Learning to read: Key to achieving the Education 2030 agenda

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Published online: 21 February 2018
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As the global education community is still strategizing on how to best walk the Education 2030 talk, many education systems are already pushing forward to meet their learning commitments and implement the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4: ensuring inclusive and quality education for all and promoting lifelong learning.

Achieving SDG4 will unlock the other 16 SDGs, which critically depend on advancing inclusive and quality education.

A deeper understanding of how humans learn is urgently needed to better facilitate learning. Understanding how learning to read happens is the first step. How do people learn to translate abstract symbols into meaningful sounds? Why is it hard for some and easy for others?

Cognitive psychology suggests standardized ways of teaching reading, and sees systematic letter sequences, phonics, or syllabic construction as essential for all learners, especially children.

Brain research shows that as children learn to read, the left side of the visual cortex of the brain becomes specialized to help them visually process letters. As they continue to learn, this region connects to other areas that represent the sounds of speech. This supports an approach to teaching reading based on correspondences between the letters that represent sounds and the sounds themselves (the so-called grapheme-phoneme correspondence) rather than whole-word recognition. Therefore, cognitive neuroscience supports the early teaching of mastery of the sounds, leading to a detailed analysis of sound-print correspondence.

However, brain networks alone offer an incomplete picture of how humans learn to read. The process of learning to read is complex and builds on cognitive, linguistic, and social skills. Moreover, reading always takes place in a specific sociocultural context, which provides the framework for its meaning.

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Literacy as a social practice challenges a few deep-seated assumptions, such as: literacy is a basic skill that an individual either has or does not have; there are standardized ways of teaching reading (and writing); and classroom practice is essential to learning to read.

This double special issue was guest edited by the late Brian Street, a leading scholar whose seminal ideas of literacy as a social practice challenged dominant approaches to learning to read, and questioned the idea that people living in conditions of poverty are illiterate. Brian helped found the field of New Literacy Studies, and supported grassroots organizations that sought to understand and build on local literacy practices, rather than focusing on a presumptuous “one-size fits all” model. He worked constantly to establish connections between theory and practice, and across different disciplines and cultural contexts.

This special issue was one of Brian’s final contributions to the field before his untimely death. Alan Rogers, his longtime friend and collaborator, graciously accepted our invitation to complete the issue, while keeping the structure and the content the way Brian wanted. The result is an extraordinary collection of articles, which revolves around learning to read as a social practice. The issue is also an implicit tribute to Brian’s extraordinary contribution to the field of literacy, as it brings together prominent scholars whose work and thinking were shaped, on many levels, by his writing and teaching.