

8-2011

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Recommended Citation

Cassidy, J., & Ortlieb, E. (2011). Literacy: The First Decade of the New Millennium. *Reading Horizons*, 51 (2). Retrieved from https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading_horizons/vol51/iss2/3

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Literacy: The First Decade of the New Millennium

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Abstract

Although the importance of literacy instruction has remained constant since the beginning of the new millennium, literacy trends have shifted, often alongside acts of legislation. Areas of literacy education that were once overlooked in the past like adolescent literacy and RTI are now receiving increased attention, whereas areas of literacy like phonemic awareness, phonics, and fluency receive considerably less attention than 10 years ago. Discussions describe “very hot” and “cold” topics as they relate to philosophy/approach, level, content, materials, and assessment. Educators can utilize the findings in this survey to adjust their instruction and direct attention to needed areas within their own schools.

Beginnings of new decades invariably provide an opportunity to look back at the preceding 10 years and draw comparisons as well as note changes that have occurred. The December 6, 2010 issue of *Time* magazine provided such a reflection in a themed issue titled “Time Frames Issue: What Really Happened 2000-2010.” Therefore, we thought it might be worthwhile to look back at the “hot” and “not so hot” issues in literacy: topics which appeared on the annual “What’s Hot” list when we surveyed literacy leaders in 2000, and those “hot” and “not so hot” issues in literacy when we surveyed literacy leaders in 2010 (Cassidy & Cassidy, 2000/2001; Cassidy, Ortlieb, & Shettel, 2010/2011). Rather than review the whole decade, we looked specifically at two years: 2000, when we interviewed literacy leaders for the 2001 list and 2010, when we interviewed our panel for the 2011 list.

Some History

In the mid-1990s, we noticed that the field of literacy education lacked sufficient data regarding its progression. Hence, we thought it would be useful to create a list which educators could use as a resource to contextualize their work. This body of work would allow us, as literacy professionals, to learn from the past and in turn, refine our practices to suit the ever-changing needs of the educational community.

In 1996 we began surveying newspapers that published “What’s Hot and What’s Not” types of lists, as well as those who avidly read these publications, to explicitly define what is meant by “what’s hot” and “what’s not.” The consensus from these sources was that “what’s hot” indicated that a topic was receiving increased or more positive attention; while “what’s not” meant that the subject was receiving decreased or negative attention. These lists of topics did not represent the relative importance of a topic or its impact on the field of literacy.

Each year we interviewed, either by phone or in person, a panel of literacy leaders from different geographic areas in the United States as well as a leader from Canada and one from outside of North America. Participants included leaders of professional associations and those who have had long-term influences on the field of literacy. We wanted to consider all levels of education including central office personnel, administrators, classroom teachers, and college professors. All, however, had to have a national or international perspective on literacy education. For the first list, “What’s Hot, What’s Not for 1997” (Cassidy & Wenrich, 1997), we assembled 22 leaders, and 25 in each subsequent year.

Survey respondents were given specific directions to exclude personal opinions from rating a given topic as hot or not hot; instead, they would rate the topic according to their perspective of whether the topic was currently receiving increased or more positive attention, or the topic was receiving decreased or negative attention. Beginning in 2000, these literacy leaders had an additional opportunity to express their own opinions in the second part of the survey as respondents were asked, “Should this topic be hot?”

In its first year (1997), we constructed the survey from topics identified from professional literacy journals, more general and widely circulated education journals (e.g., *Phi Delta Kappan*, *Educational Leadership*, *Education Week*), popular magazines, newspapers, and recent convention programs. In subsequent years, we relied on the year’s previous respondents to make needed modifications, deletions, and additions. Based on its early success, the “What’s Hot, What’s Not” list became an annual feature in the International Reading Association’s (IRA) membership newspaper, *Reading Today* (see Cassidy & Cassidy, 1998/1999, 1999/2000; Cassidy

& Wenrich, 1997, 1998). For the last 15 years the “What’s Hot, What’s Not” lists have received far greater attention than expected, as they have been translated into Spanish, modified for use in other countries, summarized in newspapers, and utilized in collegiate courses and professional development experiences for classroom teachers. The lists have also prompted readers to express their opposition to: (a) the items on the lists, (b) the selection of survey respondents, and even (c) the survey results (e.g., Dewitz, 1999). Longer discussions of the topics on the list have appeared in a number of other venues (Cassidy & Wenrich, 1998/1999; Cassidy & Cassidy, 2004; Cassidy, Garrett, & Barrera, 2006; Cassidy, Valadez, & Garrett, 2010; Cassidy, Valadez, Garrett, & Barrera, 2010).

Although it has been only 10 years since the new millennium, significant changes in the field of literacy prompted a new focus on topics and issues that were overwhelmingly perceived to be hot or not hot in the survey published in December 2010/January 2011. Items deemed hot or not received more than 75 percent agreement from the 25 interviewees. This near-consensus list provides a glimpse at literacy education 10 years into the new millennium. Now in its 15th year, “What’s Hot for 2011” includes an updated list with current data from the survey completed in mid-2010. Table 1 (Cassidy et al., 2010/2011) summarizes the results of the survey.

Table 1. *What’s Hot and What’s Not? (2011) Results*

	What’s Hot	What’s Not	Should be Hot	Should Not be Hot
Adolescent literacy	√√		√√	
Adult literacy		√√	√√	
Comprehension	√√		√√	
Core learning/literacy standards*	√√		√	
Critical reading and writing		√	√√	
Curriculum-based assessment		√	√	
Disciplinary/content area literacy*		√	√√√	
Differentiated instruction	√		√√	
Early intervention	√		√√	
English as a second language/Eng. language learners (-)	√		√√√	
Fluency (-)		√√		√
High-stakes assessment (-)	√			√√
Informational/nonfiction texts	√		√√√	
Intertextuality/reading multiple texts		√√	√√	
Literacy coaches/reading coaches (-)	√		√√	

Motivation/engagement		√√	√√	
New literacies/digital literacies	√		√√	
Phonemic awareness (-)		√√		√√
Phonics (-)		√√		√√
Political/policy influences on literacy	√		√√	
Preschool literacy instruction/experiences		√	√√	
Professional development (inservice)		√	√√	
Response to intervention	√√		√	
Scientific evidence-based reading research & instruction		√		√
Struggling/striving readers (grade 4 & above)	√		√√	
Teacher education for reading (preservice) (-)		√	√√	
Vocabulary/word meaning	√		√√	
Writing		√	√√√	

Key

- √ Indicates that more than 50 percent of the respondents were in agreement (hot or not hot)
- √√ Indicates that at least 75 percent of the respondents were in agreement (very hot or cold)
- √√√ Indicates that all the respondents were in agreement (extremely hot or extremely cold)
- (+) indicates the topic was hotter for 2010 than 2009
- (-) indicates the topic was less hot for 2010 than 2009
- (*) indicates new topic for 2010

Participants in this year's survey were **Richard Allington**, University of Tennessee; **Donna Alvermann**, University of Georgia; **Kathryn H. Au**, School Rise Inc, HI; **Thomas Bean**, University of Nevada, Las Vegas; **Heather Bell**, Rosebank School, New Zealand; **David Bloome**, Ohio State University; **Karen Bromley**, Binghamton University, SUNY, NY; **William G. Brozo**, George Mason University, VA; **Robert Cooter**, Bellarmine University, KY; **Patricia A. Edwards**, Michigan State University; **Joyce Hinman**, Bismark Schools, ND; **James V. Hoffman**, University of Texas; **Lori Jamison**, Toronto, Canada; **Barbara Kapinus**, National Education Association, Washington, DCMD; **Donald J. Leu**, University of Connecticut; **Marsha Lewis**, Duplin Schools, North Carolina; **P. David Pearson**, University of California at Berkley; **Taffy Raphael**, University of Illinois – Chicago; **Timothy Rasinski**, Kent State University, Ohio; **D. Ray Reutzel**, Utah State University; **Victoria J. Risko**, Peabody College at Vanderbilt University, TN; **Misty Sailors**, University of Texas-San Antonio; **Timothy Shanahan**, University of Illinois, Chicago; **Dorothy Strickland**, Rutgers University, New Jersey; and **Linda Young**, Hans Herr Elementary School, PA.

To facilitate longer discussions, in 2000 (Cassidy, Brozo, & Cassidy, 2000; Cassidy, 2002), we divided the various topics into five categories: (a) philosophy/approach, (b) level, (c) content, (d) materials, and (e) assessment; and looked at the “very hot” or “cold” topics within each category. In this piece, we have revisited

those categories and compared the 2000/2001 survey results with the 2010/2011 results (see Table 2). The changes have been dramatic!

Table 2. Comparison of What’s Hot and What’s Not

	What’s Hot – 2001	What’s Not – 2001	What’s Hot – 2011	What’s Not – 2011
Philosophy/ Approach	Balanced Reading Instruction Research-based Practice Guided Reading	Whole Language	Core Learning Literacy Standards Response to Intervention	Intertextuality/ Reading Multiple Texts
Level	Early Intervention		Adolescent Literacy	Adult Literacy
Content	Phonemic Awareness Phonics	Comprehension Vocabulary Spelling	Comprehension	Fluency Phonemic Awareness Phonics
Materials	Decodable Text	Literature/Based Instruction		
Assessment	High Stakes Assessment	Portfolio Assessment		

In 2000/2001 *balanced reading instruction*, *guided reading*, and *research-based practice* were the hot issues. On the 2010/2011 list *balanced reading instruction* and *guided reading* had been dropped from the survey. The literacy leaders probably suggested the elimination of *balanced reading* because of increasing confusion as to what the term meant (Cassidy & Wenrich, 1998). *Guided reading* was probably targeted for deletion because so much had been written on the topic and also because literacy leaders thought it was very similar to older approaches such as the directed reading thinking activity (DRTA). The topic *research-based practice* has been modified and is now identified as *scientific research-based reading research & instruction*. It is still a hot topic but it has lost heat since the end of the Bush administrations (Cassidy, Valadez, & Garrett, 2010).

Since its enactment within the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act* ([IDEA]; U.S. Department of Education, 2004), Response to Intervention (RTI) has received increasing attention each year it has been featured in the “What’s Hot, What’s Not” list. The foremost goal of RTI is prevention of learning difficulties by providing effective language and literacy instruction. Its importance to the field of literacy was underscored when the International Reading Association appointed 30 members to form an RTI Commission to serve the evolving concepts that impact

students, teachers, and administrators alike. Probably the most prevalent model for RTI is the three-tiered approach with tier one being effective in-class instruction for struggling readers, tier two being small group short term intervention, and tier three being long term supplemental instruction. Perhaps the implementation of RTI in U.S. schools has in part contributed to the decline of students labeled as learning disabled.

Core learning/literacy standards debuted on the “What’s Hot” list in 2011 and was immediately rated “very hot.” Core learning in the U.S. is an effort to standardize what K-12 pupils should be achieving each year in English Language Arts as well as Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects. Grade level standards for literacy include varied topics such as comprehension, creating texts, drama, fluency, listening, phonemic awareness, phonics, speaking, vocabulary, and writing. As part of a state-led initiative to prepare America’s students for college and their future careers, the National Governors Association for Best Practices (NGA Center) and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) released a set of English-Language Arts standards, termed the Common Core State Standards, in June 2010. As of August, 2011, 44 states, four territories, and the District of Columbia of the United States have agreed to the adoption and implementation process. The purpose of common standards is to ensure that all students are proficient language users so they can succeed in school, contribute to society, and pursue their own goals. These standards provide clear and consistent expectations as well as rigorous content and application opportunities. The finalized standards were also informed by top performing countries so students can succeed in the global economy. To read more about the Core Learning Standards and to find out which states have adopted them, refer to <http://www.corestandards.org>.

Level

Adolescent literacy has been a mainstay as a hot topic for the second half of the decade so it is not surprising that it is one of the hottest topics for 2011. National attention has been directed towards adolescent literacy in part due to the currently elevated high school dropout rate, alongside reports like *Double the Work: Challenges and Solutions to Acquiring Language and Academic Literacy for Adolescent English Language Learners* (Short & Fitzsimmons, 2007), *Reading Between the Lines: What the ACT Reveals About College Readiness in Reading* (ACT, 2006), *Reading Next: A Vision for Action and Research in Middle and High School Literacy* (Biancarosa & Snow, 2004), *Reading to Achieve: A Governor’s Guide to Adolescent Literacy* (National Governors Association, 2005), *Writing*

Next: *Effective Strategies to Improve Writing of Adolescents in Middle and High Schools* (Graham & Perin, 2007), and a more recent report, *Time to Act: An Agenda for Advancing Adolescent Literacy for College and Career Success* (Council for Advancing Adolescent Literacy, 2009). These reports indicate that a focus on middle and high school literacy development is necessary for educational reform to commence. The recent awareness of adolescent literacy also explains why *struggling/striving readers* is also a “hot topic.” When we surveyed our respondents in 2000 for the 2001 article, *adolescent literacy* was not even on the list.

Early intervention or early literacy was one of the hottest topics in 2000/2001 and it is encouraging that it is still a “hot” topic. Perhaps it has lost some heat because some attention has been focused on the older reader: grade 4 and above. This reflects the fact that not all literacy problems children experience can be solved in the earliest years.

Content

Perhaps the most dramatic shift in attention in the field from 2000/2001 to 2010/2011 has been in the content of literacy education. *Phonemic awareness* and *phonics*, both very hot topics in 2000/2001 were definitely “cold” in 2010/2011 and most literacy leaders concurred with this loss of heat. Most of those interviewed felt that too much attention and research had been focused on these topics (Cassidy, Valadez, & Garrett, 2010). *Comprehension*, a cold topic in 2000/2001, was very hot in 2010/2011 (Block, Parris, & Morrow, 2008; Gambrell, Morrow, Pressley, & Guthrie, 2007) and most authorities would agree that the single most important aspect to literacy is meaning construction. However in years past, comprehension was primarily associated with upper elementary grades and as a result, not given as much attention as topics related to early reading instruction like phonemic awareness and phonics, which are both currently not hot topics. *Fluency*, which debuted on the “What’s Hot” list in 2003 and was immediately “very hot,” had slipped to the “cold” category by 2011 and most educators agreed that too much attention had been focused on that area. The shift in content focus in the field could have dramatic effects in the classroom. Perhaps struggling sixth graders will no longer be subjected to phonemic awareness exercises and maybe more attention will be paid to comprehension for kindergarteners and first graders.

Materials

Another important shift in the field from 2000/2001 to 2010/2011 is the fact that no materials are in the “very hot” category on the survey. In 2000/2001,

decodable text was a hot topic. That material emphasis was consistent with the content focus on phonics and phonemic awareness. Perhaps we are realizing that no specific kinds of materials can guarantee success for all students. Not surprisingly, *decodable text*, which was a “very hot” topic in 2001, had disappeared from the list in 2011. The emphasis on *phonics* in the beginning of the decade forced attention on materials using a great preponderance of words that were decodable using the phonic elements that had been taught.

Although no specific types of materials are “very hot” for 2010/2011, informational/non-fiction texts have garnered attention from literacy leaders for several years. Classrooms have departed from the traditional usage of fictional texts in early grades (PK-2) and non-fiction texts in grades 3 and above to utilizing all genres of books from the onset of schooling (Buss & Karnowski, 2002; Vasquez, 2010). Curriculums that embed informational/non-fiction texts allow students to develop content area knowledge while improving their reading abilities. This integration of the content areas is especially necessary for teachers pressed for time during their instructional periods.

Assessment

Another significant change from 2000/2001 to 2010/2011 is that no assessment topic appears to be “very hot,” although that situation will probably change soon. High-stakes assessment is still “hot” and has become a cornerstone in almost every school nationwide with increasing emphasis over the last 20 years. Students of every grade level are expected to meet or exceed grade-level-appropriate benchmarks. U.S. Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan of the Obama administration, has championed for national standards to measure knowledge, skills, and performance in hopes of increasing student learning. Finding the balance between data collection/analysis and the utilization of those findings within instruction is a difficult but necessary task for all educators. As soon as policy makers determine how to establish that balance, an assessment topic will probably be “very hot” again.

Some Conclusions and Lessons Learned

Literacy trends have clearly fluctuated over time. Since the new millennium, however, significant change has resulted in the field redirecting attention to address many topics that were perhaps overlooked in the past. It is clear that not only do three of the five pillars of reading education (fluency, phonemic awareness, and phonics) receive less attention now than in 2000 when the report of the National Reading Panel (NRP) propelled them to the forefront, but that most literacy leaders

feel that these topics have received too much attention and should not be hot (Cassidy, Valadez, & Garrett, 2010). Indeed, there are other aspects of literacy that are currently receiving a greater amount of attention like adolescent literacy and RTI. Those in the field of literacy have long known the value of comprehension and believe it should be the primary focus of every literacy program. Educators can utilize the findings in this survey to adjust their instruction and direct attention to needed areas within their own schools.

(Note: The pronoun “we” is used throughout this piece. In this case, it refers to the numerous literacy educators who have worked with Jack Cassidy in analyzing and interpreting the data from the “What’s Hot” surveys over the last 15 years.)

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