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# Have whole language and balanced literacy been mischaracterised and misapplied?

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Goldenberg**



Is this why people keep taking sides in the long-running Reading Wars?

Educators who subscribe to a perspective variously known as ‘whole language’, ‘balanced literacy’ or ‘three-cueing’ sometimes complain that their views are mischaracterised as ignoring letter–sound associations and phonics. They claim, not unreasonably, that whole language et al. practitioners don’t deny that letters, sounds, and phonics matter; just that there’s more to reading words than letters, sounds and phonics. They argue that a more productive approach to reconciling differences between these perspectives and those typically associated with the so-called ‘Science of Reading’ would be to adopt a ‘both/and’ perspective, seeing merit and value in both perspectives rather than taking sides and arguing for one over the other.

It’s an admirable view, but I’m not sure how viable it is when we look closely at what the differences involve.

The differences between whole language/balanced literacy/three-cueing on the one hand and a perspective better aligned with the best research evidence on the other are subtle. Subtle but extremely important.

(I’m using balanced literacy/three-cueing/whole language interchangeably, which I realise will rankle some people, but in common usage, they are all very similar and derive from the same set of assumptions and premises. It’s ok with me if anyone disagrees. Just trying to be as transparent as possible.)

Balanced literacy et al. could be a-ok, but only if there were an acknowledgment that connecting visual cues (letters or symbols in written language) to auditory cues (sounds in the spoken language) is fundamental and non-negotiable. Somehow, auditory cues get left off the list of ‘cues’, or it’s simply assumed they will get taken care of ... some way, somehow.

Yes, three-cueing, balanced literacy and whole language advocates, believers and practitioners acknowledge that letters and sounds matter. Here’s the sticking point: letters and sounds more than just ‘matter’. You must know the letters and their corresponding sounds to become a successful reader in an alphabetic language. Why? Because the sound–symbol connections are what connect oral language (human speech) to written language (print), and this connection is necessary to become literate in any written language.

In an alphabetic language, the written symbols are letters. For reading to be possible, the letters must get connected to the sounds they represent in the oral language, even if that representation is often irregular with many exceptions to rules and patterns. The behavioural and classroom research makes a compelling but not definitive case. It’s the neuroscientific research that I believe nails it. I’ve written about this [previously](#).

Facility with oral language does not equate to facility with written language. Oral language is necessary for acquiring written language, and advancing oral language also helps written language advance. Facility with written language then returns the favour by helping to propel oral language. But written language can only help oral language once written language is acquired. And for written language to be acquired, there must be a strong connection forged between the

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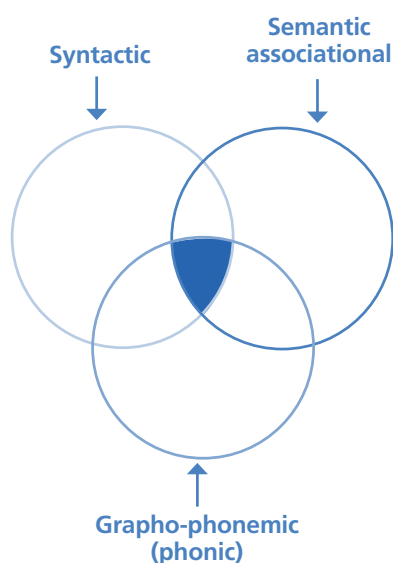
sounds of the language and how those sounds are represented in print.

This is what I believe the three-cueing (and balanced literacy and the former whole language) folks simply do not get. And it's where sides, perhaps unavoidably, are taken. Even *must* be taken.

Learning those sound-to-symbol connections is not trivial. For some learners, it's extremely difficult. But the fact is – yes, it's a fact, based on current evidence, some of which is not even new – that making the connection between oral and written language is the gateway to literacy. That is true in every oral and written language that has been studied, and my guess is it's true for any oral and corresponding written language. But new discoveries might yield new facts. I try never to lose sight of that particular fact.

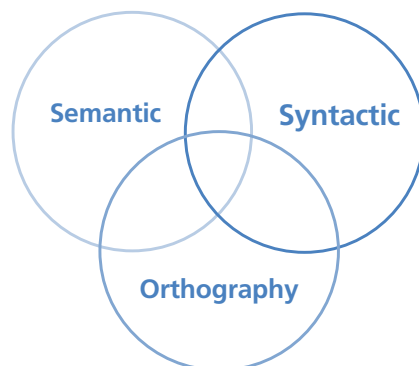
The three-cueing concept that David Pearson helped usher in a half-century ago refers to what 'mature' readers do. David did not use the term 'three-cueing' in his 1976 article. But he introduced into the reading world the familiar figure depicting the three-circle Venn diagram of balanced literacy. The figure's caption (Figure 1, below) reads: "Sources of information used in reading. Mature reading occurs when all three sources of information are used in concert."

Figure 1  
Sources of information used in reading. Mature reading occurs when all three sources of information are used in concert.



Adapted from Pearson, D. 1976. A psycholinguistic model of reading. *Language Arts*, 53(3), 306–314.

Figure 2  
The three-cueing system



Adapted from Pearson, D & Tierney, R. 2024. *Fact-checking the Science of Reading: Opening up the conversation*. Literary Research Comms.

Bear in mind that 'mature' readers are readers who have already gained facility in automatic and accurate word recognition, fluent reading and comprehension – that's why they are called mature readers! They are able to use three, or however many, cues (called 'sources of information' in Figure 1) more or less interactively. Not so with beginning and early (aka 'novice') readers. And that's the rub.

One of the 'sources of information' in the 1976 figure (Figure 1) is 'grapho-phonemic (phonic)'. This means that the connection between letters (grapho) and sounds (phonemic) is already there. It's been forged; otherwise, you'd need two circles, one each for the visual and aural sources of information.

Instead, they occupy a single circle. Representing them (or it?) as *one* source of information assumes that two pieces of information from different perceptual systems – visual and aural – can function as a single 'source of information' (later to be relabelled a 'cue').

This assumes an awful lot. Connected visual and aural cues/sources of information certainly can function as a single source of information. But the connection between the two needs to be learned somehow. We are not born knowing that speech sounds are represented by written symbols, much less which sounds are represented by which symbols. There is nothing intuitive about this. The connections do not occur spontaneously.

Yet this is exactly what Tierney and Pearson, and many others who use the diagram in Figure 1, are suggesting, that the letter–sound links already exist. For mature readers, they do. But if applied to novice readers, who are students learning to read, this model assumes they already have letter–sound knowledge, that is, they've connected the visual and aural cues and made them into one.

Think about that.

Isn't this figure patently ridiculous if applied to students learning to read? *They're not mature readers*, right? Of course right.

But hang on. Tierney, Pearson and others found a fix. Look at the 'The three-cueing system' diagram from their recent 'Fact-checking the Science of Reading' monograph (Figure 2). It simply eliminates the inconvenient 'phonemic/ phonic' part. 'Grapho-phonemic' turns into 'orthography', which means proper, correct or conventional spelling.

That's great (leaving aside it's gone from an adjective to a noun), unless of course you're – again – trying to use that model to guide teaching reading to novice readers. Orthography is a great thing but not helpful when it's unconnected to the sounds of the oral language it's supposed to represent.

Unfortunately, that three-circle Venn diagram with the 'three-cueing' moniker has propagated like an epidemic since 1976, with a variety of things filling in the 'grapho-phonics' or 'orthography' circle.

In some renditions, the cue is labelled 'visual', with the not-useful additional cue suggestion: 'Does it look right?' How would a novice reader know whether a written word they can't read and are trying to figure out 'looks right'? Here's another question: Does that even make sense?

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Google three-cueing and you'll find quite an assortment of mutations.

Lucy Calkins' version of three-cueing sometimes prevails, as three circles are identified with an M (for meaning), S (for structure, or maybe syntax?) and V (for visual). M/S/V for short.

Or maybe MSV stands for 'multiple sources of information', as in the quote below. (How and why 'information' is represented by a V is inexplicable. But maybe that's not what she means.)

Calkins' version of three-cueing is interesting, as she has claimed, "I do not know anyone, however, who defines his or her method for teaching reading as 'the three cueing systems (sic)'." Maybe they (and she) don't define their method as three-cueing, but check out this depiction of what she considers exemplary teaching of reading in her training book, *A Guide to the Reading Workshop*:

*Natalie helped the children search and cross-check multiple sources of information (MSV). She coached kids to rely first on meaning, by searching the picture and thinking about what was happening, and then to decode the print. She continued moving through this process on subsequent page of the shared text, assessing how children called upon the syntax and meaning on previous pages to support their new predictions.*

Really, doesn't it sound an awful lot like three-cueing even if not 'defined' as three-cueing? You get your meaning (the picture first) and what's happening, then decode the print, then call upon syntax and meaning on the previous pages to support 'predictions'.

Isn't it a little, ummm, duplicitous to claim, "I don't know anyone who defines their method as 'three-cueing'?"

Then, what about the 'decode the print' part? Yeah, just look at the pictures, decode the print, check out the syntax and meaning on the previous page. All to support your 'new prediction'.

But hang on, again: What if the student can't or isn't very good at decoding? Or are we back to 'grapho-phonetic' cues in this 'no-one I know calls it three-cueing' version of three-cueing,

where you are just supposed to assume those letter-sound connections have been adequately forged and therefore 'decode the print' can just be tossed off casually as one the 'sources of information' at students' disposal?

Reminds me of when I decided to try to change the clutch of my car by myself. I had changed the oil in my car, so I thought, how hard could changing the clutch be? So, I got a manual for my make and model, found 'change the clutch' in the table of contents and happily turned to the page.

Step 1: 'Remove the transmission.' I took it to a mechanic.

Here's why it is unhelpful to adopt a both/and stance to the two sides: 'Three-cueing' got stuck to David's diagram like a bad rash, turning a figure representing what mature readers do into a very poor way of thinking about how to help novice readers become mature readers. And that's where we are today with three-cueing (and balanced literacy and the late, unlamented whole language), an unhelpful and misleading approach to helping learners become readers.

We must get this figure, image, concept or idea changed so that the sounds of the language that are represented by written symbols get into the mix as a priority item – not a nice-to-have but a must-have. Then, along with other must-haves such as vocabulary and language development, knowledge, and so forth, we can get serious about addressing the woeful state of our literacy instruction, with so many students way underperforming due to poor instruction.

The sounds of a language you're learning to read are a critical aspect of learning to read. You need to know what sounds are being represented by symbols that are themselves meaningless and only gain meaning when associated with the sounds of the oral language.

Getting this understanding firmly in place in the minds, materials and hands of those responsible for teaching children to read is one of our central challenges, certainly as educators but also as concerned citizens. The costs to individuals and society of low literacy are substantial.

This challenge is made stiffer by the implacable opposition of three-cueing, balanced literacy and whole language advocates who do not or cannot recognise the importance of connecting sounds and symbols.

Yes, they say phonics matters. The quote from Lucy Calkins says as much.

But the bit of teaching she holds up as exemplary (and others along these lines) is in no way supported by the overwhelming preponderance of reading research. To the contrary, anyone who knows the research will tell you that it should be professionally anathema to teach that way.

Then as if that weren't enough, the whole thing gets bollocked up further as some people, realising that 'three-cueing' has become a bit worrisome, just like 'whole language' and 'balanced literacy', run away from the term, replacing it with deflections such as MSV ("no one I know uses three-cueing") and 'comprehensive literacy'. When offered these shape-shifting alternatives, be sure to ask what exactly is meant. And good luck getting a clear understanding.

So, bottom line: I'm afraid we do have to take sides. Making sure learners can connect sounds to symbols accurately, automatically and efficiently is non-negotiable. Other things are too. But for reasons that elude me, we indeed can agree on these other things. They don't raise the ruckus that learning about the letters and sounds does, and I don't think I'll ever understand why.

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*An edited version of this article originally appeared on the author's blog, [We must end the reading wars... now.](#)*

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