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Evidence-Based Practices as the Antidote to the Reading Crisis: A Case Against Alphabetic Phonics

Abstract

The ongoing reading crisis in the United States necessitates a shift toward instructional practices that are firmly grounded in empirical research. This manuscript critiques the use of Alphabetic Phonics, not only for its reliance on multisensory techniques but also for its incorporation of instructional features that contradict the principles of Structured Literacy and explicit instruction—such as learning without failure, discovery learning, and loosely guided exploration. Drawing from decades of research, including findings from the National Reading Panel (2000) and contemporary meta-analyses, the paper argues that effective literacy instruction must prioritize direct, systematic, and evidence-based methods. The discussion examines how the instructional philosophy and program design of Alphabetic Phonics fail to provide the clarity, structure, and feedback needed by struggling readers, particularly those with dyslexia. Additionally, the manuscript critiques recent legislative decisions that permit at-risk educational funding and state licensure credentials to support programs lacking rigorous research validation. Ultimately, this work calls for literacy policies and instructional decisions to be anchored in evidence-based practices to ensure effective reading instruction for all students.

Keywords

Alphabetic Phonics, evidence-based practice, explicit instruction, structured literacy

Cover Page Footnote

This manuscript was drafted with the assistance of ChatGPT (OpenAI, 2023) for refining phrasing, and improving language and structure. The author takes full responsibility for the content, analysis, and conclusions presented.

Evidence-Based Practices as the Antidote to the Reading Crisis: A Case Against Alphabetic Phonics

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The reading crisis in the United States has been a well-documented phenomenon, with concerns about declining literacy rates surfacing for decades. In 1983, the federal report *A Nation at Risk* warned of falling academic performance in U.S. schools, including significant struggles in reading (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). Not long after, the country became entrenched in the Reading Wars of the 1990s, a fierce debate between proponents of Whole Language and Phonics-based instruction (Pearson, 2004).

Advocates of Whole Language argued that reading, as a language-based process, should be learned much like spoken language—through immersion in rich, authentic texts rather than isolated skill drills (Goodman, 1967; Smith, 1971). This approach prioritized strong oral language development and encouraged student choice in reading and writing, aiming to create an enjoyable, meaningful literacy experience rather than a mechanical decoding process (Cambourne, 1988). Whole Language theorists, such as Goodman (1986), emphasized that context and meaning drive word recognition, rather than phonics rules alone. The approach also drew from constructivist theories of learning, suggesting that students develop literacy skills through active engagement with text (Weaver, 1998).

Conversely, proponents of Phonics-based instruction contended that reading is not a natural process like speaking and must instead be explicitly taught (Gough & Hillinger, 1980; Liberman et al., 1989). Research has consistently demonstrated that systematic phonics instruction is essential for foundational reading skills, including word attack strategies, word recognition, fluency, and comprehension (Ehri et al., 2001; Torgesen, 2002, 2004). Moreover, struggling readers—particularly those with dyslexia—require explicit, structured phonics instruction to achieve reading success (Shaywitz, 2003). After decades of research, the consensus remains

clear: explicit and systematic phonics-based instruction is the most effective method for teaching reading (National Reading Panel, 2000).

While a discussion of Balanced Literacy will remain brief, the 2000s saw widespread adoption of this approach in many school districts. (Pressley, 2006). Though Balanced Literacy incorporated some phonics instruction, it continued to rely heavily on cueing strategies and Whole Language principles, which critics argue are misaligned with the Science of Reading (Shanahan, 2020). In an effort to address declining reading achievement, the influence of Whole Language, and potential "pseudo-science" reading programs, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001 mandated evidence-based reading instruction, emphasizing phonics-based programs as a cornerstone of literacy education (U.S. Department of Education, 2002).

As debates over instructional approaches intensified during the Reading Wars, national attention turned to how reading achievement could be accurately measured and tracked over time. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP)—widely recognized as the "Nation's Report Card"—was first introduced as a main reading assessment in 1992 (National Center for Education Statistics, 1993). However, under NCLB in 2002, NAEP reporting gained national attention as a key measure of literacy progress and educational accountability (Loveless, 2005). Concerns about declining reading scores intensified when the 2019 NAEP results revealed stagnation or declines in student performance, sparking national debate over reading instruction methods (NAEP, 2019). The post-pandemic 2022 NAEP scores further exacerbated concerns, as media coverage highlighted sharp declines in reading proficiency, reinforcing the urgency of the ongoing reading crisis (NAEP, 2022). While NAEP offers valuable insight into national trends, experts caution against using a single assessment as the sole indicator of instructional effectiveness or system-wide success (Koretz, 2008; National Research Council, 2011; Polikoff, 2016). A more holistic approach—drawing on multiple data sources and contextual understanding—is needed to inform instructional decisions and evaluate policy outcomes (National Research Council, 2011).

To address ongoing concerns about reading achievement, literacy instruction must prioritize instructional approaches grounded in cognitive science and supported by empirical evidence (National Reading Panel, 2000; Castles et al., 2018). Decades of research confirm that explicit, systematic instruction in phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension is essential for developing proficient readers (Ehri et al., 2001; Castles et al., 2018). The Science of Reading emphasizes these foundational skills, ensuring students can decode efficiently while building strong language comprehension (Seidenberg, 2017).

This paper calls for a shift away from outdated and unsupported methods toward research-validated instructional frameworks, such as Structured Literacy and explicit instruction. Within these frameworks, educators should implement specific interventions aligned with student needs and backed by rigorous research (Cook & Cook, 2011). Schools must reject market-driven programs that lack scientific validation and instead invest in practices proven to improve outcomes for all learners—especially those with significant reading difficulties (Shaywitz, 2003; Fletcher et al., 2018).

The goal of this paper is to advocate for the widespread adoption of evidence-informed practices, highlight the limitations of programs like Alphabetic Phonics, and emphasize the importance of equitable, effective reading instruction. Ensuring that every learner receives effective, research-based reading instruction is critical to improving academic outcomes and narrowing persistent gaps in achievement (National Reading Panel, 2000; Castles et al., 2018).

An Understanding of Terminology

The terms evidence-based practice, research-based practice, intervention, and strategy are frequently used in education—often interchangeably—when discussing what "works" to improve student outcomes. However, not all interventions or strategies meet the rigorous criteria to be considered evidence-based. Understanding how these terms relate within a hierarchy of instructional decision-making is critical. Conflating them can lead to conceptual confusion and the use of approaches that may not be appropriate for students' needs or supported by strong empirical evidence (Cook & Cook, 2011). Clarifying these distinctions is essential for educators, policymakers, and school leaders aiming to implement instruction that is truly grounded in research.

Evidence-Based Terminology

Evidence-based practices (EBPs) are broad, well-established instructional approaches that have been validated through multiple high-quality studies across varied settings, populations, and research teams. These practices are grounded in a strong base of scientific evidence demonstrating consistent, positive outcomes (Cook & Cook, 2011; Cook & Odom, 2013). Federal legislation, including the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004) and the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, 2015), requires the use of EBPs in educational programming. ESSA further classifies EBPs into four tiers based on the strength of the supporting evidence: strong evidence from well-designed and well-implemented randomized control trials, moderate evidence from quasi-experimental studies, promising evidence from correlational research with statistical controls, and practices that demonstrate a rationale but have not yet undergone rigorous testing.

Evidence-based interventions refer to specific instructional programs, curricula, or treatment protocols designed to address particular skill deficits or learning needs. These interventions are narrower in scope than EBPs and are typically implemented within the broader framework of an evidence-based practice. Their effectiveness is generally supported by high-quality studies targeting specific academic or behavioral outcomes (Cook & Odom, 2013). Organizations such as What Works Clearinghouse (WWC), Evidence for ESSA, and the National Center on Intensive Intervention (NCII) provide searchable databases and effectiveness ratings to help schools select appropriate interventions (American Institutes for Research, n.d.).

Strategies are individual instructional techniques—such as modeling, the use of graphic organizers, or immediate corrective feedback—that can be incorporated within both interventions and practices. While some instructional strategies may be supported by empirical evidence, they are narrower in scope and are most effective when embedded within a

comprehensive instructional approach. Isolated use of strategies without alignment to validated interventions or practices may result in fragmented or less effective instruction (Cook & Cook, 2011; Cook & Odom, 2013).

It is important to understand this hierarchy: strategies operate within interventions, which are delivered as part of broader practices. Failing to recognize these distinctions can lead to the mislabeling of interventions or strategies as EBPs and ultimately reduce instructional effectiveness (Cook & Cook, 2011). Therefore, using the correct terminology helps districts and educators make informed decisions that align with research and policy mandates.

Research-Based Terminology

A research-based practice, on the other hand, refers to an instructional or intervention method that is grounded in theory and potentially supported by studies but has not necessarily undergone the type of rigorous testing required to demonstrate consistent, measurable outcomes in real-world settings. These practices are informed by existing research, such as theoretical frameworks, case studies, or preliminary findings, but may lack the high-quality experimental or quasi-experimental studies required to qualify as evidence-based (Cook & Odom, 2013; Slavin, 2002). While research-based practices can offer instructional guidance, they do not carry the same level of empirical validation as EBPs. Therefore, distinguishing between the two is essential when making educational decisions to ensure interventions have a proven impact on student learning (Slavin, 2002).

Understanding the distinction between evidence-based and research-based practices is essential for informed decision-making. While both have a role in education, only evidence-based practices are backed by rigorous, peer-reviewed studies demonstrating consistent, measurable success. In contrast, research-based practices, though informed by theory and existing research, lack the level of empirical validation required for widespread implementation. For students with significant reading difficulties, using evidence-based practices should be non-negotiable. Federal legislation such as IDEA (2004) and ESSA (2015) reinforces this priority by mandating high-quality instruction rooted in strong evidence to ensure equitable learning opportunities.

The Role of Explicit Instruction for Effective Reading Interventions

Explicit instruction is a systematic, direct, and structured approach that provides clear guidance in mastering essential skills. Research consistently supports explicit instruction as one of the most effective methods for teaching reading, particularly for students with learning difficulties (Archer & Hughes, 2011; Swanson & Hoskyn, 2001). Unlike constructivist models that rely on guided discovery learning or theories like “learning without failure” (Cox, 1992)—which assumes students will self-correct errors over time—explicit instruction provides direct explanations, modeling, and structured practice with immediate corrective feedback to ensure mastery (Baker et al., 2023).

A core component of explicit instruction is clearly stating the learning goal at the beginning of a lesson, which research shows enhances motivation, focus, and achievement (Harbour et al., 2015; Schunk & Swartz, 1993). Without a clearly defined goal, students are more likely to experience cognitive overload, making it difficult to internalize new concepts (Kirschner et al.,

2006: Moos & Pitton, 2014). By explicitly setting objectives, teachers provide students with a structured roadmap, reducing ambiguity and increasing engagement.

Explicit instruction also involves breaking tasks into manageable steps, ensuring students build their understanding progressively. Guided practice through modeling and demonstration allows students to see correct examples before attempting tasks independently. Frequent opportunities for student response, such as choral responses, partner work, or written activities, maintain engagement and enable continuous monitoring (Archer & Hughes, 2011; Messenger et al., 2017).

Immediate, corrective feedback is another essential element, preventing misconceptions and reinforcing accurate learning in real-time (Baker et al., 2023; Metcalfe, 2017; Hattie, 2009). This contrasts with "learning without failure" (Cox, 1992), which assumes students will self-correct mistakes over time—a notion unsupported by research. Failure to address errors immediately can reinforce incorrect knowledge, making later correction more difficult (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Explicit instruction, in contrast, ensures students receive timely, constructive guidance, accelerating progress in reading and other academic skills.

By focusing on explicit, systematic, and evidence-based instructional practices, explicit instruction offers a highly effective alternative to unstructured, discovery-based methods that leave too much to chance. Their extensive research base underscores the importance of using proven instructional strategies to ensure student success in reading.

The Intersection of the Science of Reading, Structured Literacy, and Explicit Instruction

The Science of Reading, Structured Literacy, and explicit instruction are interrelated frameworks that collectively form the foundation of effective reading instruction. The Science of Reading represents decades of research from cognitive science, linguistics, neuroscience, and education, explaining how the brain learns to read (Castles et al., 2018). Key findings, such as the Simple View of Reading (Gough & Tunmer, 1986) and Scarborough's Reading Rope (2001), emphasize that reading comprehension depends on both word recognition and language comprehension. The National Reading Panel (2000) further identified phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension as essential components of reading instruction, reinforcing the need for systematic, explicit teaching. However, while the Science of Reading provides the research foundation, it does not dictate specific instructional methods, which is where Structured Literacy and explicit instruction play a critical role.

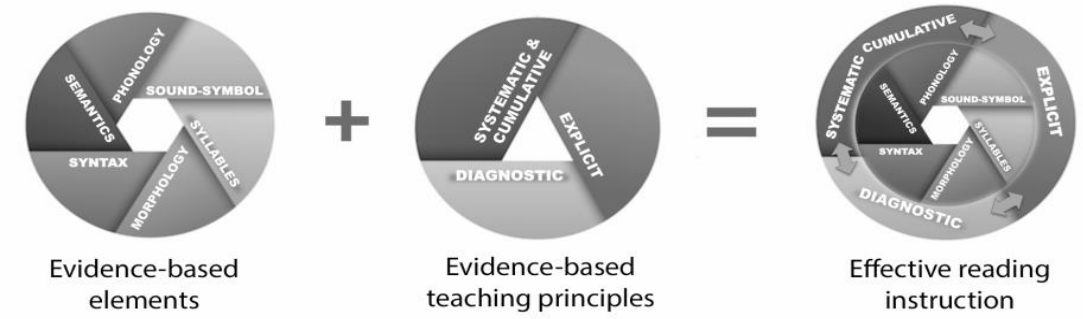
Structured Literacy is an instructional approach that translates the Science of Reading into practice through explicit, systematic, and cumulative instruction (International Dyslexia Association [IDA], 2019; Spear-Swerling, 2018). The term Structured Literacy was introduced by the International Dyslexia Association (IDA) in 2014 to unify and clarify the instructional practices that were empirically supported for being most effective for teaching reading, particularly to students with dyslexia and other reading difficulties (Brady, 2020). While the term itself is relatively new, the instructional components it encompasses—such as phonology, sound-symbol association, syllable structure, morphology, syntax, and semantics—have long been supported by research within the broader Science of Reading (Moats, 2020; Seidenberg, 2017). Grounded in decades of reading research, Structured Literacy emphasizes explicit, systematic,

cumulative, and diagnostic instruction in foundational skills. Unlike more implicit methods, Structured Literacy programs are intentionally designed to build linguistic knowledge and decoding skills in a logical sequence, supporting all learners but especially those who struggle with reading acquisition (Spear-Swerling, 2018; Fletcher et al., 2019). The term served to differentiate these evidence-based practices from approaches like whole language or balanced literacy, which often lack the intensity and structure required for many students to achieve literacy proficiency (Castles et al., 2018; Seidenberg, 2017).

Additionally, Structured Literacy follows evidence-based teaching principles, ensuring instruction is explicit—clearly taught, not inferred; systematic and cumulative—organized in a logical sequence that builds upon previous knowledge; and diagnostic—responsive to student needs based on assessment data (Cowen, 2016; IDA, 2019; Spear-Swerling, 2018; see Figure 1). This approach ensures that foundational reading skills are taught in a structured, sequential manner, reducing cognitive overload and increasing retention (Kirschner et al., 2006).

Figure 1

Structured Literacy Framework



Reprinted from Structured Literacy Infographic, by Cowen for the International Dyslexia Association, 2016 (https://app.box.com/s/2yqu2ke21mxs0hz9l77owdlogrtyesvq). Copyright 2016 by the International Dyslexia Association.

To effectively implement Structured Literacy, teachers must use explicit instruction, which provides clear modeling, guided practice, and immediate feedback (Archer & Hughes, 2011). Clearly stating the learning goal at the beginning of a lesson has been shown to improve student motivation, focus, and achievement (Harbour et al., 2015). Unlike student-led or guided discovery methods, which often assume that learners will infer concepts independently, explicit instruction ensures that students receive direct guidance and scaffolding before moving to independent practice (Sweller, 1988; Moos & Pitton, 2014). Frequent opportunities for student response and corrective feedback prevent misconceptions from becoming ingrained and reinforce accurate learning (Baker et al., 2023; Metcalfe, 2017; Hattie, 2009).

Together, explicit instruction and the Science of Reading provide the research foundation for Structured Literacy. While the Science of Reading explains how reading develops and why certain practices are effective, explicit instruction outlines how to teach these skills clearly and

effectively. Structured Literacy brings these insights together into a cohesive, practitioner-friendly framework that guides educators in delivering effective, research-aligned instruction.

The Instructional Design of Alphabetic Phonics: Where It Falls Short of Structured Literacy

Although Alphabetic Phonics shares a historical connection with Orton-Gillingham, its instructional design diverges in several critical ways from the evidence-based principles of Structured Literacy. Developed by Aylett Cox at the Scottish Rite Hospital for Children in the 1960s, Alphabetic Phonics is detailed in her program manual *Foundations for Literacy: Structures and Techniques for Multisensory Teaching of Basic Written English Language Skills* (Cox, 1992). The program incorporates elements such as alphabet drills, spelling dictation, and handwriting, all delivered through multisensory techniques. Lessons emphasize visual, auditory, and kinesthetic-tactile strategies and frequently utilize guided discovery learning. While these components may appear aligned with effective reading instruction, a closer examination reveals that Alphabetic Phonics falls short in several areas, including its reliance on implicit teaching methods, lack of timely corrective feedback, insufficient attention to phonemic awareness, and promotion of discredited learning styles theory. The following sections critically evaluate these instructional shortcomings and contrast them with the explicit, systematic approach endorsed by Structured Literacy and supported by decades of cognitive and educational research.

Discovery Over Direction: The Problem with Implicit Instruction in Alphabetic Phonics

While it incorporates several components of reading instruction, Alphabetic Phonics does not fully align with Structured Literacy (see Figure 1), primarily due to its reliance on guided discovery learning and lack of emphasis on direct, explicit instruction (Cox, 1984). One of the "Basic Principles" outlined in the *Foundations for Literacy: Structures and Techniques for Multisensory Teaching of Basic Written English Language Skills* manual (p. 204) is "Discovery Teaching," which reflects this instructional philosophy. This orientation is clearly articulated in Cox's (1992) own words:

> The instructional approach called guided discovery teaching is effective in ensuring that students learn sound-symbol correspondences and other patterns of language.… Discovery teaching uses the Socratic Method of asking questions to lead students to discover new information.

This internal contradiction further underscores the program's departure from the Science of Reading and highlights a fundamental misunderstanding—by both its creators and many of its consumers—of how skilled reading develops. While Alphabetic Phonics materials, such as the *Foundations for Literacy: Structures and Techniques for Multisensory Teaching of Basic Written English Language Skills* (Cox, 1992), reference systematic phonics instruction, they also introduce discovery-based constructs like "auditory discovery," "visual discovery," and "kinesthetic discovery." These imply an implicit, student-led learning process that conflicts with the explicit, teacher-directed instruction supported by research (Baker et al., 2023). This philosophical difference reflects a broader divergence: explicit instruction, an evidence-based teaching principle within Structured Literacy, minimizes ambiguity by clearly telling and showing students what they need to know, particularly in areas like phoneme-grapheme mapping

and decoding. In contrast, Cox's guided discovery model may inadvertently delay or obscure key concepts for students with dyslexia—who research consistently shows benefit most from direct, explicit, and systematic instruction (Kilpatrick, 2015; Moats, 2020; National Reading Panel, 2000).

Learning Without Correction: The Risk of Avoiding Feedback in Alphabetic Phonics

Additionally, a key concern with the implementation of Alphabetic Phonics is its incorporation of a "learning without failure" philosophy, which assumes students will self-correct errors over time rather than receiving immediate, corrective feedback (Cox, 1992). The *Foundations for Literacy: Structures and Techniques for Multisensory Teaching of Basic Written English Language Skills* manual (Cox, 1992), for example, emphasizes preserving students' self-esteem over instructional precision, stating, "Each student must be assured that any behavior is acceptable which does not interfere with another child's learning.… There can and must be learning without failure in every classroom" (p. 81). While emotionally supportive environments are important (Pianta et al., 2012), this approach deprioritizes instructional accuracy and timely error correction—both of which are critical for struggling readers (Archer & Hughes, 2011; Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Moats, 2020).

In contrast, explicit instruction—central to Structured Literacy—emphasizes immediate feedback to correct misunderstandings before they become ingrained (Archer & Hughes, 2011; Moats, 2020). Research overwhelmingly supports the use of immediate and specific feedback to strengthen learning outcomes, enhance student confidence, and promote skill mastery (Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Wiliam, 2010). Meta-analyses have shown that timely corrective feedback has one of the largest positive effects on student learning, especially in high-cognitive-demand tasks such as decoding and spelling (Hattie, 2009).

Moreover, delayed correction or reliance on self-discovery in error correction has not been shown to improve outcomes for students with reading disabilities. As Stevens et al. (2021) note, interventions that lack consistent feedback and direct instruction show limited effectiveness for students at risk for word-level reading difficulties. The absence of peer-reviewed evidence supporting "learning without failure" as a viable instructional method raises serious questions about its pedagogical soundness—especially in programs designed for students who require explicit, structured support.

Phonemic Awareness: The Foundational Skill Alphabetic Phonics Fails to Deliver

Furthermore, Alphabetic Phonics predates the research establishing the critical role of phonemic awareness in reading achievement (Ehri, 2014; Kilpatrick, 2015; National Reading Panel, 2000). Phonemic awareness falls under the broader category of phonology—an essential, evidence-based component of Structured Literacy. By failing to prioritize phonology, Alphabetic Phonics omits foundational instruction necessary for decoding and word recognition. This creates a significant instructional gap—one that undermines the needs of struggling readers. According to Kilpatrick (2015), orthographic mapping—the mental process that allows readers to store written words for instant retrieval—requires proficiency in phoneme-level awareness, especially phoneme manipulation skills such as deleting, substituting, or reversing sounds in words. As a result, teachers using Alphabetic Phonics must supplement instruction to ensure students develop

phonemic awareness. Importantly, this supplementation must occur at the phoneme level, as research has shown that phonemic awareness—not awareness of words, rhymes, or syllables—is the most powerful predictor of reading success (Kilpatrick, 2015).

Heavily marketed supplemental programs have attempted to address this deficiency by incorporating phonological awareness into the Alphabetic Phonics program. While these add-ons are often presented as comprehensive solutions, many fall short of aligning with research-based developmental progressions. They tend to devote disproportionate time to lower-level skills such as rhyming and syllable segmentation, while allocating only a small portion—typically around 20%—to phoneme-level manipulation, the foundational skill necessary for orthographic mapping. As Kilpatrick (2015) explains, "The phonological awareness skills that support orthographic mapping are not the basic phonological skills … [like rhyming, syllable counting], but rather advanced phonemic awareness, such as phoneme manipulation" (p. 145). These supplemental programs are also rarely supported by peer-reviewed research, leaving their claims of effectiveness unsubstantiated. Without sufficient attention to advanced phonemic skills—and no strong evidence base—such efforts are unlikely to meaningfully close the instructional gap and may continue to fall short for students who most need targeted, high-quality intervention.

No Evidence, No Endorsement: Why Alphabetic Phonics Fails the Research Test

Alphabetic Phonics is not recognized as an evidence-based intervention by What Works Clearinghouse (WWC) or Evidence for ESSA, indicating that it does not meet the rigorous research standards required to demonstrate effectiveness in improving student reading outcomes (WWC, 2024; Evidence for ESSA, 2024). While the program emphasizes visual, auditory, and kinesthetic (VAK) modalities under the umbrella of "multisensory instruction," it also directly promotes learning styles theory—a concept widely discredited in cognitive science. For example, the *Foundations for Literacy: Structures and Techniques for Multisensory Teaching of Basic Written English Language Skills* manual (Cox, 1992) encourages students to identify as visual, auditory, or kinesthetic learners, stating, "Can you imagine how much easier and more interesting your twelve basic years of schooling could be (or could have been) if you (or someone) had discovered how you learn best before you entered first grade and teachers could have taught you everything with that knowledge in mind?" (Cox, 1992, p. 75). This assertion reflects a belief that instruction should be tailored to individual learning styles—a theory long rejected by researchers as a "neuromyth" that lacks empirical support (Coffield et al., 2004; Kirschner & van Merriënboer, 2013; Pashler et al., 2009).

Foundational reviews have shown that matching instruction to a student's preferred sensory modality does not improve learning outcomes, including in literacy-based tasks (Pashler et al., 2009; Kirschner, 2017). As Pashler et al. (2009) conclude, "there is no adequate evidence base to justify incorporating learning styles assessments into general educational practice" (p. 105). This is particularly troubling in the context of reading instruction, where Alphabetic Phonics' endorsement of learning styles may lead educators to adopt ineffective strategies that are unsupported by cognitive science. This is especially concerning in reading instruction, where all students—regardless of preference—benefit most from explicit, systematic teaching of phoneme-grapheme correspondences, decoding, and language structure (Petscher et al., 2020). Riener and Willingham (2010) further emphasize that instructional effectiveness is driven by the nature of the content, not by individual learning preferences. In the context of reading, this means

instruction must align with cognitive processes involved in learning to read, rather than how students prefer to receive information.

Additionally, while Alphabetic Phonics shares its multisensory roots with programs such as the Wilson Reading System, it is important to recognize that not all multisensory programs are equally grounded in evidence. Unlike the Wilson Reading System, which is supported by rigorous research and closely aligned with Structured Literacy, Alphabetic Phonics has not met this standard (Ritchey & Goeke, 2006; Stevens et al., 2021). A meta-analysis by Stevens et al. (2021) examined the effects of Orton-Gillingham-based interventions—including Alphabetic Phonics—and found no statistically significant improvement in phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, or spelling among students with or at risk for word-level reading disabilities. The study also found no significant effects on vocabulary or comprehension outcomes. These findings suggest that the overemphasis on multisensory techniques in programs like Alphabetic Phonics may come at the expense of the core instructional practice of explicit, systematic teaching.

Although Alphabetic Phonics is often associated with the Orton-Gillingham (OG) approach, it is important to clarify that not all OG-based programs are equally grounded in evidence. Originally developed in the 1930s, OG is a structured, sequential, and multisensory method for teaching literacy, particularly to students with dyslexia (Gentry, 2006). It emphasizes phonemic awareness, decoding, and language structure, and is typically delivered in one-on-one or small-group settings with diagnostic teaching at its core. However, many contemporary adaptations of OG vary significantly in their fidelity to these principles, and their effectiveness depends largely on how well they preserve the explicit, systematic elements central to OG's original design. The International Dyslexia Association (IDA, 2018) recognizes OG as a component of Structured Literacy only when implemented with those essential features. The concern here is not with OG itself, but with Alphabetic Phonics as a derivative program that diverges from OG's research-validated components and lacks sufficient empirical support.

Despite widespread enthusiasm for multisensory instruction across educational blogs, teacher forums, and commercial platforms—many of which cite no credible research evidence—the scientific foundation for multisensory instruction as a standalone method remains weak. Even organizations that advocate for Structured Literacy, such as the International Dyslexia Association (IDA), acknowledge this limitation. As the IDA states, *"*multisensory teaching lacks the extensive research that validates Structured Literacy's other teaching principles*"* (IDA, 2024). However, IDA and leading instructional texts, such as *Multisensory Teaching of Basic Language Skills* (Birsh & Carreker, 2018), emphasize that multisensory instruction can be effective when used in a deliberate, structured, and systematic way. Structured Literacy endorses multisensory techniques only when they are tightly integrated with explicit instruction and linguistic goals—not when they are applied as unstructured, VAK-style activities that prioritize sensory engagement over instructional clarity. This underscores the importance of not equating multisensory engagement with instructional efficacy, particularly when multisensory components are not explicitly tied to structured, linguistically grounded teaching goals.

What matters most is not how many senses are engaged, but whether instruction is explicit, systematic, and aligned with Structured Literacy principles grounded in the Science of Reading (Castles et al., 2018). Unlike Alphabetic Phonics, which relies heavily on multisensory engagement without consistent research validation, Structured Literacy emphasizes the direct

teaching of sound-symbol correspondences, phonemic awareness, decoding, and the structure of language—components consistently validated by research as essential for students with reading difficulties (Moats, 2020; National Reading Panel, 2000; Castles et al., 2018). Structured Literacy, which includes explicit instruction and the Science of Reading, not only reflect the current scientific consensus but also prioritize clarity, sequence, and immediate corrective feedback, and demonstrate significantly stronger outcomes than programs lacking these core features (Stockard et al., 2018).

The Issue of Instructor Preparedness in Alphabetic Phonics

The effectiveness of reading instruction depends significantly on teacher knowledge and expertise, a point consistently reinforced in literacy research. Educators with strong content knowledge—particularly in phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension—are better equipped to deliver instruction with fidelity and support struggling readers (Hudson et al., 2012; Moats, 2020; Spear-Swerling, 2019). These findings raise concerns about whether individuals implementing Alphabetic Phonics have received the level of preparation necessary to meet students' needs effectively.

Alphabetic Phonics is typically delivered by Certified Academic Language Therapists (CALTs), credentialed by the Academic Language Therapy Association (ALTA). Although the CALT certification involves intensive training in delivering the Alphabetic Phonics program, it does not replace the comprehensive scope of a university-based teacher preparation program aligned with Kansas State Department of Education (KSDE) licensure standards. The critique presented here is not of individual competence, but of the scope and context of training. CALT programs, while rigorous, are narrower in focus and do not consistently include preparation in areas such as assessment literacy, data-based decision-making, curriculum design, or classroom management (Moats, 2014; Washburn et al., 2011).

In contrast, KSDE-accredited teacher preparation programs provide a broader and more integrated training experience. These programs, led by faculty experts, include Structured Literacy instruction and prepare educators to diagnose reading difficulties, monitor progress, differentiate instruction, and apply the latest research from the evolving Science of Reading (Ellis et al., 2023; Hindman et al., 2020; The Reading League, n.d.). They also equip educators with a deep understanding of child development, assessment practices, and evidence-based decision-making—all of which are essential for meeting the diverse needs of learners (NCTQ, 2023; NCTE, 2023).

Certifications that are not accredited by state boards of education—while valuable—often lack the comprehensive scope of training found in university-based programs (Midwestern Higher Education Compact [MHEC], 2022). This gap can affect instructional quality and long-term teacher retention, particularly for those working with students facing persistent reading challenges.

In sum, while the CALT credential offers valuable specialized training, it does not replace the depth and breadth of preparation provided through a state-approved teacher education program. Effective literacy instruction demands more than knowledge of a single program—it requires a comprehensive understanding of reading development, assessment, intervention, and instructional design. Ensuring instructors possess this level of preparation is critical to improving literacy outcomes for all students, especially those who require explicit, systematic instruction.

Implications for Literacy Instruction and Policy

The research on effective reading instruction highlights the importance of Structured Literacy approaches—which emphasize explicit, systematic instruction—in improving student outcomes. The continued use of programs like Alphabetic Phonics, which do not fully align with these principles—particularly in their lack of explicit instruction—raises concerns about the quality and consistency of literacy instruction in schools. Despite this, the Kansas State Department of Education (KSDE) currently includes Alphabetic Phonics on its approved list of evidence-based practices—a serious misclassification that reflects a broader misunderstanding of what qualifies as an evidence-based program under federal definitions (Cook & Cook, 2011; ESSA, 2015).

Given the well-documented reading crisis in the United States, it is essential that educators, policymakers, and school administrators make data-driven decisions based on credible research. Programs that fail to meet rigorous empirical standards, such as Alphabetic Phonics, should not be prioritized over approaches with demonstrated effectiveness (National Reading Panel, 2000; Stevens et al., 2021).

Federal and state initiatives, such as the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, 2015) and the Science of Reading movement, have increased awareness of research-based instruction, but implementation gaps persist. Schools and districts must select curricula and interventions based on findings from credible sources, including What Works Clearinghouse, Evidence for ESSA, and peer-reviewed meta-analyses (Castles et al., 2018). A lasting commitment to evidence-based instruction—and to the educators who serve as its defenders—is essential to improving literacy outcomes at scale.

While many teachers and therapists who implement Alphabetic Phonics are deeply committed to supporting struggling readers, their efforts may be limited by the program’s misalignment with Structured Literacy and the Science of Reading. Well-intentioned instructors may unknowingly implement strategies that lack the necessary evidence base to meet the needs of students with dyslexia and other reading difficulties. Now more than ever, schools need unwavering "Points of Truth"—teachers and literacy leaders who recognize that the truth lies in what works, refusing to be swayed by trends, emotions, or marketing gimmicks, and committed to implementing and defending instructional practices grounded in evidence-based scientific research. Thus, these educators prioritize methods validated by decades of research rather than outdated or market-driven programs that often rely on emotional testimonies, ensuring that reading instruction is anchored in proven, effective strategies.

This concern is further amplified by Kansas's recent Seal of Literacy initiative, a state requirement for educators seeking licensure in specific roles, including Reading Specialist, Early Childhood Unified, Elementary Education (K–6), and High Incidence Special Education (K–12). The Seal of Literacy is designed to ensure that educators receive high-quality training in evidence-based reading instruction rooted in Structured Literacy principles. However, during the May 13, 2025, Kansas Board of Education meeting, the board temporarily suspended the usual rules of order to approve a training—rooted in Alphabetic Phonics and offered by a nonprofit organization—as meeting the professional development requirements for the Seal of Literacy. This is deeply concerning given the endorsement and advocacy of Alphabetic Phonics, a program that lacks empirical validation and diverges from Structured Literacy practices. The approval of such training raises critical questions about fidelity to evidence-based practices. Including programs that lack strong empirical support in official licensure pathways undermines the intent of the Seal and risks institutionalizing ineffective instructional methods at scale.

House Bill 2033, passed in Kansas, compounds this issue by allowing at-risk education funding to be used for programs and services provided by nonprofit organizations accredited by the International Multisensory Structured Language Education Council (IMSLEC). This bill, introduced at the request of a specific non-profit organization that endorses Alphabetic Phonics, effectively circumvents the rigorous evaluation process that public school instructional programs are typically subjected to (Kansas Legislature, 2025). The use of multisensory approaches remains a debated topic, with conflicting evidence regarding their effectiveness, yet organizations accredited by IMSLEC are positioned to "validate" these approaches, even though they are not necessarily scientifically proven.

This is especially concerning given the limited empirical validation of multisensory techniques as standalone instructional methods. Even the IDA, which supports Structured Literacy, acknowledges that multisensory teaching lacks the extensive research base that validates other core Structured Literacy principles (IDA, 2024; Ritchey & Goeke, 2006; Stevens et al., 2021). While proponents claim that IMSLEC-accredited programs provide essential literacy interventions, no requirement exists for these programs to demonstrate efficacy through independent, peer-reviewed research. This raises an important policy question: Should public education funds—and licensure credentials—be tied to programs that lack the same research validation required for curricula used within public schools?

This shift in at-risk funding allocation and licensure training access underscores the critical need for heightened scrutiny in how literacy initiatives are adopted, endorsed, and funded. Allowing nonprofit organizations to access public education funds without adhering to the same evidence-based standards required of public schools creates a concerning precedent. If policymakers fail to establish clear accountability measures, at-risk students—who are most in need of high-quality reading instruction—may continue to receive ineffective interventions, further exacerbating the literacy crisis.

Conclusion

Ensuring that all students have access to effective reading instruction is a matter of educational equity. The continued use of programs lacking scientific support perpetuates achievement gaps, disproportionately affecting students with disabilities, English Learners, and those from

historically marginalized communities (Wexler, 2023). Instructional approaches such as "learning without failure" and discovery-based learning—which minimize modeling, guided practice, and immediate corrective feedback—are inconsistent with decades of research on how students best acquire foundational reading skills. These methods may appear student-centered in theory but fail to provide the structured support needed to close literacy gaps in practice.

To improve literacy outcomes nationwide, teacher training, instructional practices, and policy decisions must be aligned with Structured Literacy principles and evidence-based methodologies. Programs that rely on outdated assumptions or unvalidated philosophies, such as Alphabetic Phonics, dilute the effectiveness of reading instruction and divert resources from approaches that are known to work.

As the entities responsible for governing and guiding public education in Kansas, the Kansas State Board of Education and KSDE hold considerable influence over the quality of instruction delivered in classrooms. With that authority comes the responsibility to ensure that approved training programs and licensure pathways are grounded in sound research and best practices. Endorsing programs with limited empirical support not only risks undermining the intent of initiatives like the Seal of Literacy—it also jeopardizes the educational outcomes of the very students these policies aim to protect.

Institutions of higher education are uniquely equipped with the expertise to lead this work. Their alignment with the Science of Reading and Structured Literacy provides a credible, evidence-based foundation for preparing educators to meet the needs of all learners. Rather than turning to politically influenced or privately marketed training models, state leaders should leverage the proven knowledge base within Kansas's universities to guide literacy reform.

Without a sustained commitment to evidence-based instruction, the reading crisis will persist—leaving far too many students without the tools they need for academic achievement, economic opportunity, and full participation in society.

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