

Teaching with the science of reading

What teachers can actually do in the classroom

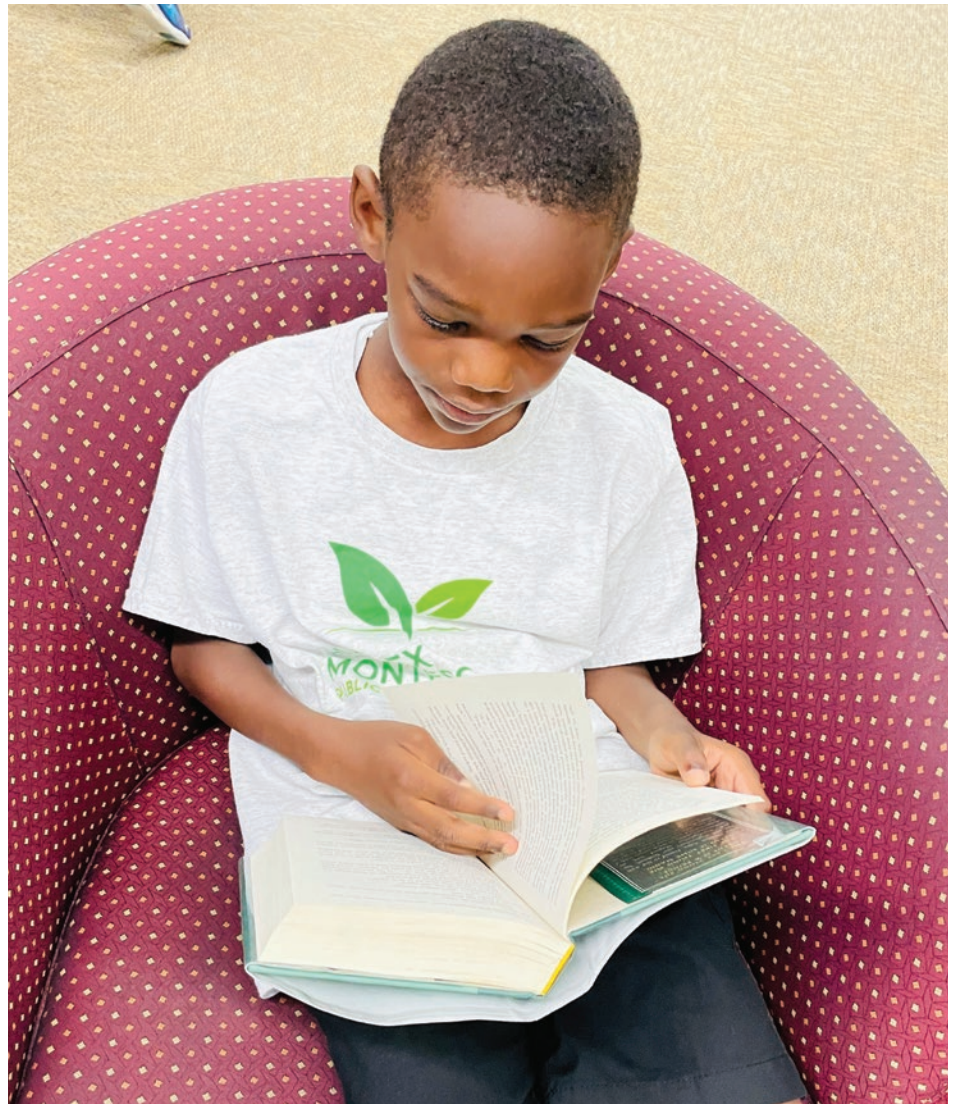


BY **LINDA S. ZANKOWSKY**

Twenty-nine states and the District of Columbia have passed laws or policies mandating that public schools ensure they are implementing the Science of Reading. One course of action is to require schools to choose from “core programs”. A core reading program is a systematic approach that serves as a basis for teaching reading in all classrooms in a school; it may or may not be a commercial textbook series. The premise is that by implementing approved core programs with fidelity, schools will help more children become successful readers. But studies of the impact of core reading programs highlight flaws in this assumption. One study of comprehension instruction in the five most widely implemented core programs at the time found that:

The structure of the curricula is often incoherent so that students and teachers do not know how skills and strategies relate to one another or how acquiring these sets of skills leads to becoming a better reader... Core programs do not provide enough practice to ensure that any given skill will be learned... Finally, the core programs do not provide sufficient support or scaffolding so that students can learn to use these skills on their own (Dewitz et al., 2009).

Montessori teachers and school leaders are facing legislation and regulations which require them to adopt



Reading to learn

curriculum-centered rather than child-centered programs without clear evidence that this will improve children’s reading performance. Core programs are typically structured by grade levels and come with expectations of how much time a teacher will spend on reading instruction. This impacts the culture of the multi-age classroom, the freedom of the 3-hour work period, and the potential for integrating reading and writing in the cultural curriculum.

Every Montessori teacher and

school leader feels a heavy responsibility for teaching children to read. Yet in my work with schools and teachers, it is evident that they feel woefully underprepared for this task. It is beyond the scope of this article but the Montessori teacher preparation community would do well to better support reading instruction.

For schools, we must maintaining the integrity of a child-centered Montessori classroom while we ensure that

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children have every opportunity to become successful readers. Montessorians can do this by focusing on what we know about effective teachers of reading while being open to the research that may challenge us to think beyond our Montessori bubble. The large body of research on effective teachers of reading tells us that these teachers:

1. understand the **development** of reading
2. use classroom-based **assessment tools**
3. **use what they learn** to inform their instruction
4. have a deep understanding of the **pedagogy of reading**
5. create classrooms where **literacy is embedded** in all aspects of the curriculum

Development

Effective teachers of reading have a clear understanding of the well-documented continuum of reading development both for the on-track and off-track reader, and understand that children can go off-track at various points on the continuum from age 3 to 12. These teachers continually observe children to “mind the gap” between what the child can do and what the child should do next. They know when a child is off-track and proactively target specific instructional strategies and intervention to bring the child back on-track.

Assessment

Effective reading teachers are not afraid of the word assessment. They enter the classroom every day wondering what they might need to learn about each child’s use of reading strategies seeking opportunities for one-on-one interactions to confirm what they have observed.

Today’s effective teachers of reading rely on a variety of assessment tools, including informal tests, interviews, observations, work samples,

portfolios, and students’ judgements of their own performance. Such assessment procedures when combined with teacher reflection provide teachers with a much more complete picture about their students reading and help them to make informed instructional decisions” (Blair, Rupley and Nichols, 2007).

These teachers don’t just administer assessments because they are required to; they use classroom-based assessments to reflect on what a child is using and confusing leading to informed instructional decisions.

Pedagogy of reading

Skilled teachers of reading read research! They, or better yet their schools, subscribe to journals like such as *Reading Teacher*, *The Reading Research Quarterly*, or *Reading League Journal*. Just as Montessori teachers learn about various child development philosophies, exceptional reading teachers understand how arguments about reading instruction have developed over time. They appreciate that the “Simple View of Reading”, first presented by Gough and Tunmer in 1986 and further developed by Scarborough’s Reading Rope, expands our understanding of how children learn to read words. This view of reading emphasizes the role that strong decoding skills and knowledge of language (vocabulary, structure, background knowledge, literacy knowledge, and verbal reasoning) plays in learning to read.

This view can be interpreted to mean that we don’t need to emphasize strategies to support children’s comprehension. However, effective teachers of reading know that there is a well-documented body of research demonstrating that strategy instruction in the context of reading increases children’s vocabulary and their comprehension of more sophisticated text.

Schools where children learn to think critically and develop the higher

order thinking skills of proficient readers have a “coherent curriculum across grades that gives priority to higher order thinking, whether text comprehension, argumentation, or reasoning and proof” (Au & Raphael, 2021).

Note, Au and Raphael are not saying that these schools have a “core program”—they have a “core curriculum”. You may be thinking we have that—the Montessori curriculum teachers learn in training! In fact, as one explores the teaching of reading one realizes that the Montessori curriculum is rich and coherent across some of the five essential strands identified by the National Reading Panel (phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, comprehension) and is quite frankly inconsistent in others; particularly supporting the child’s development of reading comprehension. When I ask Montessori teachers which of the five strands the Montessori curriculum addresses, they almost always say phonics and vocabulary. Likewise, they identify phonemic awareness and comprehension as issues of concern, while fluency falls somewhere in between.

Montessori needs a model that encompasses a broader view of reading than the simple view if we are to reach the fullest potential for teaching reading in our classrooms. Duke and Cartwright (2021) present an interesting alternative to the Simple View of Reading called the Active View of Reading which has possibilities for Montessori Schools as a framework for a coherent curriculum of reading.

Embedded literacy

We know that reading instruction is best situated in the context of a rich socio-cultural classroom environment. Reading is embedded and celebrated across all aspects of the classroom within a context that makes reading meaningful and important. Because

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they have a strong pedagogical understanding of reading, effective teachers of reading can teach reading throughout the day. Children group and regroup for guided reading, literature circles, book clubs, and study groups. They research areas of interest, learn to question, seek answers, and to synthesize their learning to make a point or support an argument to others.

Montessori teachers know how to create this environment where children can flourish. What they need is a deeper understanding of what good readers do, what strategies work best to help all children be good readers and a school culture that is open to working both within and across program levels to create continuity and consistency.

Reading in Montessori

Teaching children to read in a child-centered Montessori classroom is complex and challenging. I believe that we know what we need to do to ensure

all Montessori children become proficient readers. I also know that the Montessori community can let the question of “is that Montessori?” and a persistent desire to prove that “Montessori has it all” get in the way of opening our hearts and minds to what is known about teaching reading.

I hope that Montessori school leaders who must choose a core program can use the framework provided in this article to help your teachers adapt that core program to work in the Montessori classroom rather than adapting the classroom to the program. Some states allow us to put forth curriculum that addresses the science of reading as an alternative to a core program. Hopefully, this discussion will start you on the path to implement what we know about the teaching of reading into your Montessori classrooms providing you with the arguments you need to present your program to the policy leaders in your state. Montessori teachers have

a unique opportunity to put into practice what we know are the best practices in teaching reading while maintaining the child-centered and socio-cultural nature of our classrooms serving as a model for what should and can happen for all children.

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