

Editor's Note: Professor James Tucker, the McKee Chair of Excellence at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, coauthored this column. Professor Tucker is a national leader in research in teaching and outreach for the study of dyslexia and related exceptional-learning conditions. He has held various positions in a long and illustrious career, including Director of the Bureau of Special Education, Pennsylvania Department of Education and has extensive national and international consulting experience. Six years ago, Jim, along with Emily Hanford (featured later in this column) introduced me to what I believe to be the most crucial problem in American education. For online readers, you may access hyperlinks to articles discussed throughout the column's text for your convenience. These articles are also listed with URLs in the notes at the end of the column.

FACTS ABOUT ASIA

The Elephant in the Classroom: The US Literacy Crisis and Asian Studies

By James A. Tucker and Lucien Ellington

Most, but perhaps not all, readers are familiar with the South Asian village folk tale, "The Blind Men and the Elephant,"¹ where six blind men attempt to understand an elephant based upon accurate information they've learned about pachyderms but through no fault of theirs, cannot see. They furiously argue among themselves about an elephant's appearance. The villagers, tiring of these incessant disagreements, arrange for a small boy to lead them to a wise Rajah's Palace. Before meeting the Rajah, a gardener has each man touch the Rajah's elephant, but this only makes the situation worse. The Rajah encourages them, with the assistance of the small boy, to put all the parts they touched together and then discuss their findings. Afterwards, the blind men have a much better understanding of elephants. The story has a happy ending and Peace Corps educators indicate this folk tale's reading level as appropriate for grades three through five and/or grades five through eight.



"Blind Men and an Elephant," from the Holton-Curry Reader (by Martha Adelaide Holton & Charles Madison Curry, 1914).
Source: Wikipedia at <https://tinyurl.com/mrxd9yt>.

A quick glance at the content of this *EAA* issue reveals that no less than six contributors write essay reviews of national award-winning middle school literature. This outstanding collection of books on Asia are stories in the best sense of the term. Middle school students who read them learn rich content they don't know about Asia. Most of the award winners also feature protagonists from the same age ranges as the readers who negotiate difficult situations while acquiring values and habits that will last a lifetime.

The Literacy Crisis

Unfortunately, compelling facts indicate that almost two-thirds of America's middle school students are like the blind men and the elephant; they are unable to read and comprehend. Auditory, Kinesthetic, and Visual Learning Styles notwithstanding, former President Obama put it best in his 2005 speech *Literacy and Education in a Twenty-First-Century Economy*: "Reading is the gateway skill that makes all other skills possible."²

Although the latest COVID-related learning losses are now garnering national attention, the US, unlike most other developed nations and many developing ones, is experiencing a *literacy crisis* that is at least three decades old, but awareness of the problem has been almost as murky as blind men correctly conceptualizing an elephant.³ *Pre-COVID data* from the *National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP)*, published in the US government's highly respected *Nation's Report Card*, indicates that only 35 percent of US fourth graders and 34 percent of US eighth graders could manage to read without substantial difficulty.⁴ Readers who continue to wonder if the expression "Literacy Crisis" is polemical, are invited to further explore the

problem. *NAEP* 2019 assessments indicated that 35 percent of children entering fourth grade attained a proficient reading score or higher. National percentages for fourth and eighth graders reading proficiently both dropped in 2019 relative to 2017.⁵

Massachusetts has been a perennial leader in education since the colonial period, and for years has led the nation in the percentage of fourth graders who are proficient or higher in reading. In 2019, only 45 percent of Bay State fourth graders were proficient or higher in literacy. Even in earlier years, this national leader could only manage to have approximately 50 percent of fourth graders score proficient or higher. In 2019, in no US state did even 50 percent of rising fourth graders score proficient or higher.⁶ This abject national failure is worse than it appears, because there is virtually no reading improvement in later grades. In 2019, only 37 percent

of public high school seniors nationally scored proficient or higher in reading, and *NAEP* tests for high school seniors don't account for high school dropouts who, if they remained in school, would have lowered the average. With the

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exception of Asian-Americans, minorities generally score significantly lower than Caucasians. The reading crisis is also a civil rights problem. State required literacy test scores generally yield the same results as *NAEP*.

To reiterate, the decline in reading achievement was happening well before the COVID pandemic, so the educational effects of the virus are not to blame. Perhaps the recent drastic drop in overall school achievement, highlighted by the pandemic, is at least partially responsible for making an increasing number of Americans aware of the extent of the crisis and finally recognize that the quality of literacy education in the United States has been deteriorating for decades. One initiative after another has claimed to be the solution to this slide, but to date there has been no significant general change

in the trajectory, and we continue to read the reports of the negative effects of lower reading achievement.

Ending the Crisis: Theories and Solutions?

Why have we not fixed this problem long before now? The argument that there is insufficient research-based evidence to give us direction is simply not supportable. Over the past half-century, there have been endless theoretical interpretations of just what is the best way to teach reading. The debate—called “the reading wars”—has raged for decades and most of the proposed solutions are evidentially ineffective. The better news is that there are literacy programs that work and, as reported in a recent *Education Week* article, in at least twenty-nine states, policy makers, educators, and citizens are seriously trying to understand this figurative elephant of failed literacy and move to reading instruction that works.⁷

“The Science of Literacy” is a recent descriptive term for an empirically demonstrative literacy program that works. “The science of reading is based upon a vast interdisciplinary body of scientifically-based *research* about reading and issues related to reading and writing.”⁸ Literacy (or reading) is the ability to decipher text and to understand it. Sometimes, a topic can be understood by defining what it is not.

The science of reading is not:

- A philosophy
- A fad, a trend, a new idea, or a pendulum swing
- A political agenda
- A one-size-fits-all approach that simply emphasizes phonics

Powerful evidence exists that most undergraduate and graduate teacher preparation literacy programs don’t work with children, because of adherence to several (or all) of these characteristics. As a result, “reading wars” erupted among educators in the 1980s and 1990s and resulted in the rise and fall of theories, most notably “Whole Language,” but other fads as well.⁹ In part because of California’s adoption in the 1980s of Whole Language and abandonment in the mid-1990s, due to precipitous declines in reading scores, the US Congress commissioned a national panel of reading experts to engage in in-depth research on the question of how to teach literacy. The result was the 2000 National Reading Panel report “Teaching Children to Read.”¹⁰

The 2000 national report and what cognitive scientists and educational psychologists consider consensual research on the teaching of reading has not been taught in most teacher preparation programs or public school districts. This is usually true because many teachers responsible for early literacy instruction have never been taught these principles themselves. Teachers also learn in their preparation programs that several “Science of Literacy” techniques are old fashioned and do not encourage creativity in children, or they consider elements of these principles potentially stifling for youngsters.

Science of Literacy Fundamentals

Infants and toddlers don’t need to be taught to talk. They learn verbal interaction with children and adults who talk. All young children need to be taught to read. Whole Language proponents dispensed with teaching language fundamentals including phonics and phonemes, and correct standard English usage. They recommended focusing upon a word as a “whole” entity and using a combination of rich children’s literature, as well as contending that young children could learn the meaning of words through taking cues from a large variety of pictures in a text. After the 2000 National Reading Panel report, Balanced Literacy became the dominant early literacy teaching method and was touted as a compromise between advocates of phonics and those of Whole Language; phonics was re-introduced into the curriculum, but usually not systematically taught.¹¹ Reading scores continued to stagnate and decline.

Most children, including youngsters, in the fifty to seventy IQ range can be taught to read if a systematic program including all the following components are taught:

1. **Phonics and Phonemic Awareness:** The ability to understand and correctly use the sounds that make up words is a critical component of learning pronunciation and reading.

2. Vocabulary, Spelling, Grammar, and Punctuation are Essential:

Teaching the meaning of words is imperative and is best achieved for a significant number of words when they are taught in the context of an academic discipline or area of interest. In a much-cited baseball study, children classified as poor readers outperformed higher ranked peers in baseball-related reading comprehension because of their knowledge of baseball.¹² Similar studies reinforce the importance of consistent learning and using vocabulary inherent to a field of study and not randomly learning vocabulary. Learning, speaking and writing correct grammar, spelling and punctuation strengthens reading ability.

3. Fluency:

No child can be an effective reader with a selection unless he or she has stored approximately 95 percent of words in long term memory that appear in the selection. The popular notion that a person can “always look it up” simply doesn’t work if the aforementioned condition is not achieved.

4. Comprehension:

The ability to understand what one reads is crippled by constantly looking up the meaning of words or systematically attempting to use pictures as cues to understand text.

Try reading content from an unfamiliar field, and keep in mind, that aspiring readers in early elementary schools are often using failed methods.

How Does all this Relate to Learning about Asia?

Unless readers of this column are largely content with a relatively few members of the US population that are being positioned to have even basic knowledge of Asia, changing the way reading is taught has enormous implications. Readers of this column who would like to read a seminal article and hear a radio documentary, winner of among other awards, a public service award from the non-partisan Education Writers Association, should read or listen to Emily Hanford’s “Hard Words: Why Aren’t Kids Being Taught to Read?”¹³

Readers who prefer a more extensive, thoughtful, and recent discussion of this entire issue are strongly encouraged to read the August 11, 2022 *Time* article “Inside the Massive Effort to Change the Way Kids are Taught to Read.”¹⁴ ♦

NOTES

1. “The Blind Men and the Elephant,” *Peace Corps*, last modified September 9, 2022, <https://tinyurl.com/554r2s3p>.
2. Barack Obama, *Literacy And Education In A Twenty-First-Century Economy*, speech, June 25, 2005, <https://tinyurl.com/34wt4y92>.
3. Emma Dorn et. al., “COVID-19 and Education: The Lingering Effects of Unfinished Learning,” *McKinsey and Company*, July 27, 2021, <https://tinyurl.com/2whw7nz5>.
4. “Results from the 2019 Mathematics and Reading Assessments,” *The Nation’s Report Card*, <https://tinyurl.com/yc3mhbjs>.
5. Ibid.
6. “2019 Reading State Snapshot Report: Massachusetts Grade 4 Public Schools,” *The Nation’s Report Card*, <https://tinyurl.com/36mbmw66>.
7. Sarah Schwartz, “Which States Have Passed ‘Science of Reading’ Laws? What’s in Them?,” *Education Week*, last modified August 31, 2022, <https://tinyurl.com/bdznxark>.
8. The Reading League, “The Science of Reading: A Defining Guide,” February 21, 2021, <https://tinyurl.com/4unat657>. See page 3.
9. Nicholas Lemann, “The Reading Wars,” *The Atlantic*, November 1997, <https://tinyurl.com/2p84np93>.
10. The National Reading Panel, “Teaching Children To Read,” February 27, 2000, <https://tinyurl.com/2e2wr8us>.
11. Emily Hanford, “Hard Words: Why Aren’t Kids Being Taught to Read?,” *APM Reports*, September 10, 2018, <https://tinyurl.com/2tpyje42>.
12. “The Baseball Experiment,” *Core Knowledge Foundation*, November 15, 2017, <https://tinyurl.com/39n3ypat>.
13. Hanford, “Hard Words: Why Aren’t Kids Being Taught to Read?,” <https://tinyurl.com/2tpyje42>.
14. Belinda Luscombe, “Inside the Massive Effort to Change the Way Kids Are Taught to Read,” *Time Magazine*, August 11, 2022, <https://tinyurl.com/4zu2vkj9>.