

# “Too Long, Didn’t Read”

## The Research behind Prescriptions for Literacy

S. BRYCE KOZLA

*“Children need to hear a thousand stories before they learn to read.”*

—Mem Fox<sup>1</sup>

This quote is the basis for the 1,000 Books Before Kindergarten program, a reading club started by Sandy Krost at Bremen (IN) Public Library. Libraries across the nation are leaping to write grants and start programs of their own. Online discussion lists are bursting with questions about the research behind children hearing one thousand stories before kindergarten.

Last year, I wrote a blog post full of research that librarians can use to justify their community’s need for a 1,000 Books Before Kindergarten program, and it’s still one of my most viewed entries. None of the research is the study that proves children should hear one thousand stories.

This is because this study does not exist. The above quote is simply a prescription for literacy.

Prescriptions for literacy are based on recommendations for literacy practices, implied by findings of scientifically-based reading research (SBRR). This means that the actual prescription is removed enough from its scientific origin to be misunderstood and occasionally appropriated. For instance, Fox’s quote is based on research implications from Anne van Kleeck.<sup>2</sup> However, these findings also highlight the importance of print and phonological awareness as well as letter naming and writing in addition to story structure in order to be reading-ready when school starts. While exposure to stories is an important piece, it’s definitely just one slice of the complex task of literacy engagement and acquisition.

When we don’t know where our prescriptions come from, it opens doors to other issues. Slavin mentions three ways that

published scientific research can reach possibly harmful conclusions:

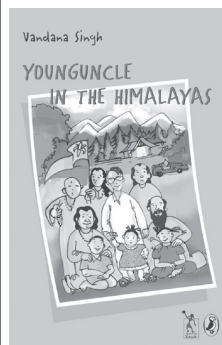
- **Cherry picking:** Highlighting the desired conclusions and downplaying the rest, or omitting the rest completely, is a misleading trick that some literacy programs use to sell their products.
- **Bottom fishing:** After research has been completed, an evaluator may make comparisons that were originally unintended. Rather than taking a subset of a group and comparing them to the group as a whole, they might compare only to the best performing members of the experimental group to the worst performers of the control group.
- **Pre-post studies:** Some studies may lack a control group in favor of tests or surveys before and after the study. Any gains made on the posttest are assumed to be attributed to the experiment. It’s not feasible to suggest that children, who learn every day, would make zero gains without the experiment.<sup>3</sup>

Though it’s understandable that researchers always hope for the best possible outcome, misleading conclusions do happen. And if prescriptions are removed enough from the research, it’s nearly impossible to trace.

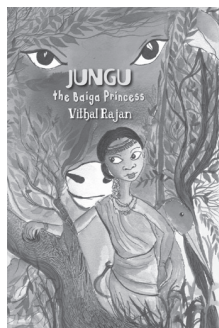
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# Stories of India

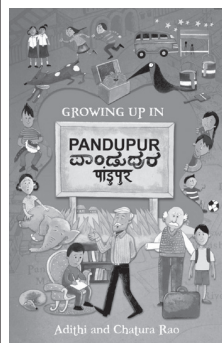
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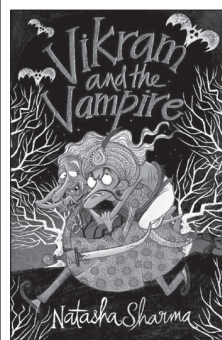
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This happened recently to librarians Amy Commers and Melissa Depper when searching for the origin of the following quote from Fox's *Reading Magic*: "Experts in literacy and child development have discovered that if children know eight nursery rhymes by heart by the time they're four years old, they're usually among the best readers by the time they're eight."<sup>4</sup>

After in-depth literature reviews on their blogs that rival any I've seen, they concluded that it was most likely based on implications from a 1987 study by Maclean, Bryant, and Bradley. The research focused on the knowledge of five nursery rhymes and the development of phonological skills between the ages of three and five. While the actual implications may sound less spectacular than the quote, it was a breakthrough in its time: the relationship among nursery rhyme knowledge, phonological skills, and reading was significant across all IQs and socio-economic backgrounds.<sup>5</sup> It was definitely a major find for unlocking the keys to effective early literacy instruction, though there was no implication of future reading success.

Nursery rhymes definitely have merit as a useful early literacy tool. What makes them so powerful is their practice and play with phonemic components like onset and rime, alliteration, repetition, and elongating syllables. Nursery rhymes are also widely known in some socioeconomic classes, so they become a source of bonding.

Conversely, some households are not familiar with nursery rhymes. In that case, songs, street rhymes, chants, and clapping games are a worthy replacement<sup>6</sup> especially if that means it becomes a shared experience for the family: "Parents seeking a collaborative approach during activities reported increased exposure to home literacy and numeracy activities than families with less collaborative involvement."<sup>7</sup>

There are many ways to learn and practice the oral language you learn in Euro-American nursery rhymes. How powerful it is to know that the songs and games a

parent plays at home can help their children get reading ready!

An increasing importance has been placed on early literacy at the national level. The National Early Literacy Panel report, a 2008 publication, outlined best practices for early literacy providers. Standards are already being set for accountability in preschool settings, changing the ways providers approach instruction. Informing literacy learning with SBRR is crucial, but there are concerns about unclear implementations of the Common Core Standards in early literacy spaces. While emphasizing explicit instruction in language, literacy, and math, some worry that the time spent on play-based learning, motor development, and other equally crucial skills will fall to the wayside.<sup>8</sup> Many of these concerns arise from the fear that administrators and policymakers will not fully read the Common Core Standards and rely on a "Too Long; Didn't Read" version, with a few easiest-to-implement prescriptions for literacy underscored over all others.

Unencumbered by national instruction prescriptions, libraries can provide a creative and welcoming environment for emotional growth and literacy to thrive. Libraries can also help families build home environments associated with positive reading outcomes: regular reading aloud, encouragement and opportunity to read, ready availability of books, an attitude that promotes reading as a fun activity, and frequent conversations.<sup>9</sup>

These recommendations may not come with the apparent "literacy guarantee" that prescriptions do, but they position libraries as a leader in equipping families with the tools they need to raise readers. Literacy can be a gift to families from the public library, and we can promote it as the complex science that it is.

Mem Fox may seem to be a "repeat offender" when it comes to prescribing literacy practices, yet she is far from the only party to do so. It's also completely understandable. We live in an age of sound bites, and it is way too tempting to rely on them when we have so few hours in the day.

As practitioners, however, we deserve to be empowered by quenching our thirst for knowledge. We need the "behind-the-scenes DVD commentary" of literacy while we share quick tips and interact with our library families.

We are trusted as the literacy experts of our community! Prescriptions (and even "commandments," adding a moral fabric to literacy) strip us of the necessary "why" that helps us make deliberate decisions with our patrons.

*Want to get started with some great resources for the research behind your favorite prescriptions for literacy? If you haven't yet, please read the Every Child Ready to Read literature review in its entirety: [www.everychildreadytoread.org/project-history%09/literature-review-2010](http://www.everychildreadytoread.org/project-history%09/literature-review-2010). Then, check out Melissa's "Research Link: [Some Sources]" at <http://melissa.depperfamily.net/blog/?p=5575>. Special thanks to her and to Amy at [www.catchthepossibilities.com](http://www.catchthepossibilities.com) for starting this conversation. ☺*

## References

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*Pictured here, left to right, are Neil Bush, Chair of Points of Light and Barbara Bush Houston Literacy Foundation, Readers to Eaters Publisher Philip Lee, and Read Across the Globe Coordinator Della Jones.*

**Sharing Food Literacy.** In October, the children's picturebook *Farmer Will Allen and the Growing Table* was read by children in thirty countries in seventeen time zones as part of an initiative from the Points of Light Foundation. The Read Across the Globe event was an effort to break the Guinness World Record for the most children being read to by an adult in a twenty-four-hour period. The current world record is 238,620, and the goal was to set the new record at 300,000. The book, written by Jacqueline Briggs Martin, is a biographical story about the former basketball star and urban farmer who founded Growing Power in Milwaukee to provide healthy food for his community and inspired a global movement. The book, published by Readers to Eaters, has also been selected for 2016 Read On Wisconsin, administered by Cooperative Children's Book Center (CCBC) in Madison.