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Staying “Above the Fray” with Julia B. Lindsey’s Insights on Effective Reading Instruction

Troy Hicks

Central Michigan University, troy.hicks@cmich.edu

Emma Chappel

Bullock Creek Elementary School, chappele@bcreek.org

Kirstin Fish

North Branch Elementary School, kfish@nbbroncos.net

Anne Hosking

Calhoun Intermediate School District, hoskinga@calhounisd.org

Jill Johnston

Hillcrest Elementary School, jjohnston@almaschools.net

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Authors

Troy Hicks, Emma Chappel, Kirstin Fish, Anne Hosking, Jill Johnston, Jodi Juergens, Georgianna Murray, Lindsay Picarski, Heidi Turchan, Meghan K. Block, and Chad Waldron

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Troy Hicks



Emma Chappel



Kirstin Fish



Anne Hosking



Jill Johnston



Jodi Juergens



Georgianna
Murray



Lindsay
Picarski



Heidi Turchan



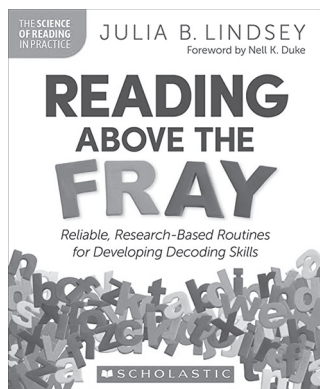
Meghan Block



Chad Waldron

Lindsey, J. (2022). *Reading above the fray: Reliable, research-based routines for developing decoding skills*. Scholastic Professional.

In the fall of 2022, The Literacy Center (TLC) at Central Michigan University (CMU) sponsored a five-session professional development book study series focusing on Julia Lindsey’s *Reading Above the Fray*



(Scholastic). Under the leadership of Chad Waldron and in collaboration with two other CMU professors, Meghan Block and Troy Hicks, a group of 38 K-6 literacy teachers met every other week from September to November, reading two or three chapters and sharing insights from their use of Lindsey’s strategies in their classroom. We are also honored to share that this book club series was made possible through the generosity of the family and friends of Kathy Blahunka, a CMU alumnae, a first grade teacher and beloved individual.

In our final meeting, as part of their breakout room discussion, we provided participants with a choice.

They were invited to either talk about the final chapter, or—as a number of teachers whose summary of Lindsey’s work and sharing of their own ideas we will see below chose to do—they could contribute a brief segment to a crowdsourced review of *Reading Above the Fray*. We invited them to move into breakout rooms focused on chapters of interest, to find a key quote from the chapter, and then to collaboratively write 3-5 sentences about the strengths of the chapter and the key takeaways.

In the paragraphs that follow, we hear from eight teachers who focused their breakout room conversations on the chapters noted here. In this final meeting and, indeed, across the entire series of book club discussions, teachers found Lindsey’s ideas and strategies to be timely, engaging, and useful. Teachers in the book club would all agree with the importance of Lindsey’s stated goal of unpacking “how foundational skills were taught traditionally and how they may be taught better, based on research” (p. 14).

With that, let’s hear from our colleagues who are implementing Lindsey’s approach into their classrooms, especially with her focus on decoding, phonological awareness (with a specific focus on phonemic awareness), morphology (which looks at the smallest units of language), and fluency. Throughout the book, she provides numerous examples and instructional routines, describing her process for nurturing readers through foundational skills instruction.

Chapter 1: Foundational Skills

Contributed by Jill Johnston and Georgianna Murray

“The goal of foundational skill instruction is to give children the most efficient and effective path to fluent word reading so that they can spend time and energy on comprehension and knowledge-building work.” (p. 22/23)

Foundational skills—including alphabet knowledge, phonological awareness, rapid automatic naming, concepts of print, decoding, and fluency, among others—aren’t reading, but are critical to reading. Lindsey opens her book with this important reminder. As teachers in

the early elementary classroom, it’s critical to remember that foundational skills are not the end in themselves; rather, they are a means to an end. The goal of the foundational skill instruction is to give students the most efficient and effective path to fluent reading. The chapter opens up on pages 16-7 with an overview of different publications and examples of varying definitions of foundational skills, ranging from the *2008 Report of the Early Literacy Panel* (2010), *The Common Core State Standards* (2010), and the *What Works Clearinghouse Practice Guide* (2016).

We liked Lindsey’s idea that—although these reports showed some differences in what those skills are—together they create a comprehensive list of the most critical skills for reading success. Or, as Lindsey writes on page 23 with a visual representation of Gough and Tunmer’s model of the “simple view” of reading (1986), foundational skills are required because “strong reading comprehension cannot occur without strong decoding skills and language comprehension abilities.”

Lindsey acknowledges that, quite often, foundational skill instruction can appear less engaging; however later in the chapter, on pages 29-31, we loved how Lindsey reminded readers that important considerations in the foundational skill instruction include both attention to joy and cultural responsiveness. In fact, these two elements are so important that Lindsey added them as two more critical principles of effective literacy instruction. As she underscored their significance, Lindsey drew from the work of highly-regarded scholars such as Gholdy Muhammad, Liz Kleinrock, and Zaretta Hammond, among others.

In this chapter that helps provide an overview of foundation skills, Lindsey reminded readers that it is important to find a balance between the texts you read with students and what that text represents both *for* and *about* our students. We know it’s hard to find good decodable texts, but we must also keep in mind the representation of various families, communities, and cultures as we incorporate these texts in our classrooms. Lindsey’s own website, *Beyond Decodables* (www.beyonddecodables.com) is a great place to begin.

Must Read Texts

Chapter 2: Decoding

Contributed by Emma Chappel and Anne Hosking

“Phonics instruction should include decoding. However, decoding sometimes gets overlooked in phonics instruction...” (p. 34)

In this chapter, Lindsey explains the crucial skill of decoding and how it encompasses a majority of foundational reading skills. “When readers decode a word,” Lindsey contends, “they use knowledge of the connections between graphemes (letters) and phonemes (sounds) in that word” (p. 33). Even though decoding is seemingly simple to a skilled reader, Lindsey points out the multilayered nature of decoding and how it can easily be overlooked in phonics instruction.

Lindsey further notes how motivating the process of decoding can be for students, mostly because of the feeling of accomplishment and pride that successful decoding can produce. By sharing the ways in which decoding is a key to unlocking successful reading, Lindsey strengthens her case for explicitly teaching decoding skills, summed up quite well on page 37 in the section, “Decoding is the Best Long-Term Option,” which outlines the many ways that decoding can help readers create an orthographic map of letter-sound correspondence.

Then, on page 39, Lindsey clearly outlines the five elements of decoding, arguing that “[d]ecoding is the product of phonemic awareness and knowledge of sound-spelling correspondences,” and she lists five interrelated skills and subskills as 1) Oral language and vocabulary, 2) Print concepts, 3) Phonemic awareness, 4) Alphabet knowledge, and 5) Sound-spelling knowledge.

Through this chapter, Lindsey reminds us that “[c]reating phonics robots who can’t understand texts is obviously never the goal” (p. 44) and, instead, we need to help students apply their decoding skills in context, ending with a very helpful outline of “A Possible Daily Routine for Teaching Foundational Skills” (p. 45).

Chapter 5: Phonemic Awareness

Contributed by Heidi Turchan, Kirstin Fish, and Jodi Juergens

“Phonemic awareness lends itself to explicit, systematic instruction because of its clear developmental progression.” (p. 70)

Lindsey devotes this chapter to the importance of phonemic awareness in children’s literacy development. The chapter served as a necessary reminder of the importance of explicit instruction related to phonemic awareness. As Lindsey contends, phonemic awareness is only a “part”—only a part but arguably the most important part—of phonological awareness. Phonemic awareness draws our conscious attention to the individual phonemes, a critical skill to build letter-sound knowledge. Though very important, Lindsey asserts that phonemic awareness instruction can often get overshadowed by a rush to implement phonics instruction.

To counter this, Lindsey reminds us that, as we support reading development, teachers must remember that phonemic awareness instruction is critical for decoding. She points out that phonemic awareness grows along with reading; to accomplish this goal, we must provide students with opportunities to practice. To that end, routines are key, and they should be quick and concise. For instance, on page 72, she reminds educators that they should not “wait for a magical moment” to link specific letters to our phonemic awareness routines; instead, they should be part of our everyday teaching.

Also, the charts that Lindsey provides on pages 66 and 68 are helpful for educators in order to better understand the development of phonemic awareness skills. From there, she reminds us that utilizing phonological awareness assessments can help to determine where students’ deficits may lie. This reminder is important because it supports the work many teachers are doing in classrooms and helps define the important implications the results of these assessments can and should have on the instruction we deliver.

Lindsey’s ideas on page 73 sum things up well: it is

an essential instructional swap to spend more time on segmenting and blending (phonemic awareness), and less time on rhyming (phonological awareness). Taken together, this chapter was highly informative and offered many useful ideas to implement in our literacy instruction. The important take-away for us was Lindsey's suggestion to use short daily routines with students that connect phonemic awareness to phonics instruction.

Chapter 7: Sound-Spelling Knowledge

Contributor: Lindsay Picarski

"Make a quick shift in your phonics lesson tomorrow by adjusting a routine you already know and love. Take inspiration from my suggestions here about word sorts. See if you can add more word reading, spelling, and noise (yes, noise) into your phonics lesson tomorrow to make sure children are not only learning sound-spelling correspondences, but applying them, too" (p. 102).

"Since the National Reading Panel's (NRP) report (2000), it has been widely accepted that phonics instruction is the most efficient and effective way to teach word reading," notes Lindsey at the beginning of the chapter, on page 90. She also argues: "In truth, however, silence during reading time should be viewed as a massive red flag... When children are learning sound-spelling relationships and applying them, they should be extremely vocal" (p. 90).

After reading Chapter 7, the expectations and outcomes that I have set for my students completing their literacy centers and daily work has changed. Julia Lindsey encourages us to let students talk with one another and practice these sound correspondences, hearing it multiple times. In my classroom, students are now more engaged and vocal during literacy center rotations, and the phonics "noise" is music to my ears!

Some additional ideas from the book encourage educators to plan phonics instruction using a clear scope and sequence. For instance, on page 98, Lindsey provides a great example for a possible routine for introducing sound-spelling relationships that includes a warm-up, review, a sound-spelling introduction, word reading,

spelling, and a specific connection to reading and writing. Moreover, she reminds us to "[j]ust say no to random word-list spelling tests!" (p. 99).

With these ideas, Lindsey ends the chapter with the reminder that "[o]ur focus of phonics instruction should always be on reading and spelling" where "children [are] becoming better users of phonics to read and write" (p. 103). Again, I can see ways to bring Lindsey's ideas into my classroom immediately, and I will be sure to bring some "phonics noise" to our learning community!

Conclusion

As early elementary educators continue to work toward more inclusive, equitable, and engaging literacy instruction, Lindsey's book provides us with many ideas for making small instructional changes that can lead to big impacts. As Jill Johnston and Georgianna Murray summed it up: "The book is very straightforward and easy to read; it's not a textbook. It's enjoyable and easy to comprehend. The instructional swaps and easy to implement ideas makes it realistic to apply the next day."

And, Lindsey remains involved in the conversation, encouraging teachers not to fall into the trap of "either/or" thinking. In a series of recent tweets, she began by arguing:

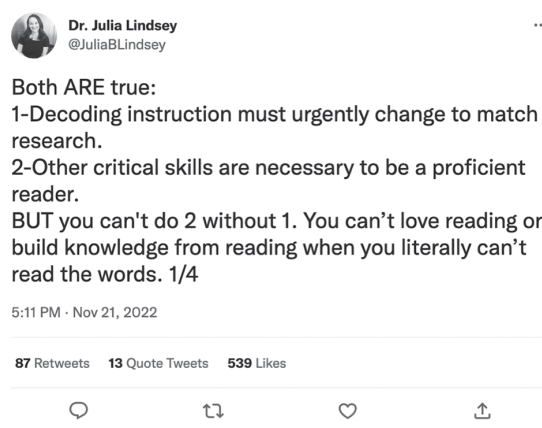


Figure 1. Tweet from Julia Lindsey on November 21, 2022: "Both ARE true: | 1-Decoding instruction must urgently change to match research. | 2-Other critical skills are necessary to be a proficient reader. | BUT you can't do 2 without 1. You can't love reading or build knowledge from reading when you literally can't read the words. 1/4"

Must Read Texts

We are all looking forward to continuing the conversation, too, with Lindsey's visit during the Michigan Reading Association 2023 conference. From her accessible and timely book, and these upcoming professional learning opportunities, we are eager to learn better how all of us might continue to teach reading above the fray.

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Contributors

Dr. Troy Hicks is a professor of English and education at Central Michigan University in Mt. Pleasant, MI. He can be reached at <hickstro@gmail.com>.

Mrs. Emma Chappel is a first grade teacher at Bullock Creek Elementary School, Bullock Creek School District, in Midland, MI. She can be reached at <chap-pele@bcreek.org>.

Ms. Kirstin Fish is a Reading Specialist at North Branch Elementary School in North Branch, MI. She can be reached at <kfish@nbbronzcos.net>.

Ms. Anne Hosking is an Early Literacy Consultant at Calhoun ISD. She can be reached at <hoskinga@calhounisd.org>.

Ms. Jill Johnston is a reading intervention teacher at Hillcrest Elementary, Alma Public Schools, in Alma, Michigan. She can be reached at <jjohnston@alma-schools.net>.

Mrs. Jodi Juergens is an Early Literacy Coach with the Muskegon Area ISD in Muskegon, Michigan. She can be reached at <jjjuergens@muskegonisd.org>.

Mrs. Georgianna Murray is a Literacy Coach / Reading Interventionist at Mason Elementary, Grosse Pointe Public Schools, in Grosse Pointe, Michigan. She can be reached at <murrayg@gpschools.org>.

Ms. Lindsay Picarski is a first grade teacher at North Branch Elementary School in North Branch, Michigan. She can be reached at <lpicarski@nbbronzcos.net>.

Mrs. Heidi Turchan is an Early Literacy Consultant at Calhoun ISD and a National LETRS Professional Learning Facilitator. She can be reached at <turchanh@calhounisd.org>.

Dr. Meghan Block is an associate professor of early literacy at Central Michigan University in Mt. Pleasant, MI. She can be reached at <block1m@cmich.edu>.

Dr. Chad Waldron is an associate professor of education at Central Michigan University in Mt. Pleasant, MI. He can be reached at <chad.waldron@cmich.edu>.