

Listening Guide for *A Novel Idea*

Episode 5: "What's the Deal With Whole Language?"

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 controversy around whole language as a literacy approach. Visit [our website](#) for the transcript and sources for this episode.

Before You Listen

What You've Heard So Far

Previously on *A Novel Idea*, Host Meg Mechelke reviewed early literacy research that opposed the belief that reading was associated with intelligence and only possible for some students. Mechelke interviewed Dr. Fumiko Hoeft about the neural processes and pathways characteristic of dyslexia and discussed literacy instruction methods with Nina Lorimor-Easley. In conversation with Dr. MaryAnne Wolf and Dr. Reid Lyon, Mechelke detailed some of the research behind these methods.

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 episode to your own experiences.

1. Have you heard of the "whole language" approach to reading instruction? What do you already know about this approach? How did you first hear about it? What questions do you have about it?
2. What are the possible limitations of research that only considers certain student demographics?

3. *For educators:* Reflect on your training to become a teacher. Did you learn about phonics-based and whole-language approaches to reading instruction? Did your teacher education program prioritize/emphasize one approach over the other? What language and evidence were used to discuss each method?
4. *For caregivers:* Think about the literacy instruction your child has received in school. Does your child decode when they read, or are they encouraged to depend on context to determine the meaning of unfamiliar words?

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.

Introducing Whole Language

(00:00 - 2:40)

In episode five of *A Novel Idea*, Host Meg Mechelke introduces the *whole language* debate with Teacher and Presidential Education Advisor Phyllis Hunter's argument for research in literacy instruction.

According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, *whole language* is "a method of teaching reading and writing that emphasizes learning whole words and phrases by encountering them in meaningful contexts rather than by phonics exercises."

The Three-Cueing System

(2:40 - 7:09)

Mechelke describes the *three-cueing system* as an implementation of the whole-word approach and an alternative to *explicit, systematic instruction* based on research. An example with whole language advocate and Professor of Education Yetta Goodman shows how this approach prioritizes guessing over decoding.

The *three-cueing system* encourages students to use semantic (What would make sense?), syntactic (Does it sound right?), and grapho-phonetic (Does it look right?) cues to determine the meaning of unfamiliar words.

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.

Literacy as a “Guessing Game?”

(7:09 - 15:46)

In conversation with Education Journalist Natalie Wexler and IRRC Literacy Research and Program Coordinator Kate Will, Mechelke challenges Education Professor Kenneth Goodman’s claim that reading is a “psycholinguistic guessing game,” instead emphasizing the importance of *phonics*.

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

The Reading Recovery Program

(15:46 - 26:07)

Mechelke introduces Educator and Psychologist Dr. Marie Clay’s *Reading Recovery*, a literacy intervention program that focused on discovery and hands-on learning over explicit instruction with mixed results. Dr. Henry May’s findings in a follow-up study suggest that Reading Recovery did not equip students with long-term literacy learning skills, potentially because the program did not include systematic decoding instruction.

Reading Recovery was a literacy intervention program featuring one-on-one personalized instruction with students, operating under the assumption that all students have the ability to learn independently through increased text exposure.

Is a Literacy-Rich Environment Enough?

(26:07 - 34:02)

In conversation with Wexler and Reading Researcher Dr. Maryanne Wolf, Mechelke counters Education Professor Robyn Ewing's whole-language argument with a look at why one size doesn't fit all; children with dyslexia and other students who grow up without access to literacy-rich environments benefit more from phonics instruction than context-based approaches, indicating that learning to read is not solely intuitive. In conversation with Neuroscientist and Educator Dr. Lyon, Mechelke explores which student demographics may be left behind by the expectation that early readers absorb literacy instruction from their environment. Hear more from Lyon on our [blog](#).

The Simple View of Reading

(34:02 - 38:04)

Mechelke first introduces the *Simple View of Reading* proposed by Psychology Professors Dr. Phillip Gough and Dr. William Tunmer—a formula that states that reading comprehension is the product of both word recognition and language comprehension. Whole-language advocates prioritize the language comprehension piece of the formula by emphasizing independent reading of authentic texts.

The *Simple View of Reading* is a model that describes the abilities that are required to read: word recognition and language comprehension. In this model, the relationship between these two skills is multiplicative rather than additive. This means that both skills are necessary in order to comprehend what you are reading. Previously, it had been believed that strong word recognition skills were not necessary if language comprehension was strong. However, research now tells us that if either skill is weak, reading comprehension will be affected negatively, no matter how strong the other skill is.

Phonics and Enjoying Reading

(38:04 - 40:48)

In conversation with Kymyona Burk, the senior policy fellow for early literacy at [ExcelinEd \(The Foundation for Excellence in Education\)](#), Mechelke addresses the myth that phonics instruction decreases children's love for reading. Hear more from Burk on our [blog](#).



Whole Language and “Meaningful Texts”

(40:48 - 47:11)

In conversation with Educators Kathy Rushton, Melissa Loftus, and Lori Sappington, Mechelke considers whole-language advocates’ belief that reading “meaningful texts” is more important than learning to decode. Hear more from Melissa and Lori on our [blog](#).

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. In this episode, Kate Will explained the importance of phonics instruction for emergent readers. How do you expect literacy instruction methods to shift as a reader masters phonics and is able to decode proficiently?
2. Let’s think about literacy instruction and privilege; what can be done to ensure that learning to read is accessible to all children?
3. *Looking ahead:* After learning about the controversial whole-language approach, what do you expect the “Reading Wars” to entail?

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](#).

[“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.

["The Neuroscience of Reading with Dr. G. Reid Lyon"](#): Learn more from Dr. G. Reid Lyon in this blog post. Lyon discusses his experience in the fields of neuroscience and reading research.