

Listening Guide for *A Novel Idea*

Episode 7: “Let’s Get Political”

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 discuss the National Reading Panel and other legislation intended to reform literacy instruction. 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 explored the debate, known as the “Reading Wars,” between whole-language advocates and proponents of phonics instruction.

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. What do you already know about national efforts to improve literacy education? How about efforts at the state or local level?
2. *For educators:* Reflect on what you know about legislation intended to improve reading achievement. How do you think politics has played a role in the debate over phonics?

3. *For caregivers:* What would you think if the term “balanced” literacy was used in your child’s classroom? How about “structured” literacy? What associations do those words have? How might language and word choice be used to influence public opinion?

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.

Reading Intervention in Texas

(00:00 - 1:45)

In episode two of *A Novel Idea*, Host Meg Mechelke recounts Neuropsychologist and Literacy Expert Reid Lyon’s experience with Texas Governor George Bush, a partnership that led to significant literacy education reform at the national level.

Paving the Way for the National Reading Panel

(1:45 - 5:34)

In conversation with Reid Lyon, Mechelke describes the obstacles faced by researchers as they created a consensus-based report on literacy that later made way for the 1997 *National Reading Panel*. People involved in passing this legislation hoped that an evidence-based report would put an end to the “Reading Wars.”

The National Reading Panel was a U.S. government body created to evaluate literacy research methods and determine how to best support reading initiatives. The panel identified five key concepts of an effective approach to literacy instruction: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension.

Reading Panel Appointees and Goals

(5:34 - 10:10)

In conversation with Reading Researcher Timothy Shanahan, who served on the National Reading Panel, Mechelke outlines the reasoning behind the panel's creation and its goals: determine if research was ready for application, identify means of communicating research with educators, and identify gaps in current research.

Criticism of the Reading Panel

(10:10 - 13:40)

Mechelke describes Reading Researcher and Educator Joanne Yatvin's disagreement with the Reading Panel's findings on the grounds that it catered to theory over practical application and did not consider how a child's home culture affects their literacy development. *Whole-language* advocates often cite Yatvin's report as a reason to ignore the panel's findings, despite the unanimous conclusion by all appointees that *explicit instruction* was crucial for early readers.

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."

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.

Public Response to Panel Conclusions

(13:40 - 18:17)

In conversation with Timothy Shanahan, Mechelke relates how initial low interest in the panel's findings was overcome by President George W. Bush's great interest in reading reform, particularly with the *Reading First* program.

The *Reading First* program, a part of Bush's No Child Left Behind Initiative, increased funding for schools that would implement evidence-based reading instruction focused on phonics and decoding skills.

Outcomes of Reading First

(18:17 - 29:12)

In conversation with Timothy Shanahan, Reid Lyon, and Natalie Wexler, Mechelke describes the challenges that led to the dissolution of the Reading First program. Researchers hypothesized that its downfall may have resulted from too narrow of a scope or misunderstandings between the program's creators and those implementing instruction methods in classrooms.

However, a notable success is that reading achievement increased nationwide during this time due to the effort being put into school improvement.

The Rise of Balanced Literacy

(29:12 - 33:36)

In conversation with Natalie Wexler and Maryanne Wolf, Mechelke explains how whole-language advocates co-opted the term “*balanced literacy*,” a method of instruction that was not evidence based and often excluded phonics instruction. Additional notable proponents of balanced literacy include Educators Irene Fountas and Gay Su Pinnell, who argued that young readers needed “leveled literacy intervention” using *leveled readers*; research has proven that relying on such texts can negatively impact reading performance.

Balanced literacy is a philosophical approach to literacy instruction that involves minimal systematic teaching of skills such as phonics, decoding, and spelling. This approach focuses on shared, guided, and independent reading.

Leveled readers are books intended to match the current reading ability, age, or grade of a student. In contrast, *decodable texts* are books or passages written to practice a specific phonics pattern in early literacy instruction. They contain mostly regular words and some high-frequency irregular words so that students can read independently.

Balanced Literacy Fails New York City

(33:36 - 41:14)

Mechelke recounts New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg’s proposal to implement balanced literacy in schools across the city, an effort that was supported by whole-language advocates and opposed by proponents of decoding and explicit phonics instruction. In response to the increasing popularity of balanced literacy rhetoric, the International Dyslexia Association coined the term “*structured literacy*” to describe a *systematic* method of literacy instruction supported by the *science of reading*.

Structured literacy refers to the explicit, systematic teaching of literacy skills, with particular attention to phonological awareness, word recognition, phonics and decoding, spelling, and syntax at the sentence and paragraph levels.

Systematic instruction is thoroughly planned and progresses gradually from easier concepts or skills to more complex ones.

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?”](#)

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, Timothy Shanahan says, “Both groups were saying ‘the research is on our side, the research proves that what we’re doing is the right thing to do.’” How does this statement characterize the two “sides” of the Reading Wars?
2. *Looking ahead:* Consider historical patterns, ongoing debates, and legislation surrounding literacy instruction. What predictions do you have about the future of the science of reading?

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](#).

[National Reading Panel:](#) In this resource, read about the research literature reviewed and conclusions drawn by the National Reading Panel on the most effective literacy instruction methods.