TEACHING GOLDILOCKS TO READ:

Too much, too little, or the just right amount of phonics?

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Abstract: This article discusses the current contradictory policies surrounding the push for phonics instruction in Texas schools. Focusing on this current iteration of the reading wars, this article seeks to help teachers develop a historical context for reading instruction, review existing research on learning to read, and turn that knowledge into practical strategies for advocating for a comprehensive approach to literacy.

Keywords: science of reading, education policy, literacy, HB 3, reading wars, research-based instruction, advocacy

As classroom teachers, you have probably read the numerous op-eds about how you are not teaching reading correctly (Goldstein, 2020; Hanford, 2019a; Hanford, 2019b). Maybe you have attended required professional development sessions focused on "systematic and explicit" (TX HB 3) phonics instruction, or your school bought an expensive, phonics program that promises to fix students' low scores on the STAAR. Teacher educators have been reading the newsletters and bulletins about the Science of Teaching Reading test that certification candidates will have to take beginning in 2021. And you may have been one of your educator preparation program's (EPP) attendees at a state-mandated *Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling (LTRS)* training, sponsored by TEA and created by the company Voyager Sopris, to make sure you're teaching reading correctly, even though you have an Ed.D. or Ph.D. in literacy.

Scholars who have been working in reading and literacy, many for decades [see, for example, work by Richard Allington (2002), Gaye Ivey (2014), Jim Hoffman (2000, with Pearson), Steven Krashen (2004)], have found that no silver bullet exists for teaching children to read and understand what they read. Learning to read is incredibly complex, requiring the acquisition of a wide range of skills through a variety of means including exposure, apprenticeship, and direct instruction. While many of the packaged, commercially available phonics programs are based on studies, that research was not designed to build curriculum to teach children to read.

Instead, the use of those studies to build programs has very real limitations. Those limitations stem from using "research done by psychologists using an experimental design to study *pieces* of the reading process and are void of studies of real children in real teaching settings" (Scharer, 2019, para. 5, emphasis added). Many teachers, parents, and young people would agree that a sterile conference room with a researcher is a pretty different setting from a real classroom with twenty other children in it. And that difference in setting just might affect how those findings get applied to a real-life classroom.

This push for phonics instruction is real and has real implications for students and teachers. This article seeks to help teachers develop a historical context for reading instruction and turn that knowledge into practical strategies for advocating for a comprehensive approach to literacy.

A Brief History of the Reading Wars

The reading wars—a longstanding dispute over how best to teach children to read—may be new to you if you are a middle or high school English teacher. But this disagreement is not new (Chall, 1967; Kim, 2008). On one side, some voices have championed phonics as foundational to the reading process (see Chall, 1967; Flesch, 1986), while on the other side, some have advocated for whole language, an approach that uses children's prior experiences and whole pieces of language in literacy instruction (see Goodman, 2019; Hoover & Gough, 1990; Smith, 1994). Adding to the dispute's complexity are voices that promote *balanced literacy*, a balance of "systematic skills instruction with authentic texts and activities" (Pearson, 2004, p. 216). Sources discussing the reading wars (Kim, 2008; Pearson 2004) identify as a driving force the controversial role that phonics plays in literacy instruction. As alluded to in the title, it appears that the literacy profession is in the midst of another "Goldilocks" moment with phonics—how much is too much, too little, or just right?

What core ideas support the polarized voices within the reading wars? In support of phonics is the idea, according to Pearson (2004), that "young readers do not 'catch' the alphabetic principle by sheer immersion in print or by listening to others read aloud" (p. 221). This idea is also foundational to the commercial LETRS program, as the authors Moats and Tolman (2019) proclaim, "Learning to Read is Not Natural, Like Learning to Talk" (p. 9). On the other hand, Pearson (2004) describes whole language as being rooted in "Deweyian-inspired, childcentered pedagogy" (p. 217), and further notes that the whole language movement "established meaning as the core, not the residual outcome of reading" (p. 218). Even if one doesn't believe the "other side" of the reading war, it's crucial to be aware of the full range of the debates and the underlying issues and history.

There's Research for That

As a historical counterpoint to the current focus on bottom-up, phonic approaches, in 1979, Ken and Yetta Goodman published a chapter titled "Learning to Read is Natural." This chapter grew out of their research in classrooms where they discovered that:

> The awareness of print seems to develop as children learn to categorize the large amount of print information surrounding them in a literate society. . . . Children learn to organize their world and make sense of it. When printed language is a part of that world, they use that aspect of the environment if it is functional and significant to their life and culture. (p. 145)

In addition, Jeanne Chall in her seminal text *Stages of Reading Development* (1983) focused on early holistic phases of reading (stage zero) before beginning readers become "glued to the print" (p. 29). In stage one, Chall's model allows for a developmental approach that acknowledges that very early literacy activities need not be completely focused on decoding. There is a time and place for focusing on the code, but early literacy can be more holistic and experiential.

In 1995, Marilyn Jager Adams wrote *Beginning to Read: Thinking and Learning about Print* and suggested that *both* a code-centered approach and a meaning-centered approach are crucial to learning to read (c.f. Spiegel, 1998; Tompkins, 2017; Willson & Falcon, 2018). The categorical assertion, from some quarters, that balanced literacy does not work or will not teach children to read, reflects, at best, a limited view of child development and learning.

Other facets of learning to read that have been documented by Allington and McGill-Franzen (2018) move beyond phonics, language, and the reading wars. For example, they suggest that readers need access to books year-round and that lack of access can lead to what is known as summer reading loss where gains made in reading are lost by not having a chance to read over the summer. Other factors that can impact literacy instruction include student motivation and student engagement with literacy learning, which can make the difference in whether students have a sense of agency in their own literacy learning (e.g., Hruby et al., 2016). Finally, access to professionally staffed school libraries have shown to have a marked impact on students' learning to read and increased test scores (Kaplan, 2010).

Research-based support for programs and policies must move beyond the five components of reading identified by the National Reading Panel (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000) and consider additional factors and contexts that shape literacy achievement and early literacy learning. For instance, work by Snow and colleagues (2007) suggests that sociocultural factors and contexts such as poverty and family disruptions can impede or interfere with learning, *despite* early literacy interventions. Sociocultural approaches, such as those of Eve Gregory (2016), point to the need to move beyond solely linguistic approaches and instead, include consideration of other factors and contexts that impact learning such as family, community, and culture.

Not All Kids Need the Same Things

So far, we have discussed the broad scope of reading research and the many tensions under the umbrella of teaching reading. While it is essential to acknowledge this broad sweep of research,

it is equally essential to acknowledge that different students need different instructional supports, approaches, and timeframes to learn to read (see Table 1).

- Students learning English as an additional language do need explicit instruction in phonics, morphemes, graphemes and the like--even adolescent students--because in English, phonics generalizations are not particularly logical, unlike most other languages (Cox, 2014).
- How dyslexia expresses itself for any individual student is as varied as height and hair color and often fairly unique to individual students. Of course, teachers need an incredible range of resources to best support those students in learning to read, including some interventions that involve explicit instruction in phonics (International Dyslexia Association, 2020).
- Students who are in gifted and talented programs, on the other hand, may need high-interest texts that are more challenging than either their age or grade level would indicate, rather than wasting student time on a phonics-centric approach that does not support their growth and development as readers (Sharp & Clemmer, 2015; Wood, 2008).
- Some children come to school already reading and do not need explicit phonics instruction in support of reading, though knowledge of orthography, as well as knowledge of morphology and etymology can influence how children represent oral language in print (Block & Duke, 2015).

Table 1. Learner differences and the teaching of reading

This list only begins to approach the incredible range of diversity within students who are learning to read and the interventions they may need. A key takeaway, then, is that we would not expect to apply the same program or instructional method to this short list of student needs. As well, we should not expect any single program or approach to work for the entirety of students learning to read in Texas, or anywhere.

Exercise Your Voice, Advocate for Kids

Given the pressure to pick one program or type of program, we want to offer teachers, coaches, specialists, and all literacy professionals concrete ways that they can advocate for a balanced curriculum for the teaching of reading. The more programs, and the more scripted the programs that teachers are asked to implement, the less responsive teaching is to the needs of learners. Bringing a critical lens to policies and initiatives that are not responsive to students' needs means teachers might find themselves at odds with the directives of others. We are proposing that teachers' advocate for best literacy practices in multiple spaces using a variety of informed tactics.

First, gather knowledge about what is involved in learning to read from the cognitive level (Purcell-Gates, Jacobsen, & Degener, 2004; Storch & Whitehurst, 2002) to the sociocultural level (Perry, 2012). The articles we reference in this piece are great places to start: read more, reflect, and then share with a wide variety of audiences.

Second, when administrators or district staff start talking about packaged, commercially available phonics programs, do your homework. There are possible advantages to the program, which you will probably hear about first, but investigate the limitations of the program and ask lots of questions. Consider how it works with or against other school initiatives. Craft some probing questions for meetings (see Table 2). Questions are a powerful tool for creating tension without being confrontational. They can reveal motives and hidden agendas, making the invisible visible. Asking those questions also means being present when discussions happen.

Setting	Questions and Resources
Faculty meetings	• "Help me understand how this will impact a student's typical day?" • "I wonder how parents are being notified…" • "I wonder how much this is costing…" • "What if students don't see gains on the next benchmark? What will happen then?" • "What other kinds of programs like this have we tried? How did those work?"
	• Offer research briefs • Share stories of student successes • Host an article club, like a book club but less to read
Textbook/ curriculum adoption committees	• "I wonder if you could give me more context for the research that supports this program? Is it part of a long-term program of research or a single study?" • "What other research have those scholars done?" • "Did your company fund any of the research in support of this program?" • "What research has been done with students using this program in school settings? Does it show improvement?"
	• Research the program/textbook beforehand to discover challenges or critiques • Talk to colleagues beforehand and make a plan for posing questions • Share stories of student successes • Host an article club, like a book club but less to read
School board meetings *All meetings allow for public comment, but trustees cannot respond in the moment. These sentences are suggestions for crafting comments.*	• "This program will cost $X per classroom/ teacher, which comes to $X total for the school. I'm wondering if there are better uses for these resources given the lack of evidence that this program supports student learning in the ways the company promised." • "This program requires students to be pulled out of their classroom for X minutes, X times a week. That loss of X minutes of instructional time has shown to be detrimental to student success in the long term." • "Our mission/vision statement focuses on supporting individual student learners. My colleagues and I work hard in our classrooms to differentiate instruction to support student learning. Purchasing a structured/scripted program does not align with the district's focus on supporting all students."
	• Bring copies of your comments and they will be copied into the public record

Table 2. Questions to ask about reading

Because "decisions are made by those who show up" (Sorkin, 1999), consider attending and participating in some new spaces. Show up for the local and state school board meeting. Volunteer for the curriculum committee. Join a TEA committee. Have coffee with some parents at the PTO meeting. When at required faculty meetings, PCLs, department meetings, and the like, ask to be included on the agenda and lead a short conversation about literacy instruction. Copy or scan this or another article and share it, while asking questions about how programs are working for, or against, your students' interests. Consider asking your principal, your curriculum coach, or even the superintendent to visit with your team about curriculum decisions affecting classroom instruction and student learning.

In those new spaces and in those familiar spaces, rally your colleagues and peers, invite parents to support your efforts, and reach out to those professional literacy organizations, like TCTELA, to help advocate for high-quality literacy instruction. These are ways to counter the narrative that learning to read is only about phonics, while inviting others to consider alternative viewpoints.

Preparing New Teachers Well

What about those of us who have the privilege and responsibility of working with preservice teachers in university-based programs? You may have attended a LETRS (Moats & Tolman, 2019) training provided by TEA or have otherwise learned more about the Science of Reading (SoR) and the new certification requirements coming as related to SoR. While many of the ideas presented are sound and align with what is widely considered best practice—including phonological awareness and phonics instruction, word study, and comprehension instruction—there is also much to be concerned about.

For example, one LETRS trainer recommended daily phonics instruction for all students even though some students do not need it (LETRS training, January 20, 2020). This statement would be akin to a doctor deciding that every patient needed a specific treatment because it is really important for those who need it and nothing bad will happen to those who have enough.

Also consider that this same doctor would have to withhold other treatments because of a lack of time or resources. Forty-five minutes of phonics instruction is essential for students who need it, but too much for students who already understand the alphabetic principle. It also means that all students would spend less time reading real books, engaging in meaningful talk, and developing literate lives. In our positions of power, relative to preservice teachers, teacher educators should be in the vanguard against the bottom-up and linear model of reading as a one-size-fits all approach, even as those programs become ensconced in state policy.

As instructors in educator preparation programs (EPPs), we also need to make sure that we bridge the content that preservice teachers will need to know to pass the to-be-developed reading certification exam with a more balanced view of literacy that accounts for data-driven, differentiated instruction. To that end, it is essential that EPPs prepare educators who have well-rounded knowledge about the teaching of reading and include, for example, an interactive model of reading and familiarity with a balanced cueing system. And let's not forget the basics: readers need to talk about what they read, and they need to write. They need choice, access to relevant and engaging texts, and they need to participate in inquiry (David & Jansky, 2017). It is possible to both teach the using principles from the SoR and develop a classroom literacy environment that is designed around the children who inhabit it.

The Core Paradox

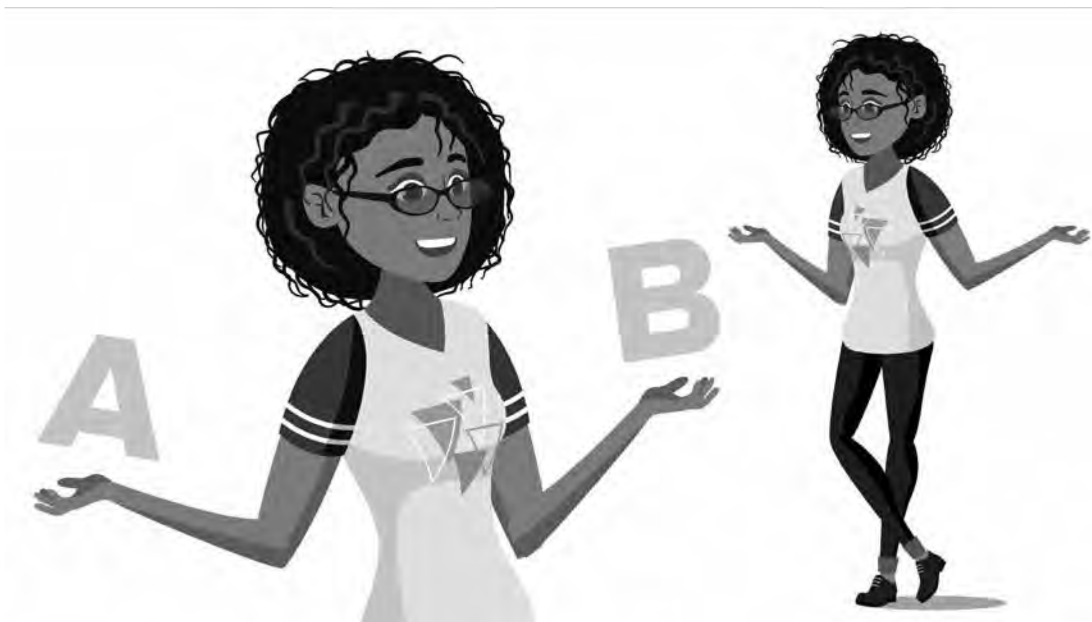
In most of TEA's presentations and discussions of explicit and systematic phonics instruction, Scarborough's "reading rope" (2001) graphic appears (see Figure 1; Texas Education Agency, 2019). Perhaps you noticed, as we did, that of the eight strands, these new policies on direct, daily, and explicit phonics instruction—for every child, whether needed or not—focus only on three strands. There is a big difference between the complexities of reading that this graphic represents and the practices that the state is decreeing into policy.

And this narrow focus is, as Scarborough (2001), herself, states, a problem because

> Even if the pronunciations of all the letter strings in a passage are correctly decoded, the text will not be well comprehended if the child (1) does not know the words in their spoken form, (2) cannot parse the syntactic and semantic relationships among the words, or (3) lacks critical background knowledge or inferential skills to interpret the text appropriately and "read between the lines." (p. 24)

TEA
Texas Education Agency
Scarborough's Reading Rope (2001)
Language Comprehension
Background Knowledge
Vocabulary
Language Structures
Verbal Reasoning
Literacy Knowledge
Word Recognition
Phonological Awareness
Decoding
Sight Recognition
Increasingly Strategic
Increasingly Automatic
Skilled Reading
29

Figure 1. Scarborough's Reading Rope as presented by TEA



Our new ELA TEKS (Texas Education Agency, 2017) purposefully moved away from separating out different facets of literacy and language. You cannot learn to write without reading, and you cannot learn to speak well without listening. The insistence on extracting and overemphasizing the phonics elements of the work of learning to read is a contradictory mandate by which the state is actually going against its own recently adopted standards (see Figure 2). This contradiction confuses teachers, principals, parents, and students—and rightly so. And, here's the key: this narrow focus on explicit phonics instruction with preplanned lessons and set amounts of time is not proven to either help students learn to read or to be successful in school.

So here we are. Scarborough's reading rope and the 2017 ELA TEKS reflect the understanding that literacy learning is layered, complex, and individual. And the policies of HB 3 require direct and explicit phonics instruction via an approved program (Texas Education Agency, 2020). How do educators reconcile antithetical positions in order to carry out daily work with students? Unfortunately, we do not have an answer to that question. First, we want to encourage all literacy professionals to continue to stay engaged with this work. How do you do that? (You might want to start humming School House Rock about now.)

When the Texas Legislature passes a bill, there are several additional steps that occur to translate the bill into the Texas Administrative Code (TAC) and Texas Education Code (TEC). That process often takes years and at many different points, there is opportunity for public comment. First, new rules are proposed and open for public comment. Before the State Board of Education (SBOE) or the State Board of Educator Certification (SBEC) passes the language to be included in TAC and TEC, they take into consideration the public comment. Second, you can register to make a public comment at either SBOE or SBEC meetings when they are voting on the code. For more information about staying up-to-date with these different processes, see Table 3 for key links.

But as literacy professionals increase their participation in the work of TEA, the SBOE, and SBEC, and advocate for research-supported literacy instruction, and building strong classroom communities, the paradox between the state policies and supporting readers is real. And as those in education have always done, we will navigate this paradox as best we can while keeping our students at the center of our instruction.

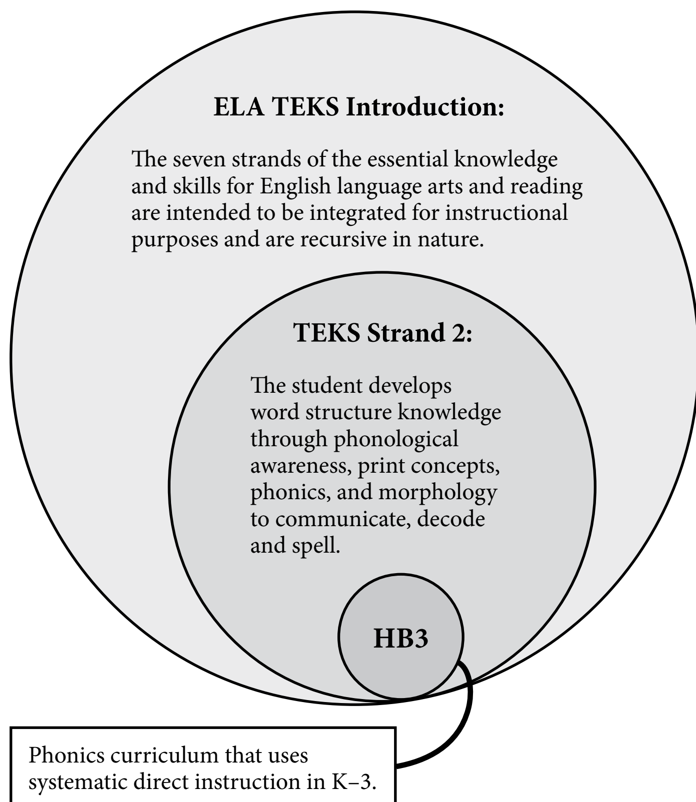


Figure 2: The relationship between the English Language Arts TEKS and House Bill 3

ELA TEKS Strands 1, 3–10

Oral language: The student develops oral language through listening, speaking, and discussion.

Vocabulary: The student uses newly acquired vocabulary expressively.

Fluency: The student reads grade-level text with fluency and comprehension.

Self-sustained reading: The student reads grade-appropriate texts independently.

Comprehension skills: The student uses metacognitive skills to both develop and deepen comprehension of increasingly complex texts.

Response skills: The student responds to an increasingly challenging variety of sources that are read, heard, or viewed.

Literary elements: The student recognizes and analyzes literary elements within and across increasingly complex traditional, contemporary, classical, and diverse literary texts.

Genres: The student recognizes and analyzes genre-specific characteristics, structures, and purposes within and across increasingly complex traditional, contemporary, classical, and diverse texts.

Author's craft and purpose: The student uses critical inquiry to analyze the [sic] authors' choices and how they influence and communicate meaning within a variety of texts.

House Bill 3—Reading Practices	https://tea.texas.gov/academics/early-childhood-education/reading-practices
English Language Arts TEKS	http://ritter.tea.state.tx.us/rules/tac/chapter110/index.html
TEA Proposed Rules with links for public comment	https://tea.texas.gov/about-tea/laws-and-rules/commissioner-rules-tac/proposed-commissioner-of-education-rules
TEA English Language Arts email newsletter	https://public.govdelivery.com/accounts/TXTEA/subscriber/new
State Board of Education Meeting Schedule, with links for public comment	https://tea.texas.gov/about-tea/leadership/state-board-of-education
State Board of Educator Certification Meeting Schedule, with links for public comment	https://tea.texas.gov/about-tea/leadership/state-board-for-educator-certification

Table 3. Important Texas education links

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