



Constructivist Teaching by Heart

Newsletter, Nov./Dec. 2025

"Putting the child at the center of their learning."

If They Don't Read Much, How Are They Going to Get Good?

In 1977, Dick Allington, a long-time literacy researcher, wrote an article titled, "If They Don't Read Much, How They Gonna Get Good?" about the lack of reading practice in literacy lessons, where activities are broken down into minute parts and taught in isolation. Intervention lessons weren't adding more phonics or text-level reading practice; they were decreasing it.

Later, Pat Cunningham, a long-time phonics and fluency expert, followed up on Allington's work in a 2005 article with exactly the same title for the ILA journal, *The Reading Teacher*. She wrote about how incentive programs actually made kids read less. She cited studies showing that kids who needed more reading and writing practice were the students who read the least of anyone. The incentive programs actually decreased motivation to read. Cunningham also advocated using read-alouds (both fiction and nonfiction) to model reading and engage students in high-quality books they can get excited about, citing studies linking young adults' motivation to read and the amount of time they read to the presence of compelling read-alouds in their school years.



Yes, as a nod of appreciation, I (Krista) "borrowed" their title for this article. Almost 50 years after Allington published his research, we are still concerned about how much kids are actually reading and whether they can possibly get good if they don't do it very much. And we've added writing, the reciprocal process of reading, to the concern.

As a teacher who tries to magnify the amount of time students spend reading and writing texts in daily lessons, I worry that education today is losing sight of the end goal of developing motivated readers with stamina. The motivation to read closely for meaning may be at risk of being lost amid a confluence of worksheets, whole-group slide demonstrations with little active engagement, and iPad-delivered lessons that students breeze over or skim at best.

A few weeks ago, I attended a professional learning session on fluency instruction offered by Wiley Blevins, a national science of reading phonics expert. His session focused on phoneme fluency, word reading fluency, and connected text fluency. I was surprised by Blevins' comments about how our whole-class and small-group reading instruction does not include enough word reading and text-level reading and writing. He shared that to become fluent readers, children must read more words in their lessons, gain more practice, and consistently apply their phonics knowledge to decode and encode continuous text.

Furthermore, Blevins stressed the importance of reading aloud and shared one of his favorite picture books, which is also one of mine! The session ended with Wiley Blevins sharing Tim Rasinski's and his own theory and resources on echo, choral, repeated, partner, and familiar reading activities. (Tim Rasinski is a widely published, long-time reading fluency expert whose work I have utilized over the past few decades.) In the session, Blevins particularly emphasized the power of readers' theater in the classroom.



“WHAT?!”, I thought. These are not the literacy activities science of reading experts are known for promoting. Yet these activities are part of my reading intervention lessons because I value using repeated reading, readers' theater, and lots of word and text reading practice, as they are grounded in best-practice research for teaching struggling readers and contribute significantly to my students' growth. (Even Dr. Suess created *Green Eggs and Ham* and *The Cat in the Hat*, among other titles, for this purpose over 60 years ago.) I was so happy to see this aspect of literacy taught by Blevins, a science of reading expert.

In ***Constructivist Teaching by Heart: A Child-Centered Approach for Educators, PreK-3***, we write extensively about reading mileage, shared and repeated readings, readers' theater, and writing every day in many ways. We take a stand for the importance of increasing students' reading mileage in daily literacy instruction, which is even more critical for those who have difficulty with reading and writing.

In his seminal book, *A Fresh Look at Phonics Instruction (2017)*, Blevins shares “10 Common Causes of Phonics Instruction Failure and How to Avoid Them” (p. 199). His first four causes revisit similar concerns outlined by Allington and Cunningham 48 and 20 years ago. See what you think:

Cause #1 - “Inadequate or Nonexistent Review and Repetition,” meaning that there should be significant daily instruction and practice for students offering varied “opportunities to read, construct, sort, write, and apply phonics rules daily”.



Cause #2 - “Lack of Application to Reading and Writing Experiences” - Blevins states, “unfortunately, the instruction we provide our struggling readers is usually dominated by isolated skill work when in fact what these students need is even more application work. Regardless of their level, students must be thinking about their toolbox of phonics skills in ways that are useful to becoming skilled readers and writers”.

Cause #3 - “Inappropriate Reading Materials to Practice Skills” Blevins says, “The connection between what we teach and what we have young learners read has a powerful effect on their word-reading strategies and their phonics and spelling skills. It also affects their motivation to read.”

Cause #4 - “Ineffective Use of the Gradual Release Model” - In many classrooms with struggling readers, the “I DO” gets much more time than the “WE DO” and “YOU DO” and the majority of time is

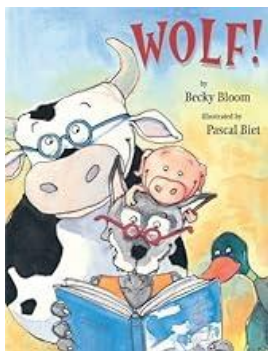


spent in “I DO”, such as in demonstration activities with students passively sitting and listening or parroting the teacher. Blevins suggests “monitoring the amount of opportunities students have to think, interact, try, and apply”.

As **constructivist teachers** work to strike a balance between the curriculum and the needs of the students in their classrooms, we can look to Blevins’ recent work and Allington and Cunningham’s past work. This research can help us to plan for leaned-in students who have ample time to practice the skills needed for reading longer and stronger as they grow into fluent, capable, and motivated readers.

EPILOGUE: So, what was that book that Wiley Blevins presented as one of his favorites, which is also one of my favorites? *WOLF!* by Becky Bloom.

Here is how Scholastic (www.Scholastic.com) describes the book:



Once upon a time, a howling wolf leaped at a pig, a duck, and a cow, and got no reaction. No running away, no frightened oinks or quacks or moos. "What's wrong with you?" growled the wolf. "Can't you see I'm a big and dangerous wolf?"

"I'm sure you are", replied the pig. "But couldn't you be big and dangerous somewhere else? We're trying to read. This is a farm for educated animals..." "Educated animals?" That gets the wolf thinking. Maybe he, too, could learn to read. And as this witty and winning tale reveals, an exciting new chapter in the wolf's life begins!

In the story, the wolf first learns to read one word at a time, then runs them all together, and finally reads beautifully with phrasing and expression. You'll notice that his agency as a reader also grows as the book goes on. *WOLF!* is a truly delightful picture book that creatively portrays a journey to becoming a reader. I hope you check it out (pun intended).

Citations:

Allington, R.L. (1977). If they don't read much, how they ever gonna get good?" *Journal of Reading*, 21, 57–61. Artley, S.A. (1975).

Calvert, K., & McMillan, D. (2024). *Constructivist teaching by heart: A child-centered approach for educators, PreK-3* (1st ed.). Routledge.

Cunningham, P. (2005), "If they don't read much, how they ever gonna get good?" *The Reading Teacher*, 59: 88-90.



Rasinski, T. V. (2010). *The Fluent Reader: Oral and Silent Reading Strategies for Building Word Recognition, Fluency, and Comprehension* (2nd Edition). New York: Scholastic.

If You Don't Read Much, How Are You Going to Get Good? Reflection Questions:



How do you incorporate phonics and fluency practice into your reading and writing instruction?



How are you using read-alouds to encourage students' reading development?



What have you noticed about your students' reading stamina, and what can you do about it?

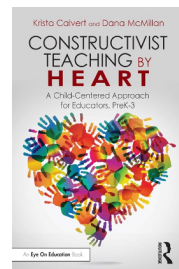
We want to hear from you!

*Share your comments about this newsletter topic, **If They Don't Read Much, How Are They Going to Get Good?** [here](#).*

PONDER BOX

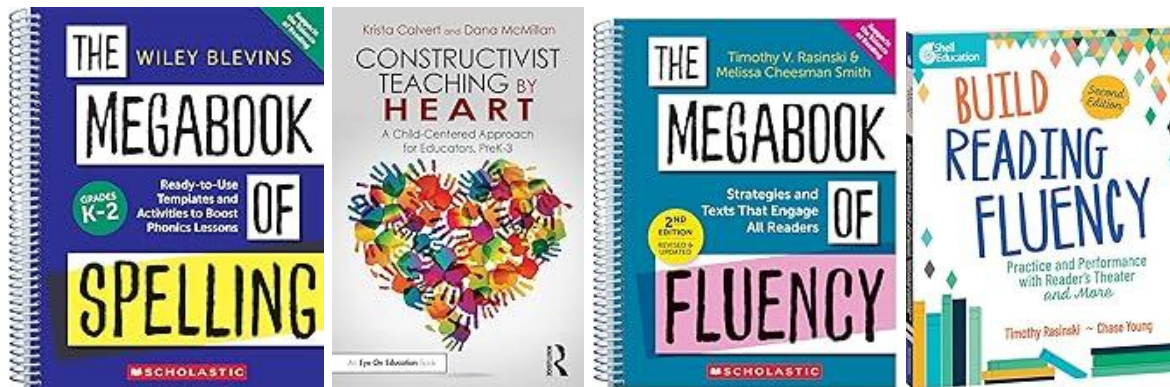
"Noted literacy expert Pat Cunningham (2005) wrote about how it's hard to become a better reader when you don't read very much. Yet, we've watched many reading lessons where the students did little to no actual reading. They are practicing the parts of reading, talking about reading, and getting ready to read, but not reading. At some point, I started to address this as "eyes-on-text" time, meaning the act of reading continuous text across the page, minute after minute. When children do this a lot, they are gaining **reading mileage**.

-*Constructivist Teaching by Heart: A Child-Centered Approach for Educators, PreK-3*, p. 84.



Teaching with High-quality Resources

We recommend these current resources chock full of constructivist teaching strategies and hands-on methods for supporting children's individual reading and writing development.



Thanks for reading! Do you have comments, ideas, or questions for the newsletter? Submit [here!](#)

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