

## Teachers College Reading and Writing Project Foundations in Research

### Overview

Teachers College Reading and Writing Project is a think tank that has long built its ideas and practices off of established and new research. Below is a summary of some of TCRWP's key beliefs and practices as well as some of the research that informs those beliefs and practices.

### Explicit Instruction

Explicit instruction is a cornerstone of TCRWP's instructional model. Throughout the workshop model, whether in whole class lessons, small group work or one-on-one conferring, teachers explicitly state what they are going to teach, demonstrate, and offer guided practice to name just a few of the hallmarks of explicit instruction. In *Explicit Instruction*, Anita Archer and Charles Hughes (2010) consolidate the work of several scholars into 16 elements of explicit instruction. These include such things as sequencing skills logically, providing step by step demonstrations and delivering the lessons at a brisk pace. Explicit instruction is particularly critical for students with learning and attentional disabilities as well as multilingual students, however, research also points to its value for a large majority of students. TCRWP curriculum and staff development has long centered explicit instruction in whole class, small group and individualized instruction.

*Research specifically about explicit instruction:*

- Piasta, McDonald Connor, Fishman & Morrison (2009) "Teachers' Knowledge of Literacy Concepts, Classroom Practices, and Student Reading Growth" studied the relationship between teacher knowledge and explicit instruction to find that students who received explicit instruction from knowledgeable teachers made significantly stronger word-reading gains than students who received explicit instruction from less knowledgeable teachers.
- McCutchen, Abbott, Green, Beretvas, Cox, Potter, Quiroga, Gray (2002) "Beginning Literacy: Links Among Teacher Knowledge, Teacher Practice, and Student Learning" studied teacher knowledge of phonics and orthographic information as well as explicit instruction and its effects on classroom practice and student learning, showing that the teacher knowledge of these things and practice of them has a strong effect on students.

*Research about explicit instruction in particular topics and skills:*

- Graham & Perin (2007) "A Meta-Analysis of Writing Instruction for Adolescent Students" discusses small but significant positive effects for writing process instruction, especially when taught explicitly in grades 4-12.
- Duke & Pearson (2002) "Effective Practices for Developing Reading Comprehension" discusses how research supports the explicit teaching of specific reading comprehension strategies such as purpose setting, activating prior knowledge, drawing inferences and summarizing and retelling.
- Byrne & Fielding-Barnsley (1989) "Phonemic awareness and letter knowledge in the child's acquisition of the alphabetic principle" discuss how both phonemic

awareness and letter knowledge are foundational understandings in learning to read and should be explicitly taught.

- Mesmer & Griffith (2011) “Everybody’s Selling It – But Just What Is Explicit, Systematic Phonics Instruction?” an important reference piece because it defines key terms and shows how teacher use of explicit, systematic phonics increases student engagement and accountability.

## **Phonological Awareness, Phonics and Orthographic Mapping**

TCRWP believes that phonological awareness and phonics instruction are crucial to children learning to read. This is a longstanding belief and practice and TCRWP has long provided staff development that supports teachers using a range of phonological awareness and phonics curricula for whole class phonological awareness and phonics instruction, including but not limited to Orton Gillingham, Foundations and Month by Month Phonics. In an effort to offer more integrated options for the schools TCRWP serves, TCRWP developed *The Units of Study in Phonics* (2018), for whole class and small group instruction which connects to reading and writing workshop instruction. There is a plethora of research to support this emphasis. Below is a selection of key studies to consider:

- **Shapiro and Solity (2010). “Delivering phonological and phonics training within whole-class teaching”** centers on a study where mixed-ability classes were given either explicit phonological awareness and phonics instruction or ‘standard’ reading instruction. The study showed that in classes that received the phonological awareness and phonics whole class training there was a significant positive effect, even for students with poor phonological awareness, resulting in a reduction of students with reading difficulties.
- **Foorman and Torgesen (2002). “Critical Elements of Classroom and Small-Group Instruction Promote Reading Success in All Children”** shows that when explicit instruction in foundational reading skills such as phonemic awareness, fluency, construction of meaning and vocabulary is done, whether as prevention or as an intervention, there is a ‘dramatic reduction in the incidence of reading failure’. The authors then go on to promote the coordination of research with what is known about small group work and one-on-one work to suggest explicit instruction would be even more powerful if it was applied there as well.
- **Suggate (2016) “A meta-analysis of the long-term effects of phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, and reading comprehension interventions”** studies the long-term impact of interventions and finds that phonemic awareness and comprehension interventions had more long lasting effects than fluency and phonics interventions. This was particularly true of students in the middle grades.
- **James (2017). “The Importance of Handwriting Experience on the Development of the Literate Brain”** discusses the finding that when students print letters by hand it enhances their acquisition of letter knowledge. Handwriting connects visual processing with motor experiences and letter recognition skills. It also finds that the quality of that printed letter writing doesn’t affect a student’s recognition, ‘... in fact, it may be better if the child produces a lot of different versions of the same letter’ (p. 507)

- **Ouellette & Sénéchal (2017) “Invented Spelling in Kindergarten as a Predictor of Reading and Spelling in Grade 1: A New Pathway to Literacy, or Just the Same Road, Less Known?”** studied kindergartners and their knowledge of oral vocabulary, phonemic awareness, letter knowledge, invented spelling and decoding abilities, then once they were in first grade, they were assessed on their decoding and conventional spelling. It was found that using invented spelling helped children to learn to read and spell conventionally.
- **Orton (2000) “Phonemic awareness and inventive writing”** discusses the relationship between phonemic awareness and spelling, and the ways inventive writing can support phonemic awareness and vice versa. In the article Orton quotes Priscilla Griffith’s work (1991) to explain this relationship, ‘Writing is especially beneficial in developing phonemic awareness because it provides opportunity to segment sounds and convert them into written language.’
- **Wolf (2008) *Proust and the Squid: The Story and Science of the Reading Brain*** explores a wide range of scientific research, chronicling how the human brain learns to read, what obstacles it might face, and how learning to read and practicing it affects more than academic achievement.
- **Kilpatrick (2015) *Essentials of Assessing, Preventing, and Overcoming Reading Difficulties*** explains the research behind a wide range of reading difficulties and the most successful, practical assessments and interventions teachers and schools can use. In this book Kilpatrick explicitly states that successful interventions must address any phonological or phonics deficits as well as teach students how to apply phonics to print and have opportunities to transfer these skills to authentic texts.

## Fluency

Fluency is critical for readers. A fluent reader reads with accuracy, a conversational pace and prosody, or expression. Not only are there connections between fluent reading and comprehension but also, when a reader is disfluent, where a reader is hitting obstacles can give valuable insights to teachers. The student might benefit from more phonics or word work, perhaps work around conventions and syntax, or more work with comprehension. With its regular assessments of fluency as well as using instructional methods such as shared reading, and modeled fluency through read aloud, TCRWP believes that fluency should be one of the primary areas of focus for the teaching of reading.

- **Rasinski, Blanchowicz, Lems, editors (2012) *Fluency Instruction: Research-based Best Practice*** is a text that mixes research pieces with practical guidance. The overall finding in this text is that fluency is more than simply reading quickly, and underlines the ways in which fluency is a key component in comprehension and a critical aspect in literacy instruction.
- **Schrauben (2010) “Prosody’s Contribution to Fluency: An Examination of the Theory of Automatic Information Processing”** takes on LaBerge and Samuels’ 1974 theory that what is most important in fluency is accurate decoding and automaticity. While those things are important, Schrauben concludes that prosody, or reading with expressiveness, is also critical.

- **Denton, Barth, Fletcher, Wexler, Vaughn, Cirino, Romain & Francis (2011) “The Relations Among Oral and Silent Reading Fluency and Comprehension in Middle School: Implications for Identification and Instruction of Students With Reading Difficulties”** studied the relationship between silent reading and oral reading and reading comprehension. They found that a student’s fluency scores on a text passage was strongly correlated to their results on a high stakes reading comprehension test, but weak correlation on fluency on word lists. This suggests that there is a relationship between fluency and text comprehension.
- **Mraz, Nichols, Caldwell, Beisley, Sargent & Rupley (2013) “Improving Oral Reading Fluency Through Reader’s Theatre”** provides a literature overview of existing knowledge about fluency, narrowing in on the value of repeated readings. Specifically the authors focus on the use of Readers Theatre and how it improved the fluency levels of one third grade teacher’s students.

## Reading Comprehension

We agree with countless researchers and educators who state that the ultimate goal of reading is to make meaning. We also believe whole heartedly that explicit comprehension instruction should be integral to any reading workshop classroom. Specifically we believe that instruction into comprehension strategies, and student’s independent use of them, is critical for students to become skillful, analytical, independent and lifelong readers. Research on this topic goes back decades and across various pedagogical philosophies.

- **Willingham & Lovette (2014) “Can reading comprehension be taught?”** refers to a range of studies to make the argument that reading comprehension strategies work, and that students tend to learn them fairly quickly, meaning that students do not need a lot practice in order to master them. Teachers should teach them explicitly but not spend a lot of time focused on them, leaving more time to spend on other reading needs, such as vocabulary development, knowledge-building, etc.
- **Duke, et.al (2011) “Essential elements of fostering and teaching reading comprehension”** argues that research supports specific practices for teachers looking to foster reading practices, including but not limited to building ‘disciplinary and world knowledge’, providing ‘motivating texts and contexts for reading’, teaching ‘strategies for comprehending’ and integrating reading and writing. The authors discuss Kintsch’s Construction-Integration model, and the way in which we bring knowledge to comprehension, and that this shapes our comprehension, which then helps us gain new knowledge that is then fed into future comprehension, forming a ‘virtuous’ comprehension and knowledge cycle.
- **Reutzel, Smith, & Fawson (2005) “An evaluation of two approaches for teaching reading comprehension strategies in the primary years using science information texts”** shows that teaching comprehension strategies for informational texts to K-3 students is effective. Additionally, evidence is shared that suggest teaching a group or set of strategies at a time, as opposed to teaching one strategy in isolation until mastery helps to increase acquisition of science content knowledge and showed gains on reading comprehension test scores.

- **Taylor et al. (2000) “Effective schools and accomplished teachers: Lessons about primary-grade reading instruction in low-income schools”** is a study that shows that highly effective teachers serving students experiencing high levels of economic poverty spend a large amount of time providing guided practice to support student application of reading and writing strategies as they were engaged in those tasks. This was true whether the students were working at word solving or at comprehension strategies. Another key point in the success rates of these teachers is that reading was a clear priority in both the school and classrooms studied.

## Identity and Literacy

A reader’s identity plays a vital role in everything from their knowledge-base to language practices to home exploration of phonemic awareness to cultural views of literacy to texts they connect with to purposes for reading to how your teacher interacts with you. TCRWP relies heavily and continues to learn from the robust scholarship on identity. We believe that literacy cannot be taught without acknowledging, including and celebrating the range of racial, cultural, ethnic, religious, gender, family, geographic and economic identities our students represent. A sampling of the scholarship that has been and continues to play a role in our work:

- **Sims Bishop (1990) “Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors”** is a seminal piece of scholarship, discussing the importance for students to see their identities reflected in the texts they read (mirrors), learn about others who are different from you (windows) and opportunities to understand or be a part of the lives of other, if only in our imagination (sliding glass doors). Sims Bishop argues that when children cannot find themselves in the texts that they read “or when the images they see are distorted, negative, or laughable, they learn a powerful lesson about how they are devalued.” She also makes the point that children from dominant cultures and social groups, who are used to seeing books as mirrors, benefit from books that are windows and have suffered from not having them because these books can help them better understand the diverse world we live in.
- **Milner (2020) “Disrupting Racism and Whiteness in Researching Science of Reading”** cautions readers to critically consider any studies on reading and to do this by examining what is considered reading success, who decides, and who the subjects are. Milner also points to the ways research can help to legitimize and maintain racial hierarchies, including, but not limited to the role of knowledge-building, specifically how one decides which knowledge is prioritized.
- **Rosenblatt (1994) “The transactional theory of reading and writing”** introduces the transactional model, which is based on both a multidisciplinary perspective including history, philosophy, aesthetics *and* the reader’s response to the text. Rosenblatt emphasizes that the reader is the one who creates the framework for the text, with the framework being informed by the reader’s identity, experiences and knowledge.
- **Cooperative Children’s Book Center (2020) “The Numbers Are In: 2019 CCBC Diversity Statistics”** is the most recent release the CCBC has gathered on the identity of authors or the identity representation of primary characters in children’s books published that year. While these numbers are becoming more reflective of the diverse populations

of students teachers teach, they are still far from what they should be. Knowing this information helps educators to discover and advocate for more representation in children's literature, as well as to better teach critical consciousness.

## **Knowledge-building**

Knowledge is a both a building block and a goal to reading. TCRWP strongly advocates for regular instruction in discipline-based content as well as explicitly teaching students how to rely on their own funds of knowledge to gain more knowledge and to use their reading skills to learn about novel topics and skills. Whether it is recommending that every year's curricular plans include nonfiction units, interdisciplinary units or regularly showing students how to transfer their hard won information to literacy and vice versa, knowledge is a cornerstone of reading development. However, as important as knowledge, facts, context and vocabulary are, we also acknowledge that who determines which knowledge can and often is fraught with power dynamics connected to such things as racial, cultural and economic identities. We are mindful of Milner's scholarship and keep at the forefront 'what knowledge' and 'who decides' and are staunch advocates for deep research into anti-racist and inclusive practices of knowledge-building.

- **Cervetti & Hiebert (2015) "The Sixth Pillar of Reading Instruction"** the authors add to the National Reading Panel's five pillars of essential reading instruction: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension. Cervetti and Hiebert describe the crucial role knowledge plays as part of literacy learning and development and suggest that one of the most effective ways for teachers to aid students in gaining more knowledge is through reading. Not dissimilar to Kintsch's Construction-Integration model referenced in an earlier study.
- **Kaefer (2020) "When Did You Learn It? How Background Knowledge Impacts Attention and Comprehension in Read-Aloud Activities"** builds off the common understanding that knowledge affects reading comprehension and studies common practices to find out if introducing new information would be as effective as activating prior knowledge when looking for comprehension gains. The study showed that students who already had knowledge on the topic and were able to comprehend on a deeper level than those who had prior knowledge activated. Left unanswered was the most effective ways to build background knowledge.
- **Kirkland (2011) "Books Like Clothes: Engaging Young Black Men With Reading"** discusses relationships between young Black men and books, concluding that what Black young men read and do not read is decided by many different factors about the texts themselves and the contexts they are presented within. When the texts and contexts of the books match the students, they read and enjoy doing so. While this study was focused on high school aged students, it's conclusions about identity, instruction and context has powerful ideas to consider for educators in the K-8 level.
- **Price-Dennis, Muhammas, Womack, McArthur, Haddix (2017) "Multiple Identities and Literacies of Black Girlhood: Conversations About Creating Spaces for Black Girl Voice"** discusses the role of literacy experience centered on the Black adolescent

girl. The article focuses on the role of identity development and the ways that educators can prioritize student voice, perspective and offer multiple acts of literacy.

## Writing

The Teachers College Reading and Writing Project has writing as it's bedrock. All of our work builds upon what we have learned over the years from excellent writing instruction. At its center is the role of student autonomy and purpose and an emphasis on writing process. These points have not only guided us, but have also been supported by decades of scholarship.

- **Graham & Hebert (2010) “Writing to Read: Evidence for How Writing Can Improve Reading”** is a report which studies and demonstrates the ways in which writing instruction supports reading. The authors identify instructional practices that are effective in accomplishing this goal: 1) students write about what they read 2) teachers instruct students on the writing processes and writing skills that go into creating a piece 3) increase the amount of time they spend producing their own original texts
- **Moats (2005) “How Spelling Supports Reading And Why It’s More Regular And Predictable Than You May Think”** discusses a range of reasons why learning how to spell and the history, meaning and patterns of English can be a powerful ability students can practice and lean on as readers and writers.
- **Graham (2019) “Changing How Writing is Taught”** discusses how writing is currently taught in schools, concluding that there are two main occurrences: teachers who teach a solid writing program and devote almost an hour a day teaching writing, across purposes, mediums, and genres or teachers who do not do a sufficient job teaching writing. The author suggests four indicators of insufficient writing instruction: 1) not enough time dedicated to writing instruction 2) not enough writing frequency 3) not enough use of proven instructional practices such as a variety of writing genres and purposes and adaptations made 4) absence of digital tools for writing.
- **Murray (2013) “The Maker’s Eye: Revising Your Own Manuscripts”** is one piece from Donald Murray whose scholarship on writing process is foundational to TCRWP. In this article, Murray argues that novice writers feel they are done when a draft is finished, whereas professional writers feel as if they have just begun. He then goes on to discuss the importance of the re-writing mindset for authors, with lenses to use as the author rereads their work including information, meaning, audience and form.

## Choice and Agency

Looking across all of TCRWP’s curricula and practices, whether in reading, writing, phonics or interdisciplinary literacy, one commonality becomes clear – the emphasis on student autonomy. Whether it is choosing books and other texts to read, topics to write about, movement through the process of writing, or strategies to employ, from the youngest to the oldest, students are expected to be the captains of their own learning lives. We believe that guidance and coaching into the student decision-making paramount. Research shows us again and again that a student

with a strong sense of self-determination, metacognition and agency will be more successful than those with less.

- **Kraemer, McCabe & Sinatra (2012) “The Effects of Read Alouds of Expository Text on First Graders’ Listening Comprehension and Book Choice** studied how read aloud of expository nonfiction texts affected both the studied first graders’ listening reading comprehension, but also the texts they chose to read. The study suggests that there is great power in the texts a teacher chooses to read to a class, including the ways it can influence student independent book choice.
- **Fisher & Frey (2018) “Raising Reading Volume Through Access, Choice, Discussion, and Book Talks”** studies teachers intervention for reading volume in grades 1, 3 and 5. Specifically they offered more access to and choice of books, as well as opportunities for book discussion. The effects were generally positive affecting a range of factors including volume of reading, student motivation and writing achievement.