

Psychology Today Sept. 20, 2023

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/raising-readers-writers-and-spellers/202309/elite-universities-call-for-change-in-reading>



J. Richard Gentry Ph.D.  
Raising Readers, Writers, and Spellers

EDUCATION

# Elite Universities Call for Change in Reading Education

Two world-class universities abandon four decades of flawed reading instruction.

Psychology Today, Updated September 20, 2023 | Reviewed by Monica Vilhauer

## KEY POINTS

- Both Teachers College, Columbia and La Trobe University are making historic changes in reading instruction.
- The changes correct teacher training that was disassociated from cognitive psychology and neuroscience.
- All readers, not only struggling readers, need strong reading instruction.

In a seismic shift based on cognitive science, two of the world's most influential teacher training institutions declare, “We are not teaching balanced literacy.”

In recent months, Teachers College, Columbia University, the first, largest, and most comprehensive graduate school of education, health, and psychology in the United States, is breaking the shackles of four decades of what the new administration views as past adherence to flawed reading philosophy and ideology divorced from current cognitive science. The exact same phenomenon is happening in Australia, where a new administration at La Trobe University is leading Australia in a call for systemic change in how reading is taught across the nation, both in schools and at teacher training universities. The thrust in both cases is a move away from decades of the balanced literacy/whole language model, which has dominated reading education in the U.S. and Australia. Similar ground swells are happening in Canada, Great Britain, and elsewhere.

In both the U.S. and Australia, the impetus for these sweeping changes comes not only from boots-on-the-ground teachers but also parents who say they are “fed up” with schools where their children do not learn to read. Some reading teachers lament that they were not prepared by higher education or in some cases were given incorrect methodologies. Universities are hearing their voices. Beyond that, there is intense political pressure for bringing on governmental regulations in light of decades of stagnant and failing reading scores. To wit, current science supports **reading proficiency based on explicit systematic phonics and spelling instruction at 90 to 95% proficiency by the end of first grade**. Yet both nations face decades of failure rates in many schools, with national scores as low as 40% proficiency. (Only 40% proficient readers) And in some schools with disadvantaged populations, students struggle with morally unacceptable rates of only 10% proficiency. (Only 10% proficient) Scores of studies show this failure trend extending up through elementary, middle school, high school, and even college.

In both the American and Australian teaching institutions, **leading reading professors who follow** the now-debunked balanced reading/whole language methodology, which still dominates reading education in some schools, **are being rebuked** for not aligning teacher training with current research in cognitive psychology.

In an interview, **Dana Goldstein**, national correspondent for *The New York Times*, reports how **Professor Lucy Calkins**, a founder of the balanced literacy movement, may not have taken into account cognitive science research for decades. Calkins stated: “The last two or three years, what I’ve learned from the science of reading work has been transformational.”

(Goldstein, 2022) The new administration at Teachers College apparently found ignoring the science for decades **unforgivable**, and over the summer of 2023 moved to **dissolve** Professor Calkins' standard bearer for Balanced Literacy, namely **Teachers College Reading and Writing Project**, which over the decades influenced millions of children worldwide. According to a statement put out by the **new Provost of the College, KerryAnn O'Meara**, "TC [Teachers College] will ensure that its professional development programs are informed by the latest research and evidence and that the College continually finds new ways to translate faculty scholarship into timely assessments, interventions, and **research-based practices**" (Goldstein, 2023). Many practitioners and curriculum publishers are wondering if the balanced reading movement and whole language are or **soon will be dead**. It begs the question, **what are the major flaws in the movement and what should change?**

In recent articles and podcasts, Dr. Pamela Snow, Ph.D., professor of cognitive psychology at La Trobe University in Australia and co-founder with Professor Tanya Serry of La Trobe's Science of Language and Reading Lab in the School of Education, used plain language to issue what feels like a **manifesto outlining the major tenants** of balanced literacy/whole language that have been followed by practitioners for decades **with no scientific backing whatsoever**. **Professor Snow refers to the flawed practices as "memes"—ideas that have spread misinformation through our current education culture—but in this case with no basis of fact in science**. Many of the tenants will be familiar to parents and teachers who may have been led to believe these false statements.

## **Debunking Balance Literacy Arguments: 4 Myths**

(Loftus & Sappington, 2023; Snow, 2023)

Myth 1: **Give children time**, they'll catch on or catch up.

While there are acceptable biological developmental expectations for early child development in areas such as learning to walk or learning to speak, **children are not biologically predisposed to learn to read**; unlike biological expectations, **reading must be taught**. **The optimal window of opportunity** for most normally developing children who are learning to read in English is a **two-year span from non-reading in preschool to proficiency with breaking the English code by the end of first grade or year two**. (90% proficient readers) Children who have not learned the foundational skills for

English reading and spelling by the end of this two-year span need intervention. Both history and research show they are **not likely to catch up**.

Myth 2: Children learn to read in **different ways**.

The long-held view that some children are visual learners, and others are auditory learners is **debunked by neuroscience and cognitive psychology**. We know from neuroscience and developmental psychology that **reading is a visual system for accessing one's already existing spoken language to create meaning** (Ehri, 2014; Gentry & Ouellette, 2019). This is true across languages. **One reads by seeing the code on the page (a visual process) and utilizing reading circuitry acquired after birth to connect the visual images on the page—the alphabetic code—to words in their spoken language**. No one is born with already existing reading circuitry.

Myth 3: Systematic phonics and spelling should be **used for remedial instruction**.

Not only struggling readers but all children need strong reading instruction. To move from non-reading to proficient reading in English, **beginners should be taught phonics for decoding and spelling for encoding words** (Herron & Gillis, 2020). Common whole language practices, such as shortchanging phonics, guessing from context, looking at pictures, looking at the word's shape, or focusing only on the first letter **distract the child's attention away from mapping the letters or syllable chunks to sounds in words**. In the words of one of the world's preeminent reading neuroscientists **Dr. Stanislas Dehaene (quoted in Gentry, 2023)**, **"whole language or even balanced literacy confuse the attention of the child" by diverting attention away from sound-to-letter encoding for spelling and letter-to-sound mapping for decoding**. That being the case, **it's confusing** for children to receive whole language instruction in general education with balanced reading programs, only to be pulled out for systematic phonics instruction for remediation.

Myth 4: Explicit teaching of phonics and spelling **kills the love of reading**.

The **reading teacher who has witnessed firsthand a beginning or struggling reader's sense of accomplishment in learning to read** knows that this statement is false. **Most beginning readers have to work pretty**

**hard at cracking the English code, and for most of them it takes time.** In fact, explicit and systematic teaching *enables* the child to learn to read. **Not learning to read in the first two years of school is the problem that kills the love** of reading. Struggles with reading often destroy the child's self-esteem and may **make him or her feel stupid and inadequate. It can be a life-long problem.** Inability to read closes the door to academic progress, career and other options. An emotionally riveting, fall 2023 release of a documentary entitled *The Truth About Reading* by Emmy award-winning documentarist Nick Nanton dramatically documents how painful **inability** to read can be, even for adults who are extraordinarily successful, but for **most of their lives hide the fact that they cannot read.** This must-see documentary is emotionally gripping and tells the story of entrepreneurs and others who did not learn to read due to whole language reading instruction but learned to read in adulthood with explicit phonics instruction; it highlights societal impacts such as the fact that two-thirds of students who cannot read proficiently by the end of the fourth grade will end up in jail or on welfare (Nanton, 2023).

## **No One Feels Good About Not Learning to Read**

Expecting beginning readers to always feel good and love every reading lesson in the first two years of schooling is neither practical nor a primary goal of beginning reading teachers. On the contrary, Professor Snow questions the often-cited goal of balanced reading enthusiasts and their feel-good notion that balanced reading practices “teach children to love reading.” Providing clarification, Professor Snow explains that the reading teacher's goal is not to teach children to *love* reading but to teach them *how to read*. She calls into question the unproven balanced literacy notion that explicit phonics instruction is drudgery. In practice, successful teachers in all subjects take boring drills and drudgery out of the teaching equation.

The core of recent calls for change in reading education at university levels is for reading instruction to be based on the latest research and evidence—**not on feel-good unproven ideologies.** Having reading scholars at elite universities and other teacher-training universities speak out and take action attributes credibility and bodes well for the future of reading education in English.

Ehri, L. C. (2014). Orthographic mapping in the acquisition of sight word reading, spelling memory, and vocabulary learning. *Scientific Studies of Reading*, 18:5–21. DOI: 10.1080/10888438.2013.819356

Gentry, J. R. (2023) Making the Most of Neuroscience for Teaching Reading. Raising Readers, Writers, and Spellers. *Psychology Today* blogs. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/raising-readers-writers-and-spellers/202306/making-the-most-of-neuroscience-for-teaching>

Gentry, J. R. & Ouellette, G. P. (2019) *Brain words: How the science of reading informs teaching*. Portsmouth, NH: Stenhouse Publishers.

Gentry, J. R. & Ouellette, G. P. (2019) *Brain words: How the science of reading informs teaching*. Portsmouth, NH: Stenhouse Publishers.

Goldstein, D. (May 22, 2022). In the Fight Over How to Teach Reading, This Guru Makes a Major Retreat. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/22/us/reading-teaching-curriculum-phonics.html>

Goldstein, D. (Sept. 8, 2023). Amid Reading Wars, Teachers College Will Close a Star Professor's Shop. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/09/08/us/lucy-calkins-teachers-college.html>

Herron, J. & Gillis, M. (2020). Encoding as a route to phone awareness and phonics. *Perspectives on Language and Literacy*. International Dyslexia Association.

Loftus, M. & Sappington, L. (Hosts). (2023, April 7). Debunking Balanced Literacy Arguments with Pamela Snow (Episode 145) Melissa & Lori Love Literacy. Literacy Podcast at Greatminds.org. <https://mail.google.com/mail/u/0/?tab=rm&ogbl#search/Pamela+Snow/FMfcgzGsltPDtLbdNBBCvIqNCKgRmDnH>

Nanon, N. (Fall, 2023). *The Truth About Reading: The Invisible Crisis Hiding in Plain Sight*. Winter Park, FL: Nanton Celebrity Branding Agency. <https://thetruthaboutreading.com/>

Snow, P. (2023, September 1). Balanced Literacy and New Zealand's Opportunity to Rewrite Reading Instruction History. *The Snow Report*. <http://pamelasnow.blogspot.com/2023/09/balanced-literacy-and-new-zealands.html>

**J. Richard Gentry, Ph.D.**, is an expert on childhood literacy, reading, and spelling. He is the author of *Raising Confident Readers: How to Teach Your Child to Read and Write—Baby to Age 7*.

Online:

[JRichardGentry.com](http://JRichardGentry.com)

## **J. Richard Gentry Ph.D.**

### About

J. Richard Gentry, Ph.D., is an internationally acclaimed author, researcher, and educational consultant known for his ground-breaking work in education on topics such as early literacy; best-practices for reading, writing, and spelling; and dyslexia. In addition to authoring 17 books, 2 textbook series,

and numerous journal and magazine articles, he blogs for the prestigious Psychology Today magazine offering commentary on a range of topics including education and policy, reading and the brain, baby/toddler reading, and educational standards. His latest book is [\*BrainWords: How The Science of Reading Informs Teaching\*](#) (Stenhouse Publishers, 2019). Other recent books and textbooks include *Raising Confident Readers: How to Teach Your Child to Read and Write—From Baby to Age 7* (Da Capo Press, 2010), *Strategies for Writing Workshop* (Shell Education, 2016), *Kid Writing in the 21st Century* with Eileen Feldgus and Isabell Cardonick (Hameray Publishing Group, 2017) and *Spelling Connections* (Zaner-Bloser, 2016), a popular evidence-based spelling series for grades K-8. Dr. Gentry received a BA from the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill and a PhD from the University of Virginia. He currently resides in Mobile, Alabama and can be reached at [Richard@jrichardgentry.com](mailto:Richard@jrichardgentry.com). For more information about Dr. Gentry, his work, seminars and publications, visit [www.jrichardgentry.com](http://www.jrichardgentry.com)