

## Lucy Calkins, Creator of Reading Workshop, Responds to 'Phonics-Centric People'

By Sarah Schwartz on November 27, 2019 11:50 AM



One of the giants of the literacy world is grappling with the recent push for the "science of reading"—and responding to critics who say her early reading program doesn't align to evidence-based practice.

Lucy Calkins, the Teachers College professor known for her popular reading and writing curricula, **released a statement last week** in response to "the phonics-centric people who are calling themselves 'the science of reading.'"

Growing interest in science-based early reading instruction, spurred by **reporting from American Public Media's Emily Hanford**, is leading some districts and states to rethink their practices. Calkins' statement suggests that some of the most established curriculum providers, whose materials have popularized many of the instructional strategies now facing pushback, are feeling similar pressure.

Calkins' program, the Units of Study for Teaching Reading, uses a workshop model. Teachers demonstrate the skills and habits that good readers have, and then students practice them on their own, with teachers acting as guides. The program takes a constructivist approach to education, minimizing direct instruction.

These materials are used in schools across the country. A forthcoming Education Week survey will provide some numbers—the results take a look at which commercial reading programs teachers are using most often in their classrooms.

But critics of the programs have said that Calkins' approach is counter to the scientific evidence base on reading instruction.

Decades of research has shown that teaching students which letter combinations represent which sounds—teaching systematic phonics—is the most effective way to ensure that children can read words. (For more on how children learn to read, see our **research explainer**.)

In Calkins' early reading lessons, in grades K-2, children are encouraged to start to see themselves as readers, get excited about exploring print, and learn reading strategies. There is comparatively little explicit instruction in how to decode words.

Recently, Calkins released her first Units of Study in Phonics program. But marketing materials for the curriculum imply that phonics should not be a central focus in early grades. "Phonics instruction needs to be lean and efficient," the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project website reads. "Every minute you spend teaching phonics (or preparing phonics materials to use in your lessons) is less time spent teaching other things."

In her recent statement, Calkins tows a similar line: She clearly states that students need explicit phonics instruction. At the same time, she cautions against an overemphasis on phonics—citing concerns that it would take away focus from other areas of reading. There's no one way for instruction to improve, she writes, and focusing on phonics might not be the solution for every school.

She also argues that it can be valuable for early readers to use multiple sources of information, not just letters, when they're figuring out what words say.

### **'Guessing' at Words?**

This notion—that children can use multiple sources of information to solve words—is based on an idea that many teachers know as "three-cueing," or MSV. In this system, students are taught to figure out what words say by using the pictures or context clues (meaning), the structure of the sentence (syntax), or the letters on the page (visual).

Students have the option to sound out tricky words, but they can also use other clues instead to guess what the word might be.

Critics argue that cueing directs children to take their eyes off of the words, and note that the **strategy hasn't shown benefits in controlled experiments**.

In her statement, Calkins argues that there's no such thing as the three-cueing approach to reading. MSV is only used as an assessment system, she writes, to analyze what source of information might have led a student to make an error.

Still, she writes that it's helpful for an early reader to predict words based on all of the information sources available. "It would be wise for teachers to say, 'Try it,' instead of 'Guess,' as, of course, some children do literally just glance at the word or the picture and take wild guesses, which is not what anyone desires or intends," she writes.

Calkins also discusses decodable and predictable books. Decodable books give students practice with the specific letter-sound correspondences that they have learned, while predictable books are designed to give emerging readers "support" from illustrations and repetitive sentence structures. Both are meant to be used as stepping stones to more authentic texts for kids who are just learning how to read. But critics of predictable books argue that they encourage guessing and attempting to memorize words as wholes.

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*For more coverage of early reading, see our ongoing series: **Getting Reading Right***

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While Calkins writes that it would be "a wise move" to include decodable books in a young student's "reading diet," she also defends the practice of using predictable books.

"A few months into kindergarten, a child can 'read' a book that says, 'I can read the newspaper,' and 'I can read the recipe,' if the child relies on the pattern of the repeating text, on the pictures, and on first letters," Calkins writes. "I have found value in those books. The child is approximating reading. Her experience is not unlike that of a bike rider who relies on training wheels."

Teachers who have used the Units of Study for Teaching Reading have pushed back against Calkins' argument that three-cueing isn't an instructional strategy.

In an **open letter** to Calkins in response to her statement, Margaret Goldberg, a literacy coach in California, wrote that guessing was encouraged in Units of Study.

"I had a chance in 2016 to attend the Teachers College Reading and Writing Program ('TCRWP') Foundational Skills Institute. At the Institute, we discussed cueing instruction when our trainer displayed the three-cueing Venn diagram and explained the purpose behind 'strengthening MSV' lessons.

Our trainer frequently used the word 'guess' to describe what good readers do. Your programs, Units of Study for Teaching Reading and Units of Study for Teaching Phonics, use

that word as well."

Pamela Snow, a reading researcher, also responded Calkins' statement. In a **post on her blog**, Snow called Calkins' concern about overemphasis on phonics a straw man argument.

No one on "the science of reading side of the debate" would argue for phonics-only instruction, Snow wrote. Young students also need instruction in vocabulary, comprehension, fluency, and writing, which "has been resoundingly argued by science of reading advocates for decades," she wrote.

It's not clear whether Calkins' statement signals any forthcoming changes to her materials. (Calkins was not available for comment before deadline.)

*Image: Lucy Calkins —Peter Cunningham-File*