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Over 20 years ago, Ronna Flippo (1999) published, *What Do the Experts Say?,* in which she found common ground among researchers regarding reading instruction. Such findings remain relevant today as appropriate reading instruction is a contested subject with legislators, parent activist groups, teachers, and researchers seemingly at odds regarding best practice. In many U.S. states, legislation and policy seek to define effective instruction for beginning readers, and educational debates may "default to ideological red herrings of phonics and 'back to the basics'" (Garcia et al., 2017, p. 74). At this contentious time, there is a need to turn again to a broad panel of scholars who are knowledgeable about ongoing research and look for guidance among their shared recommendations. That is the purpose of the current study.

Literature Review

Effective Early Reading Instruction. The topic of early reading instruction has been extensively researched by scholars in many fields, including literacy scholars, educational psychologists, neuroscientists, and sociologists. Not surprisingly, findings of these differing experts represent a range of perspectives, and the question of how best to teach beginning readers has been controversial for some time (Adams, 1990; Chall, 1967; Furness, 1957). However, examining a full range of science can inform the teaching of reading (Pressley et al., 2004). This body of research is discussed below.

Five "Pillars" of Early Reading Instruction. Following an extensive review of research, the National Reading Panel (NRP) released an influential report in 2000 identifying five keys to effective early reading instruction. These are: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. Although the reaction to these findings from the research community varied (Allington, 2005; Cunningham, 2001; Krashen, 2001; Pressley et al., 2004), there seems to be little dispute that each of these areas is important to early reading instruction. Indeed, research in the subsequent two decades verifies the role of each. Ongoing research supports connections between phonemic awareness and orthographic knowledge (Castles et al., 2011; Loeb et al., 2009; Suggate, 2014). Research maintains early phonics instruction as having an important place in reading curricula (Ellis & Moss, 2013; Lonigan et al., 2008; Pearson & Hiebert, 2010). Similarly, the role of fluency, including accuracy, automaticity, and prosody continues to be validated (Benjamin & Schwanenflugel, 2010; Kuhn, et al., 2010; Rasinski, Rikli, & Johnston, 2009). Recent research also supports the roles of vocabulary and comprehension instruction, highlighting the influence of culture and prior experiences in these important aspects of teaching and learning (Leung et al., 2011; Wright & Neuman, 2014).

Additional Instructional Considerations. There is considerable consensus regarding the importance of phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension in early reading success; however, even these findings are not without question (Bus & van IJzendoorn,

1999). When the NRP report (2000) was initially released, some reading researchers drew attention to additional factors (Allington, 2003, 2005; Cunningham, 2001).

A limitation of meta-analyses is that criteria used for selection necessarily limit the studies and topics included. This raises the question of studies and topics that may have been ill-represented or excluded in the NRP study. For example, the NRP meta-analysis did not find sustained silent reading (SSR) to be an effective instructional tool; however, Brynes (2000), who conducted a separate meta-analysis of this topic about the same time, included a broader range of studies and found that SSR could be effective, depending on the duration of use.

In addition to limiting studies included, the NRP, of necessity, limited topics that were included in the meta-analysis. Among topics *not* included are some that other researchers have identified as important to early reading instruction. For example, the NRP report did not explore instruction that builds on connections between reading and writing, which, at the time of their report and subsequently, have been found to support early reading (Graham & Hebert, 2011; Pressley et al., 2001). Another important aspect of early reading development is students' background knowledge (Anderson & Pearson, 1984; Cromley & Azevedo, 2007; Hattan, 2019) and the degree to which texts align with students' own experiences and cultural knowledge (Brown et al., 1977; Cummins, 2011; Lipson, 1983). The roles in early-reading development played by language development were similarly unrepresented (Kendeou et al., 2009; Scarborough, 2001), classroom organization (including whole group, small group, and individual instruction) (Connor et al., 2011; Kuhn, 2005; Taylor et al., 2000), and motivation and engagement (Cartwright et al., 2015; Pressley et al., 2004; Wharton-McDonald et al., 1998), which are linked to access to interesting text and choice (Guthrie et al., 2007; Marinak & Gambrell, 2008). Additionally, exposure to literature through read-alouds contributes to young children's reading ability (Baker et al., 2013; Dickenson & Smith, 1994; Swanson et al., 2011). Although policy has leaned heavily on the NRP (2000) report in the decades subsequent to its publication (Shanahan, 2003, 2014; Calfee, 2013; National Education Association, 2012; Ylimaki, 2005), this additional body of research should also inform early reading instruction.

Recent Research in Early Reading. In addition to considerations about what was left out of the report, Pressley and colleagues (2004) point out that, because of the nature of meta-analyses, the thinking represented in the report was dated, even at the time of its publication. Recommendations flowing from the NRP report are drawn from a review of research published in the three decades prior to the turn of the century. While these findings are still frequently cited as revealing the outcomes of research, they minimize the results of research in the past 20 years, which is a considerable body of work.

In the two decades subsequent to the NRP report, ongoing research has added insight regarding early reading. In addition to findings described above, new topics have been explored and new methodologies utilized. For example, in her review of fMRI findings on language and reading, Price (2012) describes functional integration of many parts of the brain that occurs during reading and validates availability of different "reading routes" within the brain for the same words (p. 838). Interestingly, at ages 9–12, children with severe reading disorders show functional disconnection to parts of the brain associated with automatic visual word processing (van der Mark et al., 2011). However, because these findings relate to children beyond the early

grades, it is difficult to make assumptions about whether differences might be the cause or result of (or unrelated to) early learning experiences. Other research about cognitive processing during reading similarly warrants consideration (Buchweitz et al., 2009; Paulesu et al., 2014; Strauss et al., 2009). Findings from brain-imaging research may have instructional implications; for example, research by Park and Huang (2010) suggests neural function is affected by culture, adding to research of varied methodologies supporting culturally-responsive reading instruction (Lopez, 2016; McIntyre & Hulan, 2012; Orosco & O'Connor, 2013; Xu & Drame, 2007).

Varied and Responsive Instruction. The above description of previous and ongoing research related to early literacy instruction is substantial but not exhaustive. Through the efforts of researchers from a variety of perspectives and using varied methodologies, much is known about both how the brain works during reading as well as instruction that supports young readers.

Although many practices have proven effective, no single best method for teaching children to read has been identified (International Literacy Association [ILA], 2016; Mathes et al., 2005; Ritchey & Goeke, 2006; Turner, 2008; Vaughn & Linan-Thompson, 2003; Reinking et al., 2019). Rather, instruction that is responsive to student needs reduces the number of children with reading difficulties (Vellutino et al., 2000). Children who have difficulties learning to read, as well as those who easily become proficient, have varying strengths and challenges, so effective reading instruction cannot be a one-size-fits-all approach (Coyne et al., 2013; Simmons, 2014).

Policy on Reading Instruction

Despite research suggesting the need for reading instruction that is responsive to students' varying abilities and needs, recent policy and legislation in some U.S. states specifies particular approaches for beginning reading instruction. At the time of this writing, all but seven states in the U.S. have dyslexia laws on the books, and the website "Dyslexic Advantage," which tracks these statistics, suggests legislation is pending in these states as well (Eide, 2019). Such laws, or the interpretation and implementation of them, may narrow and prescribe instructional repertoires for beginning readers, especially those who experience difficulty. Educational policies sometimes "serve as barriers to good teaching" (Brass & Webb, 2015, p. xi) and may "contradict contemporary research, theory, and pedagogical models" (Brass & Webb, 2015, p. 12; Fullan, 2016).

A similar outcry was made by 57 "senior scholars and leaders in the area of reading and literacy" who created and signed the Dyslexia Concern Letter (Reinking et al., 2019), stating that they share with parents the "anguish and frustration when children are identified as experiencing reading difficulties." They expressed concern, however, that a Public Broadcasting System (PBS) feature on dyslexia, released April 30, 2019 (PBS, 2019), "perpetuates inaccuracies, misconceptions, and distortions related to reading, how it is taught, and the complexity of reading difficulties" and how such difficulties should be addressed instructionally. These reading scholars stated that "research does not support a single certifiable approach to addressing reading difficulties" and that they are "particularly concerned about the dyslexia segment's suggestion that a narrowly conceptualized instructional approach is unequivocally effective."

The above-referenced letter is not without its own dissenters; notably, scholar Steven Dykstra (2019), who validates the existence of dyslexia as an accepted term by the APA and suggests that all children who struggle to read do, indeed, need the same thing: a systematic approach to the alphabetic principle. Respectfully, we submit that the above research identifies additional aspects of instruction that should not be neglected. Research also suggests that children (including those with reading difficulties) have varied needs.

Some policies limit the materials and methods that teachers are permitted to use, and "teachers' rights to use their professional judgment and experience on behalf of their students are highly constrained" (National Council of Teachers of English [NCTE], 2006). Nearly two decades ago, at the onset of the NCLB Act, NCTE (2002) warned against "attempts to impose a centrally mandated 'one size fits all' method of reading instruction," positing that "individually unique children suffer when subjected to a uniform model of reading instruction," and that "children are deprived of sensitive, responsive precision in teaching when a rigid methodology is imposed on teachers."

Consideration of a broad body of reading research suggests that policies that impose a standardized methodology upon teachers and children may be a recipe for failure. For example, although some states experienced success with Reading First initiatives (Carlisle et al., 2010; Dole et al., 2010), the government's own final report found that, although instructional time spent on the components emphasized by the initiative did increase, "Reading First did not produce a statistically significant impact on student reading comprehension test scores" (Gamse et al., 2008).

As noted by Gutierrez, "Policy is a tool that has enabling and constraining properties, and researchers should be the ones who educate communities and ensure their message is in the public sphere" (Gutierrez, in Literacy Research Association [LRA], 2017). Unfortunately, some legislation and policy initiatives seem fueled by activist groups and corporate interests or by studies conducted outside of classroom contexts (Cox et al., 2004; Nation & Cocksey, 2009; Pattamadilok et al., 2010).

It is important that research from varied perspectives is part of the space where facts, research, and evidence become fundamental to policies (Gutierrez, in LRA, 2017) and that researchers remind people that there are "real kids and teachers out there who have to live with the rules that get made in other places" (Hinchman, in LRA, 2017). Research has the potential to lead to recommendations that guide policy and inform teachers as decision-makers.

In our own region, a statewide literacy initiative aims to "build a culture of reading" through "a new focus of instruction" to support rising achievement (State Department of Education [SDE], 2019). The emphasis responds to the state's high rates of illiteracy and to legislation passed in 2013 focused on "meeting the needs of children with dyslexia in public schools" (SDE, 2016). This legislation was codified through rules that became effective October 3, 2016. Announcement of the literacy initiative came shortly thereafter, in January 2017. After the initiative was announced by the governor in January 2017, we conducted a content analysis of information regarding the initiative on the State Department of Education website, which was intended to guide educators in implementation. In an effort to support and guide the initiative, we

asked a panel of prominent reading researchers to respond to this information. Our analysis synthesizes recommendations of these experts in response to the question: To what extent does information initially available on the reading initiative website align with advice on early-literacy instruction from experts in the field?

Methods

We sought to determine the extent to which recognized experts in the field of literacy, representing diverse perspectives, agreed with recommendations about literacy learning that were included on the SDE website early in the initiative. Our purpose was to guide implementation and inform policymakers. To do this, we identified literacy experts, then identified key statements from the state literacy initiative website and additional statements that addressed findings of early-literacy research not reflected on the website. Using Flippo's (1999) influential "Expert Study" as a guide, we determined the experts' level of agreement with website statements and their responses about what was both present and missing in the initiative. Our methodology included both quantitative and qualitative analysis. A mixed-method approach was warranted because, in addition to quantitative descriptions of levels of agreement, information about *why* scholars responded as they did could provide important insights about literacy policy and practice. We concurrently collected both qualitative and quantitative survey data and statistically analyzed participants' Likert scale responses. These results guided questions for follow-up interviews. This process of concurrent mixed data collection followed by sequential analysis allowed for a more complete understanding of participants' responses (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2010).

Participants

Because our study hoped to examine the opinions of prominent literacy experts, we used a systematic sampling design (Fowler, 2014; Thompson, 2012). Scholars' expert status was the primary consideration for our sample frame; therefore, we reviewed *The Handbook of Reading Research* (Kamil et al., 2011), *Theoretical Models and Processes of Reading* (Alvermann et al., 2013), the Reading Hall of Fame website (readinghalloffame.org), and literacy-related journals to identify prominent scholars. We then considered representation regarding key aspects of early literacy learning from the literature (described above), such as reading comprehension, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, motivation, and contextual factors. Finally, we considered theoretical and methodological research perspectives to determine potential participants. Given these parameters, we felt a sample size of eight experts could provide the necessary breadth of expertise while maintaining a manageable data set to allow for in-depth qualitative analysis in a timely manner. Eight experts were contacted; two scholars did not initially respond, so two other prominent researchers with similar focus areas were contacted and agreed to participate. Experts selected for our study are prominent in the field, recognized for their impact on research and instruction in literacy, and represent a range of areas of research, methodology, and theoretical perspectives, as described below.

P. David Pearson is a literacy scholar best known for reading comprehension research. His many awards include the Oscar Causey Award from the National Reading Conference, the Albert J. Harris Award from the International Reading Association [now International Literacy

Association (ILA)], the Alan Purves Award from NCTE, and the Distinguished Contributions to Research in Education Award from the American Education Research Association. Pearson was inducted into the Reading Hall of Fame in 1990. His recent research investigates reading, writing, and language as tools for knowledge and inquiry. Pearson served as Dean of the Graduate School of Education at University of California, Berkeley and is currently an emeritus faculty member there in the Language and Literacy and Human Development programs.

Donald R. Bear is best known for his work in assessment and development of phonics, spelling, and vocabulary. His book, *Words Their Way* (2016), is in its sixth edition and is widely used in elementary schools. Recently, Bear's research has focused on orthographic development with English language learners. Bear is a professor emeritus of Iowa State University where he directed the Duffelmeyer Reading Clinic and University of Nevada, Reno, where he directed the Center for Learning and Literacy. Bear has served on the board of directors for the ILA.

Jerry Johns is best known for the *Basic Reading Inventory* (2017), an informal reading inventory in its 12th edition. He also authored *Improving Reading: Strategies, Resources, and Common Core Connections* (2019), in its seventh edition, and over 300 articles and other publications. Johns has served as president of ILA and Association of Literacy Educators and Researchers. He was inducted into the Reading Hall of Fame in 2015. He received the Outstanding Teacher Educator in Reading Award and the William S. Gray Citation of Merit from the ILA. Johns is professor emeritus at Northern Illinois University, where he directed the literacy clinic that bears his name.

Diane Barone is a foundation professor of literacy at the University of Nevada, Reno. She is best known for her work with young children on early literacy, especially English language learners. She authored or co-authored *Teaching Early Literacy: Development, Assessment, and Instruction* (2005)*; Narrowing the Literacy Gap: What Works in High-Poverty Schools* (2006)*; Children's Literature in the Classroom: Engaging Lifelong Readers* (2011), and several other books on early literacy. Dr. Barone has served as editor of *The Reading Teacher* and *Reading Research Quarterly.* She has also been on the Board of Directors of the ILA. She won the John Manning Award for Service to Public Schools in 2010.

John Guthrie is a professor emeritus of literacy at the University of Maryland. He is best known for his research on reading engagement, motivation, and comprehension. Dr. Guthrie helped to develop "Concept-Oriented Reading Instruction" (CORI), an interdisciplinary approach to increase intrinsic motivation to read and provide various reading strategies. Dr. Guthrie authored or co-authored several books, including *Motivating Reading Comprehension: Concept-Oriented Reading Instruction* (1997). He has contributed to *Handbook of Reading Research* (2000), *What Research Has to Say About Reading Instruction* (2002), and *Reading for Understanding* (2002), among others. Dr. Guthrie received the Oscar Causey Award for Outstanding Reading Research and is a Reading Hall of Fame member. In 2012, he was appointed to ILA's Literacy Research Panel, focused on investigating literacy policy.

Colin Harrison is best known for his work in reading assessment and technology in literacy development. Inducted into the Reading Hall of Fame in 2003, he has directed many national and international research projects on reading assessment. He served as founding editor of *Journal of*

Research in Reading, as president of United Kingdom Reading Association (1990-1991), chair of the ILA's Technology and Literacy Committee (2001-2004), and director of national evaluations of technology and teacher development for the U.K. government. Harrison is a professor emeritus of Literacy Studies in Education at the University of Nottingham.

Judith Green is a distinguished professor emeritus in the Department of Education at the University of California, Santa Barbara (UCSB), where she is director for the Center for Education Research on Literacies, Learning & Inquiry in Networking Communities. She is best known for her work in teaching-learning relationships, socially-constructed disciplinary knowledge, and ethnographic research and discourse studies. Green was inducted into the Reading Hall of Fame in 2013. She has served as co-editor of *Reading Research Quarterly* and co-editor of the *Review of Research in Education*, *Volume 34, What Counts as Evidence and Equity* (Luke et al., 2010) and the *Handbook for Complementary Methods in Education Research* (Green, Camilli & Elmore, 2006).

Kathleen A. Hinchman is a Professor in the Reading and Language Arts Center at Syracuse University, where she teaches undergraduate and graduate classes in childhood and adolescent literacy. Her research centers on reading engagement, specifically exploring students' and teachers' perspectives toward literacy. She has published in *Reading Research Quarterly*, *Journal of Literacy Research,* and other literacy journals, authored books and book chapters, and recently edited *Adolescent Literacies: A Handbook of Practice-Based Research* (2016). Dr. Hinchman has served as President of New York State Reading Association and the Literacy Research Association (LRA). She received the Albert J. Kingston Award from LRA in 2015.

These experts were sent an email with an invitation to participate in a study investigating the state literacy initiative. After affirming willingness to participate, they were sent a link to the survey described below, asking them to respond to statements about literacy instruction; subsequently, they were interviewed about their responses.

Instruments

Major findings about early literacy instruction were identified through a literature review. We then reviewed the state literacy initiative website, which was intended as a guide for implementation, and identified key statements regarding topics present in this literature. Where the website did not include information about a major research topic, additional statements were included to represent the research described above. This approach allowed us to obtain expert perspectives on the range of early literacy topics evident in our review of literature and to better understand our experts' perspectives toward this range of topics. This resulted in an initial pool of 25 statements about early literacy instruction.

To limit the survey, 11 knowledgeable literacy professionals, including research team members, responded to the excerpts as to level of agreement/disagreement. Based on responses, 12 excerpts were selected to represent a range of agreement/disagreement and also to represent the five constructs of reading identified by the state literacy initiative website (phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension). Additional survey items focused on constructs identified through the review of research as also being key to early literacy

development, some that were represented on the state literacy initiative website (read-alouds) and some that were not (reading motivation, discussion, writing, the reading-writing relationship, formative assessment, and differentiation).

The resulting items were used to create a twelve-item survey (see Appendix A). Eight items included statements taken from the state literacy initiative website. Four additional statements addressed findings of early-literacy research not reflected on the state literacy initiative website. We drew these statements from a report, *Essential Practices in Early and Elementary Literacy*, (GELN, 2016), which was compiled by the Early Literacy Task Force, a subcommittee of the Michigan Association of Intermediate School Administrators led by Nell Duke. Duke is a prominent early literacy researcher and professor in the School of Education at the University of Michigan.

Although we note that typically, the careful wording of survey items is an important consideration for survey construction (Fowler, 2014; Madans et al., 2011), because of our research question, it was important to include exact wording from the state literacy initiative website for those identified topics where such information was present. For other items, we used wording from the GELN (2016) *Essential Practices* document, which was likewise intended to inform practice. Experts' response to the exact wording of these statements was an important aspect of our methodology.

Because the sequence of items on a survey can influence response (Chan et al., 2015; Dahlstrom et al., 1990), we constructed the survey purposefully to evoke experts' opinions. For example, we began with a statement where strong agreement was likely (based on pilot results), then included as the second question a potentially controversial statement (again, based on pilot results). By including initial statements that might have potentially divergent responses, we felt participants would perceive the value of their expert response.

We chose to use a four-point Likert scale (with a range of one to four: 1=strongly disagree; 2=disagree; 3=agree; 4=strongly agree), including no neutral option, because we sought the specific opinion of our experts (Allen & Seaman, 2007; Borgers et al., 2004), who had knowledge of survey topics based on their own and review of others' research. Experts were asked to indicate level of agreement/disagreement with each statement; they also had the opportunity to provide comments explaining their response, with an introductory note that comments were optional but appreciated. Additionally, experts were asked to identify aspects of early reading instruction not represented in the survey.

To improve the validity of findings, a follow-up interview was conducted with each participant using a semi-structured interview protocol. Questions were based on both the individual's survey responses to open-ended comments and on our initial analysis. For example, if a participant made a comment that seemed unclear, the participant was asked to expand on their response. Questions elucidated initial quantitative and qualitative findings.

Analysis

Likert scale responses were analyzed using descriptive statistics (parametric statistics could not be used because of violation of assumptions of normality and small group size). Comments provided by participants through initial survey responses were analyzed by the researchers. Working as two teams, each team independently conducted qualitative analysis of comments. Team members worked together to group these participant comments into conceptually similar clusters. Each code group was named to abstract common concepts (Holton, 2011). Using this open-coding process (Corbin & Strauss, 1998), seven very similar emergent codes were identified by both teams. Wording differed slightly between teams; for example, one team labeled a group, "Learning to Read," while the other labeled a similar group of excerpts, "Phonics, classroom instruction." During the next phase, follow-up interviews (by email, phone, or video conference) were used to elucidate comments made on the survey, to probe areas of agreement and disagreement, and to solicit reactions to the seven emergent codes that had been developed.

Analysis of all qualitative data, including initial comments and interviews, was then conducted. Each survey comment was excerpted, and interview comments were segmented into excerpts, creating units of meaning to allow for nuanced analysis (Elliott, 2018; Saldaña, 2016). Following the process described above, these excerpts were coded using the initial emergent codes as an a priori framework. Two new codes were identified, resulting in nine distinct codes based on the experts' responses: (1) social or cultural focus; (2) phonics; (3) motivation, self-esteem, enjoyment; (4) writing; (5) oversimplified, which refers to wording the experts found to be too simplistic; (6) too strong, which refers to wording in the statements that the experts also critiqued; (7) opaque, which refers to experts' responses that required further elucidation; (8) classroom instruction; and (9) lifelong reading habits. These nine initial codes were then narrowed into four pattern codes (Punch, 2014): (1) reading instruction, (2) reading purposes, (3) sociocultural, and (4) wording. To support interrater agreement, a code-book was created that defined and gave an example of each code. The excerpted statements were then independently coded by two members of the research team, with initial 74% agreement. Reviewing items of coding disagreement, we noted that "Reading Instruction" was a code most-commonly used disparately by the two coders. Through discussion, a more consistent understanding of the code was reached and applied as the researchers together recoded to resolve discrepancies (Elliott, 2018). We also recognized that many items had been double-coded because they represented multiple ideas; these coding differences were resolved through discussion by the coders, either by double-coding the excerpt, determining a dominant code, or separating the excerpt into smaller segments that were then coded. Discussion between coders created a "common vision of what the codes mean(t) and which blocks of data best fit which code" (Miles et al., 2014, p. 84), which was helpful as we moved forward with analysis. Next, connections and tensions within and among codes were considered and both sub-codes and broader themes were identified. The process of taking the data apart aided us in "putting the data back together in a meaningful way" (Creswell, 2016, p. 156). Finally, findings were sent to our expert panel for review. Suggestions made by the experts were considered by the research team, and some adjustments were made to content and wording. The results are discussed below.

Findings

On the survey of statements about early reading instruction, experts marked their level of agreement, from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree). A space for comments about each question was provided, and experts expounded on these comments during follow-up interviews. Additionally, experts were asked to identify aspects of early reading instruction not represented in the survey. Below, we first provide an overview of the quantitative analysis. Qualitative findings related to the broader data set are then discussed.

Summary of Survey Item Findings

Quantitative analysis of survey items is reported in Table 1, including the mean, mode, and range for each statement. There was significant variability among the experts' Likert scale ratings on most items, with eight of 12 items having the maximum range of three. However, review of experts' comments revealed greater consensus than indicated by ratings, as demonstrated within the discussion of qualitative data, below.

Findings suggest that the efforts of the state literacy initiative are mostly aligned with experts' knowledge about early literacy learning. Experts showed greatest agreement and consistency with the statement related to discussion, with all experts marking "strongly agree," and with the statement about formative assessment, with all experts except one indicating strong agreement. Statements about differentiation and motivation to read also had strong agreement, with six of eight experts marking "strongly agree" and two marking "agree." Interestingly, our item-by-item analysis reveals that the experts had the strongest level of agreement with statements about topics that were not represented on the state literacy initiative website but were added to the survey to represent research on early reading. Overall, there was mild disagreement to mild agreement on website statements, with a full range of responses from the expert panel.

Qualitative analysis of comments for each item suggests that differing ratings on the survey belie much consensus among experts, whose comments demonstrate more agreement than disagreement and instead tend to emphasize different aspects of the survey statements. These assertions are evidenced in the findings of qualitative analysis of all survey and interview comments, described below.

Common Ground among Expert Comments

In addition to quantitative analysis of survey items, we looked for patterns among all qualitative data provided through interviews and open responses on surveys. Initially, all qualitative responses from open-ended survey items were excerpted and coded by two groups, and seven codes were identified. Later analysis, which included interview comments, yielded identification of two additional codes. These nine codes were then collapsed because of commonalities, resulting in four final codes: instruction, reading purposes, sociocultural emphasis, and wording. Comments within each code were then reviewed to identify meaningful groups of ideas, which are discussed below.

Instruction. Given the focus of the initiative, it is not surprising that the code Reading Instruction had 66 excerpts, the largest group. Within this code, there were three major themes: phonics, needs-based instruction, and affect.

Phonics. Barone said, "Phonics is important for young children who are coming to understand the code," and none of the experts seemed to disagree with that statement. Pearson, Hinchman, and Harrison emphasized the importance of the ability to recognize words with analogies and patterns, as well as sound-by-sound decoding and automaticity. Harrison asserted that although there is disagreement about when and how much phonics instruction is needed, "some phonics is essential for nearly every kid."

Participants described phonics as one of the important components in early reading instruction. Johns indicated that phonics is "one tool to help students decode words that they do not know at sight" and that phonics instruction should be "based on their demonstrated needs," and Harrison emphasized that reading independently "depends on a number of things—vocabulary, motivation, lexical and sublexical knowledge, knowledge of print conventions, etc.—AND phonics" (emphasis in original). In addition to phonics, other components suggested as important for early reading instruction were oral language, thinking, inquiry, disciplinary literacy, reading volume, spelling, digital literacy, and concepts of print.

Experts also described various ways that phonics could be taught, including the role of writing as a tool for learning sound-symbol associations. Barone said, "Teachers and parents need to support students as they create messages." She took issue with what she called a fixed phonics model, "which does not provide contextual support for decoding unknown words." She cited extensive work on language experience approaches, which "support literacy development and knowledge of sound-symbol relationships," as an alternative to fixed phonics approaches. Hinchman said, "Even though we need to learn to read letter patterns, known as diphthongs and digraphs, we don't need to know they're called diphthongs and digraphs to be able to learn these patterns." The experts' agreement about the importance of phonics was tempered with comments about how and when children might gain this knowledge and the need for other types of instruction for early readers. In addition, our experts emphasized that, like all aspects of reading instruction, phonics instruction should be based on need.

Needs-Based Instruction. The survey statement, "Teachers should use ongoing observation and assessment in language and literacy to inform instruction" was one with which almost all experts strongly agreed. Evidence of experts' support for needs-based instruction was found throughout the survey and interviews. In relation to phonics instruction, Johns said, "Students need an appropriate foundation in phonics based on their demonstrated needs." Guthrie pointed out that, "Some students induce phonics independently. It's counter-productive to proficient oral readers." Hinchman described how needs might be met as part of small-group instruction, saying, "Needs-based small group and individual instruction can also include explicit phonics." These experts recommended a phonics approach tailored to students' needs.

Words like *respond, needs, observation, assessment,* and *guide* pointed to experts' support for needs-based instruction in early-reading instruction. Guthrie, responding to the website statement about sequential phonological awareness instruction, cautioned that such instruction should be provided "only as needed." Johns said, "Instruction in needed skills is also important," and that teachers should "use day-to-day observations and insights about their students to help make better decisions." Green said that instruction should meet students "where they are" and be

"responsive to students through ongoing documentation of their work;" she commented that this documentation could come from both teachers and students. Barone emphasized that small-group instruction should be dynamic, that "groups need to change…based on need."
When discussing the role of formative assessment, Hinchman suggested that teachers could work collaboratively to gain multiple perspectives about how to address strengths and needs. She suggested that "needs-based small group and individual instruction can also include explicit phonics or comprehension instruction." In designing what occurs during small group instruction, Green pointed out it is important that "we build solid diagnostics for students." Experts commented that observation could be used to assess and address strengths and areas of need, along with other types of ongoing assessment.

Affective Domain. Within experts' survey comments and interviews, there was substantial attention to the affective domain, including comments related to motivation, choice, interest, and attitude. The website statement about the five pillars of a comprehensive reading program elicited comments from experts about affect. Harrison commented, "Unless motivation/fun/ enjoyment is there, then a program based on the five areas mentioned might be a waste of time." On this statement, most of the experts made comments about the absence of affective dimensions from the description of a comprehensive program. Pearson said that, within statements included in the survey, there was "too little on motivation."

Johns described "the importance of capitalizing on students' interests" for motivation and said, "You really get a lot of connections going, building on a person's interests" that "can generate a positive look…a curiousness." He pointed out that finding materials of interest for students can help them "see the value in reading." Without such connections, Harrison remarked, "It misses out fun!"

Building on the importance of having reading materials aligned with students' interests, the experts described the value of student choice, as demonstrated by their agreement with the survey statement, "Literacy motivation and engagement are fostered through offering opportunities for children to make choices in their reading and writing." All agreed or strongly agreed with this statement. Guthrie described choice as a practice that supports motivation, and Pearson called choice "a cornerstone of engagement." Hinchman said, "All students need the chance to have a go at independently reading choice texts, even emergent readers."

Johns gave attention to "feelings, attitudes, (and) beliefs about reading," saying, "You know, that to me has always been a neglected part. I think it was Mark Twain who said, 'The person who can read who doesn't has no advantage over the person who can't read.' To me, I think that's really a long-standing tragedy in our quest to help students become engaged readers." Johns spoke of the need to "promote a love of reading" and help students "see reading as a pleasurable experience."

Experts saw affective dimensions as connected to outcomes, saying that supporting students' interests not only enhances students' progress in learning to read, it also helps them develop "positive attitudes toward reading," "see the value in reading," and "see themselves as readers." Johns added, "I just want to stress attitude, 'I can be a reader.'" Experts described attention to the affective domain as important to early reading instruction, depicting a connection among these

affective aspects, with motivation, choice and interest contributing toward attitudes about reading and self as reader.

Reading Purposes. Closely connected to ideas about affect in reading instruction, participants included descriptions of the purpose for reading in their comments. Across survey responses and interviews, 19 of 124 comments were related to reading purpose. They described the value of reading to learn and reading for pleasure.

Reading to Learn. Many comments about reading purpose were in response to the survey statement, "A child learns to read in the early years so that he or she can read to learn throughout life." Experts emphasized that children should be reading to learn with no delay. Johns felt the statement created "a false dichotomy" between learning to read and reading to learn and remarked that even as young as kindergarten, children are reading to learn. Pearson said that "kids should ALWAYS be reading to learn—from day one of exposure to books" (emphasis in original). Similarly, Guthrie stated that "youngsters read to learn," and Bear stated that "reading to learn is important early on." Barone said, "children read to learn from the youngest ages," and Harrison emphasized that "the benefits of learning to read are immediate—you don't learn to read so that you can benefit later," and went further, quoting nineteenth-century novelist Gustave Flaubert, who suggested we "read in order to live" (as quoted in Harrison, 2004, p. 3).

Interdisciplinary Purposes. Closely connected to reading for the purpose of learning, experts made comments about the value of reading across the curriculum. Guthrie described the value of nonfiction texts. Harrison described the importance of reading in content areas. Barone discussed the value of reading to extend content knowledge. Green described texts that "relate to other dimensions of the curriculum" and had concerns about reading instruction being tied to a reading program rather than being "across disciplines in a school day." She suggested that reading should be "the center of all discipline-based subjects." Green detailed that teachers need to consider "connected reading-writing in science, history, language arts, mathematics, physical education, and the arts."

In addition to having the opportunity to read and write about content, Johns stressed the opportunity to "engage in meaningful and insightful and critical conversation and analysis about it," suggesting critical evaluation as a purpose of learning to read. Bear said reading involves "thinking and it involves the social aspects of learning and is related to purpose...We're looking for 21st-century skills…real skills that people need." Experts' comments demonstrated their belief in early reading as a purposeful activity.

Sociocultural Emphasis. Of the 124 comments, 19 were coded as "sociocultural emphasis." These include comments about the role of student discussion, about culture and community, about home as a context for learning, and about the value of multiple perspectives.

Discussion. Experts all strongly agreed with the survey statement about developing students' ability to engage in meaningful discussion. While agreeing, Green pushed on the statement, asking about "how you engage them in meaningful conversations," and "How is meaningful defined?" She described the important role that dialogic discourse plays with the interconnected processes of reading and writing and how ideas are "talked into being."

Barone emphasized a "high-level" discussion in which no standard answers should come from the teachers. "Discussion where the teacher has all the answers is not really discussion," she added. Guthrie described research demonstrating that "conceptual discussion increases students' interpretative elaboration and acquisition of multiple perspectives on textual content." Green said teachers need information "so that they might support students in learning to communicate." Green also talked about the *teachers'* need to "talk about what they find in collaborative, multi-perspectival learning communities to develop notions of how to address strengths and needs in instruction." Overall, experts seemed to agree with Harrison that discussion is "incredibly important."

Home, Culture, and Community. Experts also described contextual influences, including factors related to home interactions, as important to early reading. Green described studies tracing the development of reading from home to school and emphasized a multi-faceted approach that includes students' culture and community. Bear asked, "Are children read to and engaged in oral language (at home)?" Johns suggested, "The role that parents and caregivers play in the child's preschool years is generally regarded as critical." Barone said that both teachers and parents "need to support students as they create messages."

Harrison described the importance of adult interaction as children learn to read and of their role as models. He said, "I would want every kid leaving high school to know that when they become a dad or a mum, the best thing they can do to help their child do well in school is to be sharing books with them from age one." Further, he suggested, "Make sure that if you're a guy that you do your share so they don't get the idea that only females read." Johns agreed, saying to promote a love of reading, "it's also important that you try to keep parents involved, spending some time with their children, sharing books or other materials." Experts described home, culture, and community as assets for young readers.

A few comments in this group described outcomes of learning to read. For example, Barone emphasized the role of reading and classroom culture in building identity. Guthrie described reading as contributing to building communities that understand multiple perspectives. Overall, the experts described sociocultural aspects of early reading. "It's not just cognitive," Harrison said, pointing out the social aspect of learning to read. "It's not about skills alone – learning to read is a socio-cognitive activity."

Wording. In addition to the harmonies noted above with regard to our experts' views of early reading instruction, scholars unitedly had concerns about wording of some statements, calling the language "too narrow," "too strong," "partial," and "problematic." Green, who was an outlier on Likert scale responses, shared views that were divergent mostly because of wording of the statements. For example, she was the only "strongly disagree," with all others marking "strongly agree" on the statement about formative assessment, even though she commented, "The answer to this is definitely." She went on to express concerns about holes in the statement. Johns, expressing his concern with a website statement, said, "When you do those 'only' or 'single,' 'the most' it's kind of a red flag to a person like me." Largely because of concerns about how statements were written, Likert scale responses masked general agreements among experts.

Oversimplification. Experts participating in this study felt some statements from the literacy initiative website were problematic because they oversimplified the complex process of learning to read. For example, the statement, "A child learns to read in the early years so that he or she can read to learn throughout life," was described by Guthrie as "vastly oversimplified." He later added, "Early reading pioneers glibly expressed it, and people looking for simple solutions to complex issues adopted the statement."

Even while marking "agree" on the survey statement about motivation, Hinchman described the recommendation of offering students' choice in reading and writing as "helpful, but not necessary or sufficient," suggesting that equating choice with motivation was an oversimplification.

Experts felt that the statement, "Children who talk late, who say very few words, who have trouble pronouncing words, or who have difficulty expressing feelings verbally may have trouble learning to read," was another oversimplification. Commenting on the statement, Pearson said, "Not that simple. Some kids with delayed speech or empathy skills early on do just fine later." Harrison said, "Of course they 'MAY'. This isn't a very helpfully worded item in my view" (emphasis in original). Similarly, Barone said, "In general, these kids could have difficulties." Experts' comments call into question statements about early reading that reduce complex phenomenon and concepts.

Overstatement. Similar to concerns about oversimplification, experts suggested that some statements from the literacy initiative website were overstated. For example, commenting on the statement, "A strong foundation in phonics is necessary to move students forward in their reading," Johns elaborated, "The word 'strong' may be problematic. Students need an appropriate foundation in phonics based on demonstrated needs. Phonics is one tool to help students decode words that they do not know at sight." Green disagreed with the statement, saying, "Again, this depends," emphasizing that a strong background in language may be equally as important.

Similarly, experts felt that calling reading aloud, "the single most important activity," was problematic. They called the statement "too strong" and "too narrow," even though experts seemed to agree with Johns that reading aloud to children is "certainly a very important activity." Johns added that saying reading aloud was the single most important was putting "all your eggs in one basket." Bear said, "While it is essential, one single activity is hard to strongly agree with." He added, "We may need to open it up a little bit more than just the single best." Guthrie said the "Statement is too strong," and Harrison called it "very partial." Experts questioned whether research supported the statement, with Harrison asking, for example, "Has any research actually shown that?" and answering his own query: "I don't think so." Overall, the experts queried in our study drew attention to the wording of some statements; they recognized statements that were oversimplified or overstated as problematic.

Discussion

Like many states in the United States, a state in our region has an initiative to increase reading proficiency. The purpose of the initiative, announced the governor, is to "develop the strongest

reading program and proficiency that we can possibly do" (Governor, 2017). When the initiative was launched, the governor stated that only 35% of the state's third graders were proficient readers, dropping to 27% by eighth grade. "We've got to do better…in preparing students to learn to read," the Governor said, and "develop a lifelong habit of reading."

The purpose of our study, which we began immediately after the Governor's announcement, was to support and guide the initiative. To do so, we asked a panel of prominent reading researchers to respond to information about early reading instruction. Our analysis synthesizes recommendations in response to the question: To what extent does information initially available on the literacy initiative website align with advice on early-literacy instruction from experts in the field?

Literacy experts who participated in this study represented a broad range of backgrounds, theoretical perspectives, and research expertise about literacy, including both quantitative and qualitative researchers, cognitive scientists and ethnographers, with expertise including phonics, policy, comprehension, technology, assessment, discourse, engagement, and motivation. Our study examined experts' responses to eight statements from the state literacy initiative website, which was intended to guide implementation of the initiative, plus an additional four statements that represented aspects of early literacy reading instruction evident in research but initially absent from the site. Experts indicated their agreement with statements using a four-point Likert scale (1=strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3=agree, and 4=strongly agree). Each statement offered the opportunity for comments, which were analyzed along with experts' statements made during follow-up interviews.

Overall means of experts' ratings ranged from disagree to strongly agree, as demonstrated in Table 1, with a full range of responses (from 1 to 4) on seven of eight statements taken from the website. On statements not from the state literacy initiative website (added to include aspects of instruction not yet evident there), three of four statements had a limited range (0 or 1), demonstrating more consensus.

Agreements among Experts about Early Reading Instruction

Although initially masked in Likert scale responses, analysis of qualitative comments demonstrated agreement among experts on many aspects of early reading instruction that were described on the state literacy initiative website. Even when experts disagreed with a statement, comments tended to demonstrate general agreement about instructional aspects. For example, even though the statement about reading aloud had the strongest level of disagreement on the Likert scale portion of the survey, experts seemed to agree that reading aloud was important. It was the overstatement of the importance with which they disagreed. Experts likewise agreed that the "five pillars" of reading instruction (phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and reading comprehension) outlined on the website were important. For example, they described phonics as one important tool for reading. However, they argued that other instructional aspects, such as oral language, reading volume, and writing were also important aspects of early reading development that should not be neglected. Further, they emphasized that instruction should be based on need. Our experts also emphasized the importance of attending to affective dimensions of learning to read, describing the role of motivation, choice, interest, and attitude.

Experts also drew attention to the purposes for reading. They agreed about the value of "reading to learn," but most disagreed that that purpose should be postponed until after students had "learned to read," as implied by a statement from the state literacy initiative website. A similar theme was reading for disciplinary purposes. Experts described the value of inquiry and reading across the curriculum and of developing a critical stance.

We found evidence among experts' comments to support their view of learning to read as a sociocultural activity. They described the role of communication and of meaningful conversation among students and teachers. Experts also described the important role of home, culture, and community in learning to read and the value of reading in providing multiple perspectives.

Cautions

As described above, many disagreements (and apparent disagreements), both among researchers and between researchers and the statements from the literacy initiative website, came because of the way statements about early reading instruction were worded. Experts in our study warned against the use of superlatives, extremes, and absolutes.

Some statements oversimplified the complex process of learning to read. Because reading is complex, simplified views of reading can lead to omitting important aspects of early reading instruction, such as instruction that is based on need and attention to real purposes for reading. Lists that seem finalized, such as the website statement about five components of a comprehensive reading program, inappropriately delimit instructional foci. Our experts pointed out that aspects of early reading instruction emphasized on the literacy initiative website were necessary but insufficient.

In contrast, words like *may* create veritable non-statements that could overemphasize a practice or concern that is unfounded. For example, experts felt the website statement, "Children who talk late, who say very few words, who have trouble pronouncing words, or who have difficulty expressing feelings verbally ***may*** have trouble learning to read" (emphasis added), while true because of its evasive language, could problematize behaviors that have little to do with learning to read.

Experts suggested that the words used to talk about reading instruction could send inappropriate messages. Statements that include words like *strong* or *majority* or describe something as "the single most important," may place unwarranted emphasis on particular practices. Words like *deficit* and *barrier* could support mindsets that neglect students' assets.

In responding to statements about early reading instruction, experts frequently invoked the phrase, "this depends," or similar language, emphasizing that specifics about reading instruction should be determined based on need. The word *need* occurred 41 times in the 124 comments we excerpted from experts' survey comments and interviews. Experts' own use of words, therefore, emphasizes a flexible, needs-based approach to early reading instruction that benefits from knowledge of practices supported by research.

Conclusions and Implications

In 1999, Rona Flippo published the Expert Study, identifying agreement among a diverse group of literacy scholars about reading instruction. Similarly, our study found much agreement among the experts who participated. Experts agreed reading aloud, comprehension, vocabulary, fluency, phonological awareness, and phonics all deserve a place in early literacy instruction. Further, they agreed that some components not initially included on our state's reading initiative website warranted attention. For example, motivation, oral language, reading volume, and writing were additional aspects they emphasized, along with the need for instruction to be based on need. Importantly, our expert panel also reminded that reading should be viewed as a purposeful activity from the very beginning of reading instruction, with students "reading to learn from day one" (Pearson survey comment) and reading across academic areas.

These experts repeatedly drew attention to wording of statements from the state literacy initiative website they found problematic. Perhaps it is not surprising that a group of literacy experts, whose careers focus on language, would carefully attend to wording of statements about early reading instruction. Words subtly, but powerfully, send messages about what is emphasized and deemphasized. Our findings have implications regarding how policies are communicated. Experts cautioned against extremes in describing aspects of early reading instruction. Superlatives and modals, they warned, can inappropriately emphasize positions and practices.

As heated debates may seem to polarize the field of reading research, our findings suggest that it is helpful to look for common recommendations about early reading instruction, such as those pointed out by our expert panel, to inform policy and guide implementation. The science of reading is represented by a vast body of ongoing research about cognitive processes and instructional practices. Experts' knowledge of this science can be a helpful policy guide to initiatives that seek to improve students' reading ability and appetite.

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Table 1. Quantitative analysis of experts' Likert scale responses

Topic	Source	Mean	Mode	Range
Read aloud	SDE website	2.38	2	3
Comprehension	SDE website	2.63	1, 2, 4	3
Vocabulary	SDE website	2.75	4	3
Comprehensive instruction	SDE website	2.75	4	3
Reading difficulties	SDE website	3.0	3, 4	3
Phonemic awareness	SDE website	3.0	4	3
Phonics	SDE website	3.38	4	2
Fluency	SDE website	3.5	4	3
Formative assessment	GELN, 2016*	3.63	4	3
Differentiation	GELN, 2016*	3.75	4	1
Motivation to read	GELN, 2016*	3.75	4	1
Discussion	GELN, 2016*	4	4	0

*GELN: General Education Leadership Network (2016). *Essential Practices in Early and Elementary Literacy.* Michigan.

Appendix A: Survey Statements

Survey Statements, in order of presentation (origin of statement is listed parenthetically)

Differentiation: Literacy instruction should include small, needs-based group and individual instruction, where the majority of the time children are actually reading and writing connected text. (GELN, 2017)

Vocabulary: A deficit in the number of words low-income children hear prior to kindergarten is a barrier to the development in reading skills. (State literacy initiative website)

Formative assessment: Teachers should use ongoing observation and assessment in language and literacy to inform instruction. (GELN, 2017)

Phonemic awareness: Kindergarten and first grade students should progress through the phonological awareness continuum as they work on basic phonological skills, including phoneme blending and segmentation. (State literacy initiative website)

Discussion: Develop students' ability to engage in meaningful discussion of the complex texts they read in whole class, small group, and partner conversations so they can learn to negotiate and comprehend complex texts independently. (GELN, 2017)

Comprehension: A child learns to read in the early years so that he or she can read to learn throughout life. (State literacy initiative website)

Phonics: A strong foundation in phonics is necessary to move students forward in their reading. (State literacy initiative website)

Motivation to read: Literacy motivation and engagement are fostered through offering opportunities for children to make choices in their reading and writing. (GELN, 2017)

Fluency: Fluent readers know the words automatically, and therefore move easily from word to word, spending their cognitive energy on constructing meaning. (State literacy initiative website)

Read aloud: Reading aloud with children is known to be the single most important activity for building the knowledge and skills they will eventually require for learning to read. (State literacy initiative website*)

Comprehensive instruction: A comprehensive reading program incorporates five essential components: phonological awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension. (State literacy initiative website)

Reading difficulties: Children who talk late, who say very few words, who have trouble pronouncing words, or who have difficulty expressing feelings verbally may have trouble learning to read. (State literacy initiative website)

Addition aspects: Are any important aspects of early literacy instruction missing from the statements above? Please describe:

* State literacy initiative website (2017). Note that the website has been updated since 2017 and some survey statements may no longer exist.

**GELN: General Education Leadership Network (2016). *Essential Practices in Early and Elementary Literacy.* Michigan.