

The science of reading isn't enough

For Utah's students, we need a shift in pedagogy



BY **KACEE WEAVER**

As the Instructional Coach for the district's Title 1, non-Montessori STEM magnet school, tasked with assessing emergent readers with the PAST (Phonological Awareness Screening Test), I sat across from a red-headed 8-year old and asked him to change the /p/ in the word "slop" to the soft /th/.

He struggled sounding out the word and then asked,

"What is sloth?"

I assessed 5th and 6th grade students, the majority of whom could not decode and had no background knowledge of the words "Asia" and "Europe" during the state-mandated reading test. In fact, it is not uncommon for Kindergarten to move into 1st grade unable to blend CVC words fluently despite spending at least 120 minutes a day in structured ELA lessons and activities.

These and other experiences are in stark contrast to my experiences as a trained Montessori guide and former public Montessori teacher and administrator, where our students regularly met or exceeded Uniform Growth Goals in reading.

In a Montessori classroom, investigating and discussing topics (based on authentic interests) organically strengthens background knowledge, vocabulary, and verbal reasoning. Multiple representations of content (books, nomenclature cards, technology, and other teacher-made materials) support deep dives into learning with multiple entry points into the discovery and

integration of new knowledge. Repetition, songs, concrete and pictorial materials bring language to life and provide a solid foundation for the responsibility and excitement of being a fluent reader and writer.

In contrast, in many of the traditional district's classrooms, word recognition and language comprehension skills are taught in isolation and aren't routinely integrated into other content areas. Social Studies and Science subjects are regularly pushed aside for more ELA time and it's not uncommon for children who don't complete their weekly minutes on the "individualized" computer (Science of Reading) programs to be kept in for recess or to miss art, PE, or library time. Children whose growth doesn't follow the pacing guide are provided interventions from yet another scripted curriculum, often implemented by a minimally trained paraprofessional.

Leadership tells us that in Kindergarten through 3rd grade the focus should be on *Learning to Read* so that in the 4th grade, children will be *Reading to Learn*.

Our early childhood schedules are broken into 15-30 minute chunks: writing, comprehension, phonemic awareness, phonics, science, etc. Activities are "siloed" into separate skills, each to be transferred to children at a prescribed time. We're told to "teach to the middle," yet keeping an entire class together leaves at least two-thirds of every classroom without appropriate individualized scaffolding. Children who are slower to demonstrate their learning are consistently left behind, while those that excel are asked to go slower and stay with the group.

My district has purchased six research based ELA curricula, costing millions of dollars each, and yet the

number of 3rd graders reading at or above benchmark has increased by only 1% in the last 7 years. Unfortunately this is not an anomaly. According to the U.S. Department of Education, 54% of U.S. adults 16-74 years old—about 130 million people—lack proficiency in literacy, reading below the equivalent of a sixth-grade level.

In response to this crisis, Utah earmarked 20 million dollars to train all K-3 teachers in the Science of Reading (SOR). Instituting LETRS (Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling) training is predicted to increase the state's 3rd grade reading proficiency from 50% in 2021 to 70% in 2023.

LETRS, a 168 hour professional learning course, accredited by the International Dyslexia Association "follows the structured literacy approach and provides educators with the Science of Reading pedagogy, depth of knowledge, and tools to teach language and literacy skills to every student" (LETRS, 2020). Completing this course was a complement and refresher of my Montessori lower elementary training and I learned new skills and strategies to support the acquisition of language. But while this was absolutely necessary information for all educators, it isn't enough to reverse the nation's literacy crisis.

First, we're missing major opportunities for strong literacy foundations by waiting until a child is five to enter formal schooling. Montessori primary classrooms are filled with literacy rich experiences that build a strong foundation for reading and writing. Explicit, sequential, and systematic lessons are embedded in each material presented, practiced, and mastered by the child in

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a Montessori classroom.

Salt Lake School District, partnering with the Urban Institute for Teacher Education at the University of Utah, opened a Montessori early childhood program in their Rose Park Elementary and are experiencing tremendous student growth and teacher satisfaction. Students within the Montessori program attended 40 more days than their non-Montessori peers. In an area with high mobility, the Montessori program has retained the majority of their students for three consecutive years within their Early Childhood program. The Montessori students' scores on the Kindergarten Entrance and Exit Profile (KEEP) and Acadience far exceed those of their non-Montessori peers in the same school. Nicole O'Brien, principal of Rose Park elementary stated, "the three and four year olds are outperforming their 1st grade peers in writing and math!"

Additionally, Researchers in Hartford, Connecticut found that lower-income children in Montessori schools had much higher math and literacy scores than the lower-income kids in other schools. Research from the University of Virginia found that a Montessori preschool experience erases the income achievement gap between low income students and their higher income peers.

Montessori schools across the nation continue to prove that when provided with a prepared environment and developmentally appropriate materials children of all backgrounds and abilities can and will become skilled readers and writers. We need a consistent investment in education and parent resources for children from birth to five to truly transform our communities into engaged and literate citizens.

Secondly, traditional classroom practices must be dramatically transformed in order for the Science of Learning to unfold. What our students need are educators trained in developmentally appropriate progressions/practices and the flexibility of repeated opportunities for building independence of new skills through concrete materials, authentic discussion and application. They need the ability to learn with and from each other rather than simply alongside one another. They need a chance to feel successful in other areas if reading and writing aren't their strengths yet.

Educators are begging for more resources and support. Facebook's *Science of Reading — What I Should Have Learned in College* has 161k followers and *Teachers Pay Teachers* has 360,000+ resources listed for the Science of Reading. Essentially, educators are having to recreate the Montessori emergent and beginning reading materials for their own classrooms.

While many educators prioritize individual learning over curriculum pacing, the majority of teachers I have worked with in the last several years beg for more support implementing individual lessons and small groups. They struggle to identify the specific area of need, how to meet the need, and what to do with the rest of the class once they've identified a target. Shifting from a "whole group" teaching mindset to "everyone gets what they need" is a necessary transformation and one that must be a priority in traditional teacher programs and supported by district and school leadership.

Promising legislation, Utah's HB181, calls for a shift toward Personalized Competency Based Learning but we've

yet to see any significant professional development or changes in school practices in order to alter the direction we're headed.

While the SOR initiative has realigned Utah educators towards a common goal and provided a foundation for developmentally appropriate practices, without a significant investment in parent education, quality primary programs, professional development and intentional district support for altering the traditional mindset, we're not going to see the incredible outcomes we continue to witness in Public Montessori programs.

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