

Contrary Practices in Literacy Instruction



Just as research is evident on the practices that support the development of skilled reading, research is also clear on the methods and strategies teachers should no longer use in literacy instruction. Methods that are counter to research are known as “contrary practices.” The National Center for Teacher Quality (NCTQ) has identified nine contrary practices in literacy instruction. The NCTQ reviews curricula information from teacher preparation programs to assess the level to which their instruction aligns with research. Programs that use contrary practices lose a letter grade from their overall score within the rating system.

The nine contrary practices identified by the NCTQ are summarized below. The full report, including the full explanation of content contrary to research-based practices, can be found in the NCTQ report in Appendix C.

- 1. Three-Cueing System:** Three-cueing describes an instructional strategy for reading words that uses meaning/structure/visual (MSV) information. Students may be given cues to look around the page, and the teacher may ask, “What do you think the word could be,” “Look at the picture to think about what the word might be,” and “Look at the first letter to help you guess what the word is.” These word-solving techniques represent missed opportunities for students to practice decoding words using their phonics knowledge.
- 2. Miscue Analysis:** When teachers use miscue analysis, they look for strategies that students use when they read words that may be similar in meaning but differ in their sound-spelling patterns (orthography). This is often used to guide students to focus on the context and pictures rather than the letters on the page. Instead, teachers should use informal diagnostic assessments to find skill gaps.
- 3. Running Records:** This assessment practice often uses a leveled passage to determine the student’s reading level. This level is used within a system that assigns a number or letter to identify the level of a book. These levels are used to assign reading materials to students, organize students into similar groups, and report on growth as students move from one level to the next. These assessments often include miscue analysis. Studies show inconsistent results in scoring these assessments. Instead, teachers should use information from curriculum-based measures to inform instruction.
- 4. Balanced Literacy Models:** Balanced literacy often includes practices that are both supported in research and practices that do not follow research. Small group guided reading and independent reading of predictable leveled texts are hallmarks of this approach. Instruction is often provided in the whole-word memorization of high-frequency words (aka popcorn words, bubble gum words, star words). Balanced literacy often uses implicit teaching of foundational skills rather than explicit instruction. The use of context clues and three-cueing are often taught as a way to decode new words. This contrasts with a structured literacy approach where foundational skills are taught explicitly. Oftentimes, the goal of instruction in balanced literacy classrooms is comprehension and using context cues rather than decoding. Conversely, structured literacy uses explicit, systematic instruction that follows a clear scope and sequence of the progression of early literacy skills based on how the early reading brain learns and uses prior knowledge about phoneme-grapheme correspondences to teach students how to read high-frequency words.

5. Guided Reading: This approach to reading instruction typically uses a student's "reading level" to form small groups. Students practice reading aloud to a teacher from a leveled text, and teachers typically use the three-cueing system to help students decode words. In this model, all students are away from the teacher, doing independent activities for most of the literacy block. When teachers use structured literacy to inform their instructional time, instruction is more explicit, and students are engaged in learning with the teacher for a more significant percentage of the literacy block.

6. Reading Workshop: The Reading Workshop Model is a balanced literacy approach that uses guided reading groups to provide instruction. A mini-lesson may be provided in the whole group or small groups. The mini-lesson is often planned by collecting data from the guided reading groups, and the scope and sequence are unclear. Teachers who use structured literacy teach using an explicit instruction approach and follow a scope and sequence to ensure a developmental and standards-based progression of skills.

7. Leveled Text: Leveled texts are predictable reading materials progressing in difficulty. Often, the use of these texts does not align with a scope and sequence of phonics skills for a specific grade level, they do not have enough practice with taught phonics patterns, and their word choices encourage students to memorize words and use pictures to get the words off of the page. In the early stages of reading, students need decodable text that follows the scope and sequence of phonics instruction, which provides multiple opportunities for practicing newly acquired phonics skills.

8. Embedded/Implicit Phonics: While explicit phonics instruction uses sound/spelling correspondences to teach students about the patterns of English, embedded or implicit phonics uses a text to teach a phonics pattern as students read. As students come across a new pattern, the teacher uses the opportunity to provide instruction. This instruction does not follow a developmental scope and sequence. Explicit phonics instruction follows a scope and sequence and teaches all 44 sounds of the English language and the corresponding spelling patterns.

9. Benchmark Assessment System (BAS), Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA), Informal Reading Inventory (IRI), and Qualitative Reading Inventory (QRI): This list of assessments are costly in terms of price and time to administer. In addition, research on classification accuracy, reliability, validity, and teacher usability of assessment data indicates that there is little evidence that these measures support consistent instructional decisions. Students are administered a BAS, DRA, IRI, and QRI using a text passage, list, or leveled book. Test administrators track student errors as students read orally and use the error information to find a level (BAS and DRA). These measures do not help teachers find students most at risk for reading failure and do not provide actionable information about foundational skills in reading. Curriculum-based measures are typically administered in one-minute sessions, are low-cost or free, and provide the best information when looking for students struggling with reading acquisition.

Contrary practices definitions adapted from:

Ellis, C., Holston, S., Drake, G., Putman, H., Swisher, A., & Peske, H. (2023). Teacher prep review: Strengthening elementary reading instruction. National Council on Teacher Quality.

https://www.nctq.org/dmsView/Teacher_Prep_Review_Strengthening_Elementary_Reading_Instruction