Outstanding International Impact

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Ending the Reading Wars

Research outlining the science behind how children learn to read is transforming the way reading is taught in classrooms around the world and helping potentially millions of children improve their life chances through better literacy skills.

Impacts

Research resulting in concrete recommendations on how to teach reading has countered unevidenced assumptions about how children learn to read with evidence drawn from 15 years of scientific study, transforming policy and practice among key literacy stakeholders:

- **Teacher training.** The evidence is transforming teacher practice globally through local networks of teachers teaching their peers (eg, The Research Schools Network); and, in the US, Professor Anne Castles advised Deans for Impact, an organisation committed to well-prepared teachers, which works with 60 teacher training programmes that have trained 15,000 teachers to date and plan to reach similar numbers of teachers annually going forward.

- **Reading professionals:** The research team's ground-breaking article 'Ending the Reading Wars', provided an evidence-based framework for communicating reading science reaching over 4 million people worldwide, including 12 major educational leadership organisations - the ASCD (113,000 members in 19 countries), the Thomas B. Fordham Institute (USA), ResearchEd (UK), the Reading League (USA); as well as parent advocacy groups including MomsRising (1 million members); dyslexia charities; and the major educational publishers.

- **National policymakers:** Findings underpin the introduction in 2020 of state-wide phonics screening in New South Wales, Australia; and were cited in the Literacy Strategic Plan for Massachusetts, and in the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) Improving Literacy in Secondary Schools guidance. Professor Kate Nation advised the UK All Party Parliamentary Group on Literacy. The government's UK Research and Development Roadmap (2020) stated that new approaches advocated by the research had a positive effect on reading 'similar to reducing class sizes by one third'.

- **International strategy:** The findings underpin the World Bank's new goal of halving global illiteracy by 2030 outlined in its 2019 10-year Ending Learning Poverty strategy. Professor Kathy Rastle has advised on research-based, structured lessons plans for teachers being developed initially in Mozambique and Angola then for use in classrooms across the developing world.

> " *The research of Castles et al is having profound impact where it matters most — on the practice of teachers responsible for fostering child literacy. We know, scientifically, how to help students learn to read — they have made an unparalleled contribution to ensuring this knowledge is applied for generations to come.*"
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> **Benjamin Riley**
> *Founder and CEO, Deans for Impact USA*

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About the research

In some low-income countries more than half of children leave school with poor reading skills: even in high-income countries 15-20% of school leavers struggle to read well. Speaking comes naturally to the vast majority of children but reading does not. Children must be taught how to read and debate has raged for decades over how best to teach reading.

Research by Professors Kathy Rastle, Kate Nation and Anne Castles has unpicked the science and cognitive processes behind skilled reading and turned that knowledge into concrete recommendations for use by teachers worldwide. Their synthesis of evidence from more than 300 research studies was published two years ago in a highly influential article, Ending the Reading Wars.

Based on scientific evidence gathered over 15 years, the research team propose a balanced approach to reading instruction, underpinned by a deep understanding of how reading develops. "By balanced we don't just mean a bit of every approach thrown together," Professor Rastle points out. Rather, research indicates that reading requires three sets of skills: learning how to crack the alphabetic code, becoming fluent at recognising words, and understanding written text. To crack the alphabetic code, children need instruction in the link between letters and sounds (phonics). This provides the necessary foundation on which to build the other vital skills of fluent word reading and text comprehension. Mastery of all three skills enables a child to read well.

"Our Ending the Reading Wars article is important because it has influenced people across the entire literacy ecosystem," Professor Rastle explains. "A change this fundamental in the way reading education is delivered – and which potentially affects every child in the world – requires everyone involved to be talking about the science of reading and how it can be used to improved outcomes for children. Today, educational leadership organisations, publishers, policymakers, teachers and parents are talking about the science of reading. That wasn't happening three years ago."

Further information

Professor Kathy Rastle (Royal Holloway, University of London), Professor Kate Nation, (University of Oxford) and Professor Anne Castles (Macquarie University, Australia) are Finalists in the Outstanding International Impact category in the ESRC Celebrating Impact Prize 2020.

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Ending the reading wars
https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1529100618772271

Ceasefire in the reading wars
https://www.tes.com/magazine/article/ceasefire-reading-wars

Hard words: why American kids aren't being taught to read
https://www.apmreports.org/episode/2018/09/10/hard-words-why-american-kids-arent-being-taught-to-read

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