

Never Too Late: Aesop's Tales as an Antidote to Apathy

Ann Ellsworth

Introduction

An influx of variables—driven by research, business, or technology—shape the ever-evolving field of education. Most recently, fresh challenges emerge as schools adjust to the aftermath of the pandemic and legislative shifts. These topics that educators did not study as part of their teacher preparation also affect classroom circumstances. While interdisciplinarity and embracing new realities inform conversations and advancements, it is critical to acknowledge the teachers who do the work. Educators meet students where they are and commit to their advancement; their pedagogical expertise guides learners and accomplishes lesson objectives. Early literacy educators possess not only academic knowledge about the inner workings of the English language but also have practical knowledge about helping diverse learners. As change agents, implicit in their job descriptions is the understanding that they address the challenges that come with social stratification, poverty, rural realities, urban district bureaucracy, education policies, and budget cuts. They are doers and believe that an individual can make a difference. In this paper, the author shares a story that illuminates the vital nature of practitioner knowledge about essential aspects of early reading instruction. Additionally, the narrative illustrates how attitudes, engagement, and motivation contribute to producing students who can read and choose to do so. Teachers meld these complexities to support learners in their literacy journeys. This essay examines the vital nature of teacher skill and confidence with the alphabetic principle and finding the just-right text to motivate a reluctant reader.

Nancy's Story

As a faculty member working in higher education and responsible for helping K-8 elementary education majors complete teacher licensure requirements, I had just finished a critical review of variables necessary for skill development in my junior-level early literacy fundamentals class. We were engaged in a round of question-asking when class took an unexpected detour. What follows is my abbreviated retelling of one parent's courageous sharing of a story about the multiple challenges that derailed her son's early reading instruction. For this essay, "Nancy" requested that while her son's literacy journey be shared, so others might be reminded of the importance of teacher observations and decision making, her identity remain anonymous.

During the pandemic when "Todd" was in first grade, his regular classroom instruction transitioned to fully online learning at home. As reluctant homeschoolers during the lockdown period, Todd and his family focused more on drilling basic math facts with flashcards and completing health enhancement physical exercises than reading. Nancy, working from home and spending hours in front of her computer, now had to deal with the unfamiliarity of supervising two grade-school children while managing a household. Todd's introduction to learning to read got off to a rocky start. A long-term substitute teacher and plenty of missed school due to doctor's appointments and ear infections was how his mother characterized her son's first-grade experience. With a non-permanent classroom teacher to monitor Todd's missing work and assess his acquisition of essential language concepts, his assessments were sporadic. Missing core phonics principles impacted his decoding and encoding skills and sapped his motivation. Able to apply phonics principles with regularly spelled three-letter consonant-vowel-consonant (CVC) words, Todd could read very simple decodable text. However, the CVCe (silent-e) generalization was another vowel layer. Knowing that CVC words generally have a short vowel sound whereas

one-syllable CVCe words make a long vowel sound required more refined language competency. Skilled readers easily switch vowel sounds, but developing readers need explicit instruction and lots of practice (Blevins, 2017). Another concept that proved troublesome involved the soft and hard sounds of *c*, which represents more than one phoneme. For example, *c* can stand for /k/ when followed by *a*, *o*, or *u*, as in *cat*, *cot*, *cut*. However, the same letter can make the /s/ sound when positioned before *e*, *i*, or *y*, as in *cent*, *city*, *cycle*. Spelling also frustrated Todd, especially sight words that had similar letter patterns, such as *where* and *were*. Discouraged by the multiple challenges, Todd acted out his frustration; now his reading difficulties had compounded into behavioral issues.

Gaps in Todd's understanding of the alphabetic principle surfaced in second grade when more advanced letter patterns—vowel doubles and diphthongs—emerged as particularly challenging. According to his mother, Todd continued to dodge reading while his older sister avidly devoured full-length books. Reading the first of Laura Ingalls' *Little House* (1932) books launched her love affair with the entire series. Todd's sister had discovered the joy of reading.

As is the case for many young readers, reading at home can be a hit or miss approach, yet practice makes a difference. Often in primary grades, teachers send parental reminders to read to or with their child every night (Fisher et al., 2023; Trelease, 2019). Teachers generally recommend daily reading for 20 minutes (Nagy & Herman, 1987). Reading with Todd before bedtime proved to be a continual struggle; requiring even ten minutes elicited angry outbursts. Busy schedules also interrupted these intended sessions, and Nancy admitted that reading practice became more infrequent. She despaired—would her son ever discover the magic of reading or were his struggles something that would plague him throughout school?

Nancy tried to recall her own learning to read experiences but could not remember a time when she did not know how to process text. For her, reading was something she could always do, much like tying shoelaces or brushing teeth. She did not have to think about those tasks, for they were automatic. *Curious George* (Rey, 1941) and *Frog and Toad* (Lobel, 1970) were childhood favorites, and she desperately wanted Todd to have the same positive associations with books that she enjoyed.

During a pivotal parent-teacher conference, Todd's teacher and Nancy addressed the deteriorating circumstances—his underperformance and disruptive behavior. The instructor presented a summary of her detailed notes and penetrating observations. It was apparent. Addressing missing foundational knowledge was urgent to ameliorate a devolving situation. Grateful for the list of specific word recognition skills that identified why her son's sub-par performance ranked him so poorly in comparison with other second graders, Nancy realized that intervention would be necessary. She also realized that the wait-and-hope approach would only cause more delays without remedying the situation. Together, they formulated an immediate plan for after-school tutoring and dedicated home practice. Two weeks later Todd started working with Ms. B, a retired teacher who volunteered at the school. Ms. B and Todd "clicked." Her kind manner and encouraging words eroded Todd's initial hostility. After just a few after-school sessions, Todd admitted to his mother that he enjoyed the twice weekly 30-minute lessons in the school library. Tutoring lessons targeted letter generalizations, practice with decodable text, and sight words. When Todd realized how his sight word knowledge impacted his reading fluency, he eagerly anticipated their flashcard drill of high-frequency words. Ms. B turned the exercise into a game, with Todd keeping the word cards that he could read without help. They drilled for accuracy and speed and charted each day's progress. This record keeping strategy worked. Todd

enjoyed the competitive aspect, each time hoping to improve on his previous accomplishment. It was not long before Nancy and the classroom teacher both observed his change in attitude. Before tutoring, Todd's objections to the family nightly reading ritual were accompanied by protestations and resentment. His lack of confidence and decoding struggles made the evening exercise a tortuous routine. In school, his disruptive behavior bothered other learners. However, tutoring changed that. When Todd realized that Ms. B was expecting him to practice and there would be no negotiation, he acquiesced, at first, just "to get it done," but as their friendship grew, he became more genuinely cooperative. Much relieved, Nancy shared that bedtime reading ceased to be yelling match.

One day, Ms. B introduced Todd to a slim volume of short stories. The brevity of Aesop's (2023) fables was appealing. As they took turns reading "The Grasshopper and the Ant" and "The Dog and his Shadow," the stories intrigued him. The familiar structure of animal characters with a problem and sometimes unexpected endings unlocked Todd's apathy. In fact, at the start of tutoring, he reminded Ms. B to make time to read these animal stories, and she assured him they read another Aesop's tale together.

In class, Nancy's animated demeanor revealed her own excitement for how this collection of stories made a difference in shifting her son's reticence about books. She also credited the tutor's commitment and dedication to addressing Todd's weaknesses and believed the intensive focus on essential letter combinations catapulted his sight word recognition. The junior-level class of prospective teachers remained spellbound as Nancy confessed that she thought her son might forever dodge reading, just as some children avoid doing their chores. She worried that she had failed as a parent because her resistant son read below grade level. The room was still as Nancy closed her story, advising her teacher candidate peers to be vigilant and proactive in the

early identification of students who struggle with print. Waiting wastes valuable time, she observed. As they asked clarifying questions, a lively discussion ensued, but all too soon the clock indicated class was up. Conversations continued as teacher candidates filed out of the room, contemplating the profound responsibility teachers wield in shaping student readers. Previously, they had understood teacher influence but only in general terms; now because of Nancy's first-hand account, they had a fresh perspective of just how much parents depend on classroom teachers to be watchful, alert, and knowledgeable experts who take initiative and provide intervention.

Effective Early Literacy Fundamentals

There may be no other skill as fundamental to future success in school and life than the ability to read with fluency, deep understanding, ease, and confidence. Teachers instruct, model, and develop students' literacy skills, so learners are not just school-time readers, but life-time readers (Fisher, 2023; Muglish, 2014). For K-12 students, school success is highly dependent upon literacy competencies because reading across subject areas drives the curriculum, especially at the middle school and secondary levels (Morrow, 2020; Nagy & Townsend, 2012). Nonetheless, some children continue to struggle with reading. Missing key concepts in the early grades can result in inefficient decoding, disfluent reading, anemic vocabulary knowledge—all of which impair comprehension in later grades (Fisher, 2023; Heilman, 2006; Rightmyer, 2006). Learning losses during COVID school closures certainly did not help students who might have missed necessary language instruction, yet that was the reality for many youngsters (Pressley, 2021; Zamarro et al, 2001).

Teaching reading begins with understanding the sound structure of English (Yopp & Yopp, 2002). Phonological awareness skills are taught with activities that focus on rhyme,

syllable units, onset and rime, and phonemes (Adams, 1990; Moats, 2020). Hearing syllables in words; stretching out a word and counting sounds, or phonemes; understanding letter-sound correspondences and the alphabetic principle; and sight recognition of familiar, high-frequency words comprise this essential set of skills. A driver in early literacy success is phonics, the study of sounds and how they map to symbols, or letters, which requires the reader to use a part-to-whole approach in breaking down words and then reassembling them (Heilman, 2006).

Understanding the grapheme-phoneme relationship has been supported by research (Ehri, 2006; Invernizzi, 2002; Savage, 2011), thus securing its placement in the hierarchy of essential reading skills. Although most literacy educators agree that phonics instruction helps users access the alphabetic principle, it should not be a stand-alone skill but used in concert with other critical word-recognition approaches to support comprehension (Berninger et al., 2009; Blevins, 2017; Savage, 2011). Heilman (2006) discussed the proper amount of phonics instruction as “the absolute minimum the child needs to become an independent reader” (p. iii). Excessive phonics instruction usurps critical class time that should be devoted to reading practice and can erode a child’s interest (Savage, 2011). As in many areas that are skill-driven, having foundational knowledge, practicing the basics, and bringing an open mind and receptive attitude contribute to advancement.

Besides word recognition skills, a reader needs to understand language and comprehend text. Background knowledge paired with vocabulary—breadth and precision—contribute to reader comprehension (Bear et al., 2016; Gill, 1992; Nagy & Townsend, 2012). Other critical comprehension skills involve making inferences, understanding metaphor and other types of figurative language, and genre features (Fisher, 2023). When combined, word recognition and language comprehension represent sophisticated cognitive abilities. As Pearson and Tierney

(2021) noted, there are waves of research as scholars strive to understand this complex cognitive skill that is a portal to all other learning. Teachers who are knowledgeable about how English works are in a better position to support their students' literacy development (Bear, 2016; Gill, 1992; Invernizzi, 2002). Even though English is complex, multi-faceted, and full of competing letter patterns, skilled teachers as pedagogical experts with a deep understanding of language structure make abstract concepts accessible to young children (Blevins, 2017; Fisher, 2023). Supporting students' skill development directly impacts reader confidence (Bear et al., 2016; Savage, 2011). With a strong knowledge base, teachers confidently guide and empower their learners.

Conclusion

Stories have universal appeal and serve as memorable illustrations of teaching-learning interactions in variable contexts. Additionally, they tell of classroom realities without being preachy. Practitioners understand the real work of teaching is messy—it is a complex endeavor, fraught with decisions. Further, teachers know how words, decisions, and actions can hinder or elevate learners (Moats, 1999). Capitalizing on opportunities for growth, discovery, and risk-taking, educators seek to develop in their students a genuine enthusiasm for literacy, and it often begins with one child at a time. In the example shared in this article, Nancy's story of her son's reading journey showcased a classroom reality that is not unique. For a host of reasons, children struggle with print, but teachers commit to turning around those circumstances. Nancy's experience illustrates how a teacher's commitment to action resulted in a positive tutoring experience. Then Ms. B contributed to Todd's development with her gentle encouragement.

I am indebted to Nancy who willingly shared her story. As a result, our community of teacher candidates reflected on how they might leverage classroom circumstances to plant hope

and to effect positive consequences for all children, especially for students like Todd. When teachers understand the interrelatedness of the many subcomponents of literacy learning that over time consolidate and increase in sophistication, they are, in effect, tour guides that point the way to strategic, confident reading. Commitment to children and pedagogical expertise transform lives; skilled readers become empowered readers.

Even though the landscape of literacy education is evolving, there are some universal truths. While those who hold public office come and go, while families relocate and establish new routines, and while education slogans and programs enjoy popularity but then fade, the enduring truth remains. Teachers are the throughline in education who prompt, lead, and champion students to discover reading as a joyful endeavor (Snow, 2005). As Bob Dylan's (1964) song lyrics note, the times they are a-changin', and literacy educators continue to do what they have done for decades—nurture not only school-time readers but life-time readers.

References

- Adams, M. J. (1990). *Beginning to read: thinking and learning about print*. MIT Press.
- Aesop (2023). *Aesop's stories for children*. Usborne.
- Bear, D., Invernizzi, M., Templeton, S., & Johnston, F. (2016). *Words their way: Word study for phonics, vocabulary, and spelling instruction*. Pearson.
- Berninger, V., Abbott, R., Nagy, W., & Carlisle, J. (2009). Growth in phonological, orthographic, and morphological awareness in grades 1 to 6. *Journal of Psycholinguistic Research* 39(2), 141-163.
- Blevins, W. (2017). *Phonics from A to Z: A practical guide*. Scholastic.
- Dylan, B. (1964). The times they are a-changin'. Retrieved from <https://www.bobdylan.com/songs/times-they-are-changin/>
- Ehri, L. (2006). Alphabets instruction helps children learn to read. In R.M. Joshi & P.G. Aaron (Eds.), *Handbook of orthography and literacy* (pp. 649-678). Lawrence Erlbaum.

- Fisher, D, Frey, N, & Lapp, D. (2023). *Teaching reading. A playbook for developing skilled readers through word recognition and language comprehension*. Corwin.
- Gill, J. (1992). Focus on research: Development of word knowledge as it relates to reading, spelling, and instruction. *Language Arts*, 69(6), 444-453.
- Heilman, A. (2006). *Phonics in proper perspective*. Pearson.
- Ingalls Wilder, L., (1932). *Little house in the big woods*. Harper Trophy.
- Invernizzi, M. (2002). Concepts, sounds, and the ABCs: A diet for a very young reader. In D. M. Barone & L. M. Morrow (Eds.) *Literacy and young children* (pp. 140-157). Guilford Press.
- Lobel, A. (1970). *Frog and toad are friends*. Scholastic.
- Moats, L. (1999). *Teaching reading is rocket science: What expert teachers of reading should know and be able to do*. Washington, DC: American Federation of Teachers.
- Moats, L. (2020). *Speech to print: Language essentials for teachers*. Paul H. Brookes.
- Morrow, L. M. (2020). *Literacy development in the early years: Helping children read*. Pearson.
- Muglish, S. (2014, Feb. 10). The power of literacy in the transformation of a nation. *The New Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.newtimes.co.rw/section/read/73001>
- Nagy, W., & Herman, P.A. (1987). *Why can't I skip my 20 minutes of reading tonight?* Greg Genus.
- Nagy, W., & Townsend, D. (2012). Words as tools: Learning academic vocabulary as language acquisition. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 47(1), 91-108.
- Pearson, P.D., & Tierney, R. (2012). *A history of literacy education: Waves of research and practice*. Routledge.
- Pressley, T. (2021). Factors contributing to teacher burnout during COVID 19. *Educational Researcher*, (50)5, 325-327.
- Rey, H. A. (1941). *Curious George*. Scholastic.
- Rightmyer, E. C., McIntyre, E., & Petrosko, J. M. (2006). Instruction, development, and achievement of struggling primary grade readers. *Reading Research and Instruction*, 45(3), 209–241. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19388070609558449>
- Savage, J. (2011). *Sound it out! Phonics in a comprehensive reading program*. McGraw-Hill.

Snow, C., Griffin, P., & Burns, M. (2005). *Knowledge to support the teaching of reading: Preparing teachers for a changing world*. Jossey-Bass.

Trelease, J. (2019). *The read-aloud handbook*. Penguin.

Yopp, R., & Yopp, H. (2000). Supporting phonemic awareness development in the classroom. *The Reading Teacher* 54(2), 184-198.

Zamarro, G., Camp, A., Fuchsman, D., & McGee, J.B. (2001). *Understanding how COVID-19 has changed teachers changes of remaining in the classroom*. Education Reform Faculty and Graduate Students Publication.