

## Clinical Forum

### Epilogue

# Solving the Reading Crisis—Take 2: The Case for Differentiated Assessment

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This clinical forum is a little different than the other forums in this journal, which typically have a series of articles on a particular topic. This clinical forum is more personal because the contributors were asked to respond to my claim that the broad view of reading was largely responsible for the persistently high levels of reading failure and my proposed solution to embrace the narrow view of reading (Kamhi, 2007). Although the respondents had different opinions about my proposed solution, all found it provocative and embraced the challenge

**ABSTRACT: Purpose:** The responses to my initial article (A. G. Kamhi, 2007) have raised serious questions about whether embracing the narrow view of reading is the best way to reduce the persistently high levels of reading failure experienced in today's schools. This afterword provides another attempt to offer a solution to this problem without the distraction of the narrow view of reading.

**Method:** This second attempt to solve the reading crisis draws on the five responses in this clinical forum and other helpful comments from colleagues who responded to the initial article in *The ASHA Leader*.

**Conclusion:** The way to eliminate high levels of reading failure is to differentiate word recognition from domain-general reading comprehension and specific subject knowledge in high-stakes assessments. This differentiation will focus attention on the true crisis in American education—knowledge deficiencies in the sciences, history, math, literature, and other subject areas that are important for success in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

**KEY WORDS:** literacy, reading, assessment

to address some difficult questions concerning the best way to improve comprehension and content area knowledge. Given the personal nature of this forum, I would like to use this afterword to show how my views concerning the narrow view of reading have changed since the initial article in *The ASHA Leader* (Kamhi, 2007).

I must confess that when I first wrote the article for *The ASHA Leader*, I did not anticipate how controversial the idea of the narrow view would be, nor did I anticipate how my attempt to disentangle comprehension from reading would be seen as questioning the role of speech-language pathologists (SLPs) in improving comprehension. The respondents in this forum and other colleagues, most notably Anne van Kleeck (2007), helped me realize that the narrow view is not the best way to persuade people to embrace the ideas I am proposing. The appeal of the narrow view was that it differentiated reading and comprehension; however, it did so by extracting comprehension from the definition of reading. This caused SLPs, reading teachers, and special educators to question the type of services that students with comprehension deficiencies would receive if they were no longer viewed as having a reading disability (see Ehren's article in this issue).

Embracing the narrow view also required a conceptual change in how one views reading. Although I had no illusion that my solution to the reading crisis would be any more likely to be embraced than any other solution (Kamhi, 2007), I thought that the advantage of my solution was that it had no financial costs; "it simply required rejecting the broad view of reading and embracing the 'narrow view' of reading" (Kamhi, 2007, p. 29). In hindsight, it was naïve of me to think that making a conceptual change in the definition of reading was in any way *simple*. Conceptual changes are in fact the most difficult ones to make (e.g., Laughlin, 2005) because they requires a change in belief. So I had it backwards: Costly

solutions to the reading crisis are in fact easier to implement than one that requires a conceptual change in the definition of reading.

Over the course of the last year, it gradually became clear to me that in my efforts to defend the narrow view, I lost sight of the problem I was attempting to solve. Audacious as it might seem, I was proposing a solution for eliminating the persistence of reading failure that plagues many nations and schools. I was not addressing the role of the SLP in serving students with language learning disabilities or how best to teach word recognition or reading comprehension. The essence of the proposal was to change the way in which reading is assessed. If high-stakes assessments differentiated among word recognition, domain-general reading comprehension, and specific subject knowledge, the reading crisis would be over because the focus would change to the true crisis in American education—knowledge deficiencies in the sciences, history, math, literature, and other content domains that are important for success in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. How can differentiated assessment do all this? Let me try again to explain how, but this time without the distraction of the narrow view of reading.

## **Solving the Reading Crisis: Take 2**

The persistence of reading failure over a long period of time is a problem that has defied solution. There is, however, a puzzling aspect to the problem. The puzzle is that there are numerous evidence-based instructional programs that have consistently been found to be effective in improving reading (National Reading Panel, 2000; Torgesen, Al Otaiba, & Grek, 2005). Given the success of these programs, why then has there been so little change in reading levels over the last 30 years? As I have written in my previous article (Kamhi, 2007) and the prologue to this forum, there have been many explanations for this puzzle. The most obvious one is that evidence-based reading programs have not been widely implemented by qualified teachers in schools throughout the country. Although there is certainly much merit in these explanations, it is my belief that significant changes in reading levels will not occur until word recognition is assessed separately from reading comprehension in high-stakes benchmark assessments.

Reading comprehension is notoriously difficult to assess because numerous factors influence comprehension, and there are many levels of understanding (Kamhi, 1997, 2005). It thus comes as no surprise that recent studies (Cutting & Scarborough, 2006; Keenan, Betjemann, & Olson, 2008) have shown that commonly used measures of reading comprehension do not measure the same thing. Some measures of reading comprehension (e.g., The Peabody Individual Achievement Test (Dunn & Markwardt, 1970) and the Woodcock-Johnson Passage Comprehension Test (Woodcock, McGrew, & Mather, 2001) are heavily influenced by decoding skill, whereas others (e.g., Qualitative Reading Inventory [QRI], Leslie & Caldwell, 2005) are more influenced by general language and cognitive processes (e.g., inferencing and metacognitive abilities). Measures of comprehension are also heavily influenced by specific subject or content knowledge (e.g., Hirsch, 2006; Willingham, 2006). The assessment that is used to measure reading comprehension must be one like the QRI, where domain-general language and cognitive processes rather than decoding skills account for the majority of the variance. The best way to measure subject-specific knowledge is with subject-specific assessments in science, math, history, and English.

If word recognition proficiency is differentiated from domain-general reading comprehension in benchmark assessments, the effectiveness of evidence-based reading programs will be apparent. Schools and teachers that use evidence-based programs will be able to document the high correlation between instruction and word recognition proficiency. As I noted in my earlier article (Kamhi, 2007), at least 90% of children should be able to attain a proficient level of word recognition. Anything less will not be acceptable given the effectiveness of scientifically based reading instruction.

Distinguishing between word recognition and domain-general reading comprehension in benchmark assessments will make it clear to teachers and other educators that these two components of reading do not respond similarly to instruction. Improving domain-general language, inferencing, and metacognitive abilities takes considerable time and effort, which makes short-term gains on domain-general measures of comprehension unlikely (cf. Hirsch, 2006; Willington, 2006). The recognition that domain-general reading comprehension is difficult to improve should lead to a better appreciation of the measurement difficulty and the numerous factors that affect comprehension. Many of these factors (e.g., background knowledge, cognitive abilities, language knowledge, ability to create coherent situation models, inferencing, motivation, engagement) have been discussed throughout this clinical forum.

An appreciation of the difficulty of measuring domain-general reading comprehension will hopefully lead educators to recognize the benefits of specific subject area assessments to distinguish students' ability to acquire specific subject knowledge from their domain-general comprehension abilities. Foremost among these benefits is that a student's specific subject knowledge has been shown to be a better indication of curriculum learning and a better predictor of college performance than general reasoning and comprehension measures (Geiser, 2008). Summarizing a decade of research at the University of California, Geiser found that admissions criteria that reflected student mastery of curriculum content, such as high-school grades and performance on subject area scholastic aptitude tests (SATs), were stronger predictors of success in college and were fairer to poor and minority applicants than general reasoning and comprehension tests like the SAT. Another benefit of subject-specific tests is their ability to show that many students who perform poorly on domain-general measures of reading comprehension are meeting subject-specific learning goals.

Differentiated assessment of word recognition, domain-general reading comprehension, and subject-specific knowledge should appeal to all of the stakeholders involved in the education of our nation's schoolchildren. Distinguishing between these two components of reading and subject-specific knowledge does not require the development of new assessment instruments or a conceptual change in how one views reading. It merely requires being explicit about the subject area and aspect of reading that is being assessed. This explicitness ensures that reading level will no longer be reduced to one score or grade level, and domain-general reading comprehension will be disentangled from subject-specific knowledge.

Differentiating among word recognition, domain-general reading comprehension, and subject-specific knowledge will allow educators to observe and measure the impact of instruction that is designed to improve each of these areas. Educators and policymakers will be confronted with evidence that word recognition and subject-specific knowledge are more responsive to instruction than are domain-general measures of reading comprehension. This will

hopefully lead to an appreciation of the language, cognitive, and motivational factors that impact comprehension as well as the kind of multifaceted and long-term instruction necessary for most students to show noticeable improvements on domain-general measures of reading comprehension. The contributors to this clinical forum have provided excellent examples of the kind of instruction that is needed to improve these abilities and skills.

## Final Thoughts

There are two general responses one can have to my latest attempt to provide a solution to the persistently high levels of reading failure in our nation: (a) Reframing the solution as differentiated assessment is no better than arguing for the narrow view of reading—they are both overly simplistic solutions to a complex crisis; and (b) It is a great idea and would actually solve the problem, but stakeholders do not read *Language, Speech, and Hearing Services in Schools*, so it is basically a thought exercise. I do not know which of these responses best describes your reaction. I am obviously biased toward the second choice, but if my proposed solution is to become more than just a thought exercise, I need some help in spreading the idea. The problem is that the idea of differentiated assessment will not be easy to spread. As I have written before (Kamhi, 2004), successful ideas (memes) are easy to understand, remember, and communicate to others. Differentiated assessment seems like a particularly poor candidate to be a successful meme. It is not a catchy term, nor is it easy to understand or communicate to others because it requires knowledge of the different components of reading and the numerous factors that influence comprehension and learning.

There is also the problem of what to call the two components of reading that need to be differentiated. *Word recognition* works fine for academics and reading researchers, but I do not think it will have much appeal beyond the academy. I thought that the narrow view of reading offered an elegant solution to the problem: Reading would be defined as word recognition, but, as I have already discussed, there was a strong reaction to the elimination of reading comprehension from the definition of reading. Other possibilities are alphabetic reading, reading proficiency, reading fluency, and word reading. If the idea of differentiated assessment takes hold, one of the terms for word recognition will eventually prevail over the alternatives. The term *reading comprehension* has less competition (alternatives) than *word recognition*. The problem with reading comprehension, however, is that it is difficult to measure and define. This is why common measures of reading comprehension do not measure the same thing (Keenan et al., 2008).

The terminology problem can be seen in how major news media reported the findings from a recent interim report on the effectiveness of President Bush's Reading First initiative. *The New York Times* was one of the few sources to mention reading comprehension: "President Bush's \$1 billion a year initiative to teach reading to low-income children has not helped improve their *reading comprehension* [italics added], according to a Department of Education report released on Thursday" (Dillon, 2008, p. 1). Most news outlets did not specify the aspect of reading that was targeted by instruction. The first sentence in the *USA Today* article was typical of these reports: "A \$1 billion-a-year reading program that has been a pillar of the Bush administration's education plan doesn't have much impact on the *reading skills* [italics

added] of the young students it's supposed to help, a long-awaited federal study shows" ("Study: Reading First," 2008, p. 1).

The way the media reported the findings of this important interim report and the nature of the findings are timely reminders of the misconceptions that many people and even some educators have concerning reading. These misconceptions are that (a) word recognition and reading comprehension are related skills that can be accurately reduced to one measurable score or level, (b) improvements in word recognition will always lead to improvements in reading comprehension, and (c) measures of reading comprehension assess the same thing. The reported findings of the Reading First initiative are not surprising if one understands these misconceptions. If this study included a measure of word recognition as well as a measure of reading comprehension, the newspaper articles would have reported that:

President Bush's \$1 billion a year initiative to teach reading to low-income children significantly improved word recognition ability but had little impact on reading comprehension. Improvements in reading comprehension typically require improving language and cognitive skills as well as subject-specific knowledge. As a result, measurable gains in reading comprehension rarely occur after short-term interventions.

If subject-specific knowledge had been assessed and targeted by evidence-based instruction, the next sentence would have been: "Students did, however, show significant improvements on end-of-year subject area tests."

I am too much of a realist to imagine that I will ever see newspaper articles like this in my lifetime, but I am enough of an idealist to hope that some readers will be energized by the potential of differentiated assessment to focus attention on the true crisis in our nation's schools: subject-specific knowledge deficiencies. If you are one of these readers, help me spread the word and make it happen.

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