balanced literacy entered the fray. According to Fountas and Pinnell (1996), balanced literacy is a philosophical belief that supports the assumption that reading and writing achievement develop through multiple environments such as teacher-directed instruction, modeling, and scaffolded opportunities. By its name, balanced literacy appears to represent the research provided by the NRP in 2000 calling for systematic phonics instruction integrated into the curriculum to create a more balanced approach to reading instruction. However, this is not the case. The balanced literacy practiced in many classrooms around the country is more representative of a whole language approach with a mere scattering of phonics instruction (Hanford, 2019). Although phonics and phonemic awareness is included in daily instruction, it is often not taught explicitly and systematically.

In opposition to this theoretical orientation to reading is an approach referred to as structured literacy, which has recently been adopted by the Kansas State Board of Education. This approach to reading, and learning to read, is the umbrella term used by the International Dyslexia Association (IDA) to unify and encompass evidenced-based programs and approaches that are aligned to the Knowledge and Practice Standards (KPS). IDA defines KPS as "the knowledge and practice skills that all teachers of reading should possess to teach all students to read proficiently" (KPS; Cowen, 2016). According to IDA, structured literacy is explicit, systematic teaching that focuses on phonological awareness, word recognition, phonics, decoding, spelling, and syntax at the sentence and paragraph levels.

Lorimor-Easley and Reed (2019) argued that those who oppose the structured literacy approach to reading believe that restricting students to phonemes initially, and then to decodable texts, suppresses the development of fluent reading. Whereas, those opposed to balanced literacy believe that if children cannot encode and decode naturally, then exposure to unfamiliar text will only lead to practicing compensatory strategies, such as relying on picture cues, while valuable instructional time passes. The bottom line is, a faulty foundation of decoding strategies compromises reading comprehension (Gough & Tunmer, 1986).

As researchers, educators, and stakeholders continue to argue over the best approach to teach reading in Kansas and in the United States, the argument continues to leave us in a deadlock. Which instructional approach is the best? McCardle, Scarborough, and Catts (2001) suggested that although there are many young learners who would become proficient readers from repeated exposure alone, as suggested by balanced literacy, there is a population of students for whom this simply is not enough. Therefore, Lorimor-Easley and Reed (2019) argue that a structured literacy approach is most effective because it avoids making potentially erroneous assumptions about what students are naturally capable of learning implicitly. Through the use of explicit and systematic instruction, students who readily internalize the patterns of language will learn quickly and easily, and

those who otherwise may experience difficulties will get the instruction they need to be successful (Lorimor-Easley & Reed, 2019).

In conclusion, it has been more than fifteen years since the creation of NCLB, and yet we still find ourselves at an impasse between closing the achievement gap and the great debate over the best way to teach reading. The pendulum has swung dramatically back and forth to both sides of the argument over proper literacy instruction. While some argue for a whole language approach to reading, others argue for a decoding approach. The overall concept of reading has been historically viewed as points on a continuum, essentially polarizing reading instruction, with educators committing themselves exclusively to their particular theoretical perspective and personal beliefs about reading (Woolacott, 2002).

However, most researchers and educators can agree on at least one thing: There is not a "right" or "wrong" approach to teaching reading. The most current research regarding how children learn to read suggests structured literacy, which focuses on explicit and systematic skills instruction, including phonics, and prevents students from struggling unnecessarily. Certainly whole language proponents are correct in providing students a literature-rich environment in which to learn; exposing them to a variety of vocabulary, ideas, and language is beneficial to developing life-long readers. Instead of throwing the proverbial baby out with the bathwater by choosing one side over the other, maybe we should recognize the benefits of both approaches while adhering to what cognitive science says regarding how children learn to read. Perhaps it is time to reframe the ongoing dialogue, reclaim the concept of balanced literacy, and recast it in a new light so we can continue to support all readers as their skills and love for reading develop.

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**Author Biography**

Dr. Sarah Broman Miller has over twenty years of experience in the field of education. Prior to her work in higher education, she taught third grade in north central Kansas, owned and operated a childcare center, and taught conversational English in Japan. She received a Doctorate of Philosophy from Kansas State University in Curriculum and Instruction with a Reading emphasis. Dr. Broman Miller's areas of expertise include language and literacy acquisition, theoretical models of reading, teacher belief systems, and multicultural education practices. Dr. Broman Miller teaches both undergraduate and graduate level courses and is an assistant professor at Fort Hays State University. She enjoys reading non-fiction books, walking, and spending time with her family and dogs.