

Listening Guide for *A Novel Idea*

Episode 6: “The Reading Wars”

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 revisit the reading crisis in California and explore the culmination of literacy instruction debates, called the “Reading Wars.” Visit [our website](#) for the transcript and sources of this episode.

Before You Listen

What You’ve Heard So Far

Previously on *A Novel Idea*, Host Meg Mechelke introduced the whole-language approach to reading instruction and described several arguments for and against this approach. Mechelke addressed how literacy research can inform instruction and make reading instruction more equitable.

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. In this episode, you will learn about the debate over literacy instruction that occurred in California during the 1990s. Why do you think this state garnered national attention for its reforms? What factors might affect how other states engage in the literacy debate?
2. At times, debates on the best ways to teach reading have become political. What political associations do you have with different approaches to reading instruction? Do some approaches seem more conservative or progressive to you? Why? Where do you think those associations come from?

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.

Tensions Rise Over Literacy Instruction

(00:00 - 3:25)

In episode six of *A Novel Idea*, Host Meg Mechelke acknowledges rising tensions in the debate over *phonics* versus *whole-language* approaches to reading instruction in the 1990s, sharing Marva Collins's story to show that some educators had been attuned to this literacy crisis long before this critical moment.

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

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."

Whole Language Methods in California

(3:25 - 13:05)

Drawing upon the statements of California Superintendent of Public Instruction Bill Honig, Mechelke describes the whole-language English Language Arts (ELA) framework in California and the responses from phonics instruction advocates such as Activist Marion Joseph and Neuroscientist Dr. Reid Lyon.

Politics in the Literacy Debate

(13:05 - 19:05)

In conversation with Neuroscientist Dr. Maryanne Wolf and Literacy Researcher Jeanne Chall, Mechelke explains how the

literacy debate became politicized—the phonics approach being associated with the political left and the whole-language approach being associated with the political right. Mechelke mentions Education Reporter Emily Hanford’s coverage of the economic side of the Reading Wars through her podcast [Sold a Story](#).

Gaps in Literacy Assessment

(19:05 - 21:40)

Reading Researcher Timothy Shanahan highlights how gaps in literacy assessment prior to the 1990s had made it difficult to evaluate students’ reading abilities and how the release of student assessment data from the *National Assessment of Educational Progress* (NAEP) in 1992 revealed the weaknesses of California’s approach to reading instruction.

According to the Iowa Department of Education, the *National Assessment of Educational Progress* (NAEP) is the largest nationally representative and continuing assessment of what America’s students know and can do in various subject areas.

Revising Reading Models

(21:40 - 25:09)

Mechelke introduces Psychologist and Literacy Expert Dr. Hollis Scarborough and her Reading Rope. *Scarborough’s Rope* and a more recent model of reading called the *Active View of Reading* expand upon the *Simple View of Reading*, which was introduced in the previous episode. All three models emphasize the need for both phonics instruction and meaning-making approaches.

Scarborough’s Rope, also called *The Reading Rope*, is a model demonstrating how various skills (such as word recognition and language comprehension) weave together to create reading comprehension. See the end of this listening guide for a linked video that explains this model or check out our eLearning module on the science of reading for an interactive visualization.

The *Simple View of Reading* states that reading comprehension is the product of both word recognition skills and language comprehension. Check out our eLearning module on the science of reading for more information on this model.

Instead of proposing two key components of reading comprehension, the *Active View of Reading* proposes four: active self-regulation, word recognition, language comprehension, and the learned ability to bridge those skill areas. For more information on this model, check out our blog post "[Research Article of the Month: December 2023](#)."

Literacy Legislation

(25:09 - 31:40)

In conversation with Lyon, Mechelke details legislation passed in the mid-90s as a result of the literacy instruction discourse ignited in California, including the *Reading Excellence Act*, which made federal funding available to schools contingent on them using evidence-based reading instructional materials.

The *Reading Excellence Act* formally defined scientifically-based research on reading and allocated funding to schools that used reading instructional materials based on science.

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, Reid Lyon poses four questions that he asked when starting with the NIH, "How do kids learn to read? Why do some kids have difficulty? How do you prevent reading failure? And how do you remediate reading failure when it's been in place for some period of time?" How might you answer these questions based on your own experiences? Have your answers to any of these questions changed over time?
2. *Looking ahead:* What national trends do you think may have come about following the Reading Wars in California? How do you think literacy instruction changed in the years that followed?

Go Beyond the Episode

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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](#).

[“The Reading Wars,” The Atlantic Monthly](#): In this article by Nicholas Lemann, take a closer look at the history of the Reading Wars.

[Scarborough’s Rope](#): In this video created by the AIM Institute for Learning and Research, learn about the components of Dr. Hollis Scarborough’s model for proficient reading.