

# **Coping With Reading Mandates In the Classroom**

*A Letter to Early Grade Classroom Teachers*

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There have been numerous controversies through the years on how best to teach young students to read, but the issue today is particularly contentious. Since around the turn of this century a subgroup of reading researchers, special educators and other interested individuals have been proactive in promoting a phonics-first/phonics-dominated curriculum for beginning reading instruction. Known as the *Science of Reading*, their agenda is characterized also by rejecting any instructional practices that address language and meaning, or that makes use of multiple cueing systems in early reading. Their proactive and aggressive stance has led to state and federal mandates and in some cases, legislation requiring a phonics dominated curriculum as well as prohibiting selected instructional practices that teachers have used successfully in the past. A vast majority of early grade teachers are frustrated by these mandates and feel constrained from using what is best for the reading and writing growth of the students in their classrooms.

These teachers are not opposed to teaching phonics in a proper perspective but are concerned that so much time is taken up with phonics training, that there is little instructional time left for other important literacy experiences.

It is in this context that I suggest a few ways of coping and existing under such constraints.

## **1. Be as competent as humanly possible.**

We begin with the obvious. Highly competent teachers are valued by the school administration and by the parents. The more competent you are, the more freedom you will have to teach and do what is right for your students. No one is going to legitimately question the teacher, who year after year teaches all students to read and write, or at minimum, significantly advances these students towards becoming literate. Remember: Competence is Power!

## **2. Push back discreetly against unreasonable mandates.**

Given a high degree of competence, if you are under the thumb of restrictive mandates, resist in some fashion. This may seem radical, but it really isn't. You don't have to be confrontational. One is reminded of a well-known education book of several decades ago, *Teaching As A Subversive Activity* (Postman & Weingartner, 1969). Good teachers have often been a bit subversive by deviating from a prescribed curriculum, teacher's manuals, scripted lessons, or even mandates when it is merited. Do what successful teachers have always done, modify when necessary.

### **3. Teach phonics in proper perspective.**

Phonics is an important part of learning to read, but it is not the only part. Nor is it the most important part despite what some are telling us. (See, for example, Hanford, 2019; Moats & Tolman, 2009; Foorman & Santi, 2009). Remember to devote an average of approximately 20 minutes of instructional time to phonological awareness and phonics each day in kindergarten through second grade instructional levels. You should personally direct this instruction and not relegate it to worksheets or pencil and paper activities. Be careful not to extend phonics lessons beyond these recommended times. We hear anecdotally of some districts requiring 40-45 minutes each day for phonological awareness and phonics. There is no research to support this excessive allotment. Anything over 20 minutes of instruction per day is a waste of time. More is not better in this situation.

### **4. Embrace the early writing process**

One of the major discoveries we have made in recent decades is that children at age 5 and 6 or younger like to write and are quite capable of doing so. (See, for example, Graves, 1983.) Their writing with invented spellings makes them better writers, better readers and better spellers over the long term. If you are teaching under mandates based on the *Science of Reading* agenda, you are quite safe in embracing early writing. The *Science of Reading* community is basically silent on this issue, perhaps because it involves children making educated guesses about how words are spelled. Remember also, that early writing is an excellent way for young students to practice and utilize their phonics knowledge. As a reminder, if you implement an early writing program, educate your parents very early in the year about the phenomenon of invented spellings and what they can expect to see from their young child.

### **5. Create a rich print environment for the classroom.**

A rich oral language environment produces strong oral language. A rich print environment helps produce readers and writers. Think in terms of books, of course, many books. But think also about other print forms, magazines, brochures, advertisements, sections of newspapers such as sports pages, or store and grocery inserts. Don't limit yourself merely to what your students can already read. Encourage your students to browse and get in the habit of turning to print for information and enjoyment. During the summer here in the U.S. and Canada, collect print material from county fairs, festivals, boat shows, machinery exhibits, programs from athletic and music events, etc. This helps make your students aware of all the print in their community and personal life.

## **6. Read to and with your students each day.**

This one seems so obvious. Perhaps with all-encompassing mandates, you feel you just don't have time. There is nothing you can do that is more important. By pausing and allowing students to discuss what is happening in the story and what might happen next, you are building the foundation for reading comprehension. You are also exposing your students to literature they may not yet be able to read on their own. You are strengthening listening skills and language comprehension. And you are modeling what good readers do when they read. By any means, find time to read to your students at least 10-15 minutes each day.

## **7. Be prepared to justify your instructional practices.**

Enlightened teachers usually have a good reason for doing what they do. Be prepared to justify your instructional practices to anyone who might ask. For example, when children write with invented spellings, they are practicing their phonics skills. When you read to children each day, you are building strength in listening comprehension and building a foundation for reading comprehension. When you do Shared or Repeated Readings, you are building fluency. When you write the ideas of your students into an experience chart, you are modeling the writing process and teaching the concept of a story. Think in terms of, "What am I doing and why are we doing this?"

## **8. Build strong relationships with parents.**

Parents and caregivers can be an important support system. You and they want the same thing for their young child, to learn to read, write, and think critically. Some parents may be intimidated by school. Make them feel welcome. Remind them that you want what they want. It is a partnership. Keep parents informed and make sure to email a parent when their child has a particularly good day. A personal phone call or note is even better. Parents can be your greatest advocates and support system as you begin to deviate from mandates that are limiting your instruction.

## **9. Expand your professional network**

The reading mandate situation that you are facing is not unique to you. We hear from teachers all over the United States, as well as Canadian educators, teachers in Australia, and teachers in the U.K. who are frustrated. Do some networking, at least locally. It is likely that even your building principal or immediate supervisor is concerned about reading mandates as well. Reach out to websites and publications that can be supportive. Noted literacy scholars Tierney and Pearson recently published the excellent *Fact Checking the Science of Reading* (2024). The website to which I contribute, [www.literacytalk.info](http://www.literacytalk.info), has a series of articles and references you can use to support a more comprehensive approach to reading.

There are many others. For example, if you are laboring under excessive phonics mandates, check out a comprehensive research study on struggling readers by Valencia and Buly (2004) where they found almost 60% of fourth graders who could not pass the state assessment test were highly skilled in phonics and word recognition. Clearly more phonics instruction is not the answer for many students. The more aware you are of important research like this the more empowered you become.

## **10. Persevere**

Don't give in to the current restrictive mandates. Our profession has been in this situation before, but this time it will take longer to right the ship because of the weight of federal and state mandates. Continue to teach positively and with energy. Do not allow yourself to feel like a victim. Resist discreetly when it is in the best interest of your students. There are tens of thousands of teachers just like you who are frustrated with unreasonable reading mandates. In addition, there are many scientists, reading specialists, school leaders, and informed citizens who are aware of your dilemma and are working hard to bring a more reasoned approach to the teaching of reading. Eventually this will happen. The more you aid in this process of change, the sooner we will be successful.

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