

# Listening Guide for *A Novel Idea*

## Episode 1: “The Science of Reading: Where Are We Now?”

*This listening guide is for caregivers interested in learning more about literacy instruction and educators who want to facilitate discussion within their higher education classroom or professional development setting. In this episode, we explore the current state of the science of reading movement. Visit [our website](#) for the transcript and sources for this episode.*

## Before You Listen

### Pre-Listening Discussion Questions

*Before you listen, consider the following questions. This can be a self-guided or discussion-based activity. Activating your background knowledge and considering your thoughts about these topics can help you connect the information in the episode to your own experiences.*

1. What do you already know about how kids learn to read? What do you already know about the science of reading? How did you first hear about it? What questions do you have about it?
2. In the episode, you will learn that some literacy instruction methods have persisted in classrooms despite being ineffective at teaching kids how to read. Reflect on the impact that ineffective instructional methods can have on early readers. Who gets left behind? What happens when kids stop receiving literacy instruction in school before they are reading proficiently?
3. *For educators:* Reflect on the training you’ve received to become a teacher. How did this training prepare you to teach reading? What teaching practices did this training equip you with? What expectations around literacy instruction did your training program give to you?
4. *For caregivers:* Reflect on the literacy instruction that your children have received in school. What has this instruction looked like? What skills have they learned? Now, think back to the literacy instruction you received. How does it compare to the literacy instruction that your children receive?

## Press Play

### Break It Down

Here, you can find the key points from the episode, organized with thematic headings and time stamps. Key terms related to literacy instruction are italicized and defined.

#### **Educators' Perspectives on the Shift to the Science of Reading**

(00:00-04:11)

In episode one of *A Novel Idea*, Host Meg Mechelke brings us to the Spencer Community School District, introducing us to Principal Melissa McGuire and Elementary Teachers Tara Rabenburg and Kimberly Moser. They express how their initial skepticism around switching to a teaching approach aligned with the *science of reading* (SOR) dissolved once they began to implement the new instructional approach.

As defined by [The Reading League](#), the *science of reading* (SOR) is “a vast interdisciplinary body of scientifically based research about reading and issues related to reading and writing.” For more info, see our blog post [“What Is the Science of Reading?”](#)

#### **Findings from the National Reading Panel**

(4:11-9:10)

Mechelke details the National Reading Panel, which was established in 1997 to determine which reading instructional strategies had the most scientific support. A key conclusion from the panel was that reading instruction should include *explicit and systematic instruction* in five key areas: *phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and reading comprehension strategies*. The National Reading Panel brought national attention to these findings, and in the past two decades, the conversation around reading instruction has only grown.

In *explicit instruction*, a teacher directly states what students are expected to know and do. Skills and strategies are taught to, rather than discovered by, students. *Systematic instruction* is thoroughly planned and progresses gradually from easier concepts or skills to more complex ones.

*Phonemic awareness* is the ability to isolate and manipulate individual sounds within spoken language.

*Phonics* is a teaching and learning process based on applying knowledge of letter-sound correspondences and spelling patterns to learn to read written text.

*Fluency* is the ability to read text at an appropriate rate and with accuracy and expression to build understanding.

*Vocabulary* refers to the words a person understands or uses in written or spoken language.

*Comprehension* refers to making meaning from text by using prior knowledge, understanding vocabulary and concepts, making inferences, and forming connections between critical ideas. Some examples of *comprehension strategies* include predicting, summarizing, identifying main ideas and details, visualizing, and understanding an author's purpose and perspective.

## The Impact of Podcasts

(9:10-11:00)

Mechelke notes that podcasts in particular have contributed a lot to the conversation around literacy instruction, including the award-winning podcast [Sold A Story](#) from APM Reports Correspondent Emily Hanford.

## Melissa & Lori Love Literacy

(11:00-16:35)

Mechelke interviews Melissa Loftus and Lori Sappington, two educators and co-hosts of the [Melissa & Lori Love Literacy](#) podcast, on the viral growth of the science of reading movement. They discuss the “how” and the “why” behind many educators’ and caregivers’ interest in the science of reading.

## What Do You Know About Literacy Instruction?

(16:35-18:22)

Mechelke interviews people around Iowa City to get a sense of what average adults know about how kids learn to read. They find that while some know a lot, others know very little.

## The End of Literacy Instruction

(18:22-20:12)

Mechelke and Dr. Kymyona Burk—the senior policy fellow for early literacy at [ExcelinEd](#)—discuss how, for many students, third grade is the last year they receive explicit reading instruction.

## The Fight for Literacy Instruction

(20:12-27:19)

In conversation with Kareem Weaver, Mechelke describes how the fight for evidence-based literacy instruction in the classroom is a social justice issue. Weaver is the second vice president of the Oakland NAACP and the chair of the organization's education committee. He is also the co-founder and executive director of [FULCRUM](#).

## Outdated Literacy Instruction

(27:19-30:26)

In conversation with Kim Taylor, an Iowa mother, Mechelke describes outdated literacy instruction methods, such as memorization and guessing. Although these methods are still used in schools today, they do not teach important literacy concepts such as phonics, *syntax*, and *morphology*.

*Syntax* refers to the order of words in a particular language—the rules that explain how words can and cannot combine.

*Morphology* is the study of how words are formed using meaningful word parts.

## SOR Advocacy

(30:26-32:23)

Mechelke describes how many states are advocating for SOR-based literacy instruction and discusses different plans and legislative policies with Dr. Kymyona Burk.

## The Phonics Conversation

(32:23-34:40)

Mechelke explains that, while it is equally important to teach reading comprehension strategies, such as vocabulary and *print awareness*, there has historically been more conversation around phonics instruction, as many have argued against its importance despite the large body of scientific evidence supporting it.

*Print awareness*, also known as the concepts of print, is a child's understanding of how print "works." When developing print awareness, children learn that print carries meaning, is organized in a specific way, and that there are rules for how one reads and writes.

## After You Listen

### Post-Listening Discussion Questions

*Continue the conversation with the following questions. This can be a self-guided or discussion-based activity. Considering these post-listening questions can deepen your comprehension of the episode's key ideas and allow you to connect the episode's topics to your own experiences.*

1. At the start of the podcast, Mechelke describes the "sound wall" in a kindergarten classroom—a "big bulletin board taking up most of the back wall, covered in different letters and letter combinations and pictures of what your mouth looks like when reading those sounds aloud." After listening to the full episode, what do you imagine are the benefits of a wall like the one Mechelke describes?
2. At the start of the episode, teachers from the Spencer Community School district describe how students' attitudes towards their reading program became "much more positive" when they switched to an SOR-aligned instructional approach. Focusing on the socio-emotional impacts of reading struggles, what are some effects of SOR-aligned approaches that you can envision?
3. In the episode, Melissa Loftus says that "you can adopt a curriculum, but especially for those foundational skills, you have to have the teacher knowledge as well." Discuss the difference between what a curriculum provides to a

classroom versus what teachers can provide to a classroom. Where might there be gaps in the resources and information curriculums provide? What kind of knowledge should teachers possess to fill those gaps?

4. When discussing the “achievement gap” and the “gap to excellence,” Kareem Weaver explains that there are “layers to this thing.” Reflecting on the studies Mechelke described from Stanford, Vanderbilt, and John Hopkins Universities, as well as the gap to excellence that Weaver describes, summarize what those “layers” of national reading barriers are. How can SOR-based literacy instruction help address the larger issues at hand?
5. *Looking ahead*: Why do you think the inclusion of phonics in literacy instruction has sparked so much debate throughout history and beyond, with decades of compelling scientific research now demonstrating its importance? Why might educators have been convinced that methods such as guessing (like Kim Taylor described) were effective in developing proficient reading skills?

## Go Beyond the Episode

*Want to learn more? The following list contains resources and studies that were mentioned in the episode as well as further reading materials on key topics from the episode. For a full list of sources, visit [our website](#).*

**[“What is the Science of Reading?”](#)**: In this blog post by Nina Lorimor-Easley, find out why it’s important to have a common understanding of such a widely used term and take a closer look at the type of research that makes up the science of reading.

**[“Scope and Sequence: What Is It, and How Do Educators Use It to Guide Instruction?”](#)**: In this blog post by Meg Mechelke, learn how to determine whether a literacy program provides systematic and thorough instruction for all students.

**[“Is It the Materials or the Instruction That Make For a Good Reading Program?”](#)**: In this blog post by Dr. Deborah K. Reed, read why teaching in an explicit, systematic way is at the heart of the best-performing reading programs.

**[“Racial Disparities in School Discipline Are Linked to the Achievement Gap Between Black and White Students Nationwide”](#)**: In this news article from Stanford Graduate School of Education, read about a Stanford-led study investigating the discipline gap and achievement gap between Black and White students.

["Making the Change: One District's Science of Reading Journey"](#): In this news article by Meg Mechelke, learn how Spencer Community School District's universal pivot to SOR-aligned literacy instruction began, what the implementation process looked like, and how the shift has impacted educators, students, caregivers, and administrators.

["Reporting on Reading With Emily Hanford"](#): Learn more from Emily Hanford in this blog post. The journalist discusses her background as an education correspondent, her hope for the science of reading movement, and more. Listen to Hanford's investigative journalism [Hard Words](#) and her 2022 podcast series [Sold a Story](#).

["Loving the Science of Reading With Melissa and Lori"](#): Learn more from Melissa Loftus and Lori Sappington in this blog post. The podcasters and educators talk about the science of reading, their favorite podcast moments, and more.

["Putting the Science of Reading Into Policy With Dr. Kymyona Burk"](#): Learn more from Dr. Kymyona Burk in this blog post. Burk discusses her thoughts on the science of reading, literacy laws, and the importance of foundational reading skills.

["Coming Together to Support Children's Literacy With Kareem Weaver"](#): Learn more from Kareem Weaver in this blog post. The educator and activist talks about the science of reading movement, the importance of collective action, and more. Weaver's work is featured in the film [The Right to Read](#), a documentary about the fight to provide young readers with the most foundational indicator of life-long success: the ability to read.