The rhetoric and reality of evidence-based practice and teaching reading: How to bridge the curriculum gap

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Dr Solity gained his PhD for research in instructional psychology. He has worked as a teacher, as an educational psychologist, and as an Associate Professor at the University of Warwick, in the UK. Currently, he is an Honorary Research Fellow at University College London and, since 2006, has been the Director of Optima (formerly KRM), a psychological and educational research-based consultancy. While at Warwick, Jonathan received over a £1m in funding to research how best to raise attainments and prevent difficulties in reading, writing and mathematics in students aged 5–13. He has spoken widely at national and international conferences and published the outcomes of his research, and its theoretical origins in instructional psychology, in seven books and over 40 papers in refereed journals and chapters in edited books.

Background

This paper reflects the tensions, myths and conventional wisdoms that exist in teaching reading. If they remain unresolved and unchallenged it is likely that irrespective of any changes to school organisation, funding, curricula or teaching methodology, the educational outcomes for the lowest achieving 20 per cent will remain the same. Few countries can have spent more than England on teaching reading since the introduction of the National Literacy Strategy (NLS) (DfEE, 1998). Nevertheless, according to all the three Progress in Reading Literacy Studies (PIRLS 2001 – published 2003; 2006 – published 2007; 2011 – published 2012), England continues to have a high proportion of students who fail to learn to read and who indicate that they do not enjoy reading. Overall vast sums have been spent throughout the English-speaking world over the last 20 years, in an attempt to raise standards and meet the needs of the lower-achieving students. However, there is little evidence that anything has changed, or is changing, for these students.
What needs to change?

Adam Philips, a well-known psychotherapist in England, once commented that ‘change is the infidelity that we fear most.’ Never has this been more evident than in the way the world of education has responded to the challenges of teaching reading, raising standards and preventing the occurrence of learning difficulties. It can be argued that the ‘success’ of an education system is best judged by how it teaches and raises the attainments of the most vulnerable, lowest-achieving students, rather than the gains made by their peers. Recent years have seen substantial research activity into teaching reading and considerable sums have been spent on introducing curriculum change. Although it can be argued that this has led to a better understanding of what helps students to experience success in reading, there still appear to be insurmountable obstacles in shifting the perception that approximately 20–25 per cent of students will experience literacy difficulties. In part this is because educational policy is predicated on the belief that significant numbers of students will inevitably experience difficulties in learning to read.

This paper is informed by instructional psychology, an approach to teaching and learning where the focus is on exploring factors in the learning environment that facilitate students’ progress in reading. It offers an alternative starting point to the more traditional areas of developmental and cognitive psychology that have typically informed classroom practice. It will be argued that the needs of the most vulnerable, lower-achieving students will only be met when the rhetoric that typically drives classroom practice and perceptions of the teaching and learning process is challenged and overcome. Table 1 identifies the educational rhetoric that drives current practice and the changes that need to take place so that everyone learns to read. Each of these sections will now be explored in more detail.
Table 1. The rhetoric underpinning the teaching of reading, and what needs to change

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<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Rhetoric</th>
<th>What needs to change</th>
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<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Governments need to set the agenda in determining how to teach reading and raise academic standards. This cannot be left to teachers or academics.</td>
<td>Experimental research should set the agenda for how best to teach and bridge the attainment gap between advantaged and less-advantaged students.</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>The goal for all those involved in education is to enable every child to experience success in learning to read, so that all students become accurate and fluent readers who enjoy reading and appreciate its benefits.</td>
<td>Accept that all children can learn to read through focusing on developing teachers’ knowledge of theory, research and practice, rather than addressing students’ cognitive functioning, potential and difficulties.</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>Systematic phonics instruction should be at the heart of the way that reading is taught.</td>
<td>Language and vocabulary knowledge should be at the heart of teaching reading. This will help students to understand what they read and decode phonically regular words.</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>Students need to be taught the 44 phonemes in English and all the graphemes that they represent.</td>
<td>Students should be taught a small number of generalisable skills and only one phoneme for any grapheme.</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>Written English is highly irregular and so needs to be simplified through giving students phonically regular texts. Furthermore it is assumed that books can be ‘levelled,’ or graded so that they can be sequenced in order of difficulty to facilitate a smooth transition from one book to the next and make learning to read easier.</td>
<td>Children should be taught to read real books rather than reading schemes. Real books are often more phonically regular than reading schemes and the phonically irregular words that appear are small in number and occur frequently.</td>
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<td>6</td>
<td>There is more to reading than phonics. We want children to enjoy reading and to read for pleasure. In England all schools are now required to develop a policy on how they are going to encourage students to read for pleasure.</td>
<td>Reading schemes are a barrier to reading for pleasure. Rather than schools writing a policy on how they will teach students to enjoy reading, learning to read should be enjoyable and fun, which will only happen through students reading real books.</td>
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<td>7</td>
<td>Students with reading difficulties need specialist one-to-one teaching to address and overcome their problems.</td>
<td>Students should be taught through differentiated, whole-class teaching.</td>
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<td>8</td>
<td>Labels identify the nature of students’ difficulties and appropriate provision to meet their needs.</td>
<td>Labels are discriminatory and reflect self-fulfilling prophecies. Effective teaching is non-labelling.</td>
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<td>9</td>
<td>Response to Intervention (RtI) is the approach used to establish whether or not students have a difficulty in learning.</td>
<td>RtI needs to be based on the premise that all student can and will learn to read. Instead of talking about students with learning difficulties we should be talking about students who challenge teachers’ professional skills.</td>
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<td>10</td>
<td>Classroom practice should be evidence-based. However, the $64,000 question is what evidence best informs classroom practice, raises the attainments of all children and prevents reading difficulties?</td>
<td>Classroom practice should, as far as possible, be based on the best possible evidence derived from Reading Comprehension Tests (RCTs).</td>
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