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Recent advances in reading instruction

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Editorial

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As the title makes clear, the focus of this special issue is on the progress that has been made in the field of reading intervention in schools, which is a key feature of the work of many, if not most, professional educational and developmental psychologists.

While concerns regarding poor reading progress made by too large a minority of children feature with monotonous regularity in critiques of contemporary schooling, in both the media and in professional educational discourse, we are perhaps in danger of underestimating the progress that has been made by reading scientists. Much of this progress in reading research and theory, however, has yet to filter through to the work of teachers in classrooms. Psychologists working with teachers in schools are ideally placed to transmit this cumulative knowledge about reading instruction and to encourage its adoption by teachers: educational and developmental psychologists are ambassadors for effective, scientific evidence-based practices in reading instruction.

While much of the professional work of psychologists in schools typically concerns young struggling and older low-progress readers, they also have an important role to play as builders of the fences at the top of the cliff, as well as ambulance drivers to those at the bottom. By encouraging schools to adopt and deploy scientific evidence-based instructional practices and procedures in initial reading instruction, they will also thereby help to reduce significantly the numbers of children requiring remedial reading intervention.

In this special issue, psychologists involved in reading research and intervention will provide perspectives on what we now know to constitute effective reading instruction and how to put this knowledge to practical use in schools. All authors are experts in the field of education, and some have worked professionally in schools.

The main theme to have emerged in this issue is the question of how best to instruct beginning readers on the intricacies of words in the English written language, wherein letter-phoneme relationships are not always consistent or straightforward. This topic is most directly addressed by Danielle Colenbrander and colleagues (Colenbrander et al., 2020). In their article – the first of this special issue – the authors provide a succinct description of the research evidence aligning with various instructional approaches to teaching irregular word reading.

In the second article, Jennifer Buckingham takes a broader view of literacy instruction to describe the research in favour of a systematic phonics approach to word-level reading instruction (Buckingham, 2020). This paper effectively serves as a rejoinder to another recently published article, in which the author argues against the research evidence that has accumulated over the decades in support of systematic phonics (Bowers, 2020).

The third article, by Rhona Stainthorp, widens the lens on literacy instruction even further, to describe how research evidence is implemented in the context of national educational programming (Stainthorp, 2020). Here, Stainthorp uses England as a case study to exemplify the widespread implementation of policies that emphasise and support instruction in systematic synthetic phonics.

The subsequent article by Jonathan Solity contrasts interestingly with those by Stainthorp and Buckingham. Solity frames the national literacy education environment in England as heavy-handed in its implementation of mandatory systematic synthetic phonics instruction, and he uses this as the context for proposing an alternative method of teaching reading (Solity, 2020).

In their articles, Kerry Hempenstall and Linda Siegel take a broader pedagogical perspective on the special issue topic. Hempenstall describes the components of – and research rationale for – a Direct Instruction model of teaching, as implemented in a literacy context (Hempenstall, 2020). Siegel describes her experiences (as previously detailed in a long series of research publications) of implementing a Response to Intervention program of literacy in several Canadian schools (Siegel, 2020). Both authors have vast knowledge stores, acquired over many years working in reading research.

The final article in this special issue, by Wheldall et al. (2020), relates specifically to the challenging prospect of conducting a research trial in school settings. In this paper, we and our co-authors outline some of the logistical difficulties faced by scientists in the field, thereby providing some real-life context for the research that is consumed by educational and developmental psychologists.

Together, the papers included in this special issue provide a multi-faceted view of what recent advances have been made in reading education. Each author (and author team) brings a unique

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and valuable perspective based on their own experiences with literacy instruction. Although we – as researchers working in this field – still have a lot to learn about reading development, intervention and assessment, we have also accumulated a lot of shared knowledge, and that fact warrants celebration.

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