

The Byword for Comprehension Instruction

W. Dorsey Hammond

The National Reading Panel Report* left little doubt that the panel members considered five elements to be the foundations of reading: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. The report further suggested that these elements, now referred to as the Five Pillars, should be developed sequentially, in that order, with the clear expectation that it's best to wait on comprehension until the other four elements are sufficiently established. This is an unfortunate message to teachers and other school leaders.

The relationships among these elements are more dynamic and interactive than the Five Pillars model suggests. Although phonemic awareness is ordinarily best taught before phonics, children can learn the principle that letters represent sounds and can learn many sound-letter combinations even when they cannot yet discriminate all the sounds of the language. Similarly, children can develop fluency in some situations before they have mastered all of the sound-letter combinations they're expected to learn. They can also learn the meanings of many new words and can often understand what they are reading before they can read fluently. In turn, when students are understanding the text they are reading, fluency often improves. In fact, all five of these elements are mutually reinforcing. They can and should be developed in tandem.

Most importantly, developing comprehension should be the dominant focus from the beginning, not last in a sequence. The byword for comprehension is simple: *Don't wait! Do it now!* The day children begin phonemic awareness training is the day they should begin receiving comprehension instruction. In the earliest days, this will take the form of reading to children and discussing with them what is happening in the story, what we have learned so far, what might happen next, and so on. It's best to avoid questions such as *What is the girl's name?* or *How many pigs are there?* so that students won't feel as if they're being tested. Very soon, children will begin to read selected predictable and other easy -to-read books on their own or with minimal teacher support. Similar discussions should ensue with open-ended questions that invite student response. The sooner children come to see that reading is all about discovering, thinking, and learning, the better.

There is little disagreement on the fact that comprehension is the goal of reading. Too often overlooked, however, is that meaning making, i.e., comprehension, is a major contributor to the learning to read process. In other words, comprehension is not merely an effect of decoding and fluency; it is also a cause. The Five Pillars are inter-related, recursive, and interactive. When comprehension is given early priority, phonics becomes easier, as does fluency and vocabulary.

When do we provide instruction in comprehension? We begin on day one and continue each day thereafter. *Don't wait! Do it now!*

* *Teaching Children to Read* (2000): <https://www.nichd.nih.gov/publications/product/247>