VIEWPOINT

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Enhancing Opportunities for Decoding and Knowledge Building through Beginning Texts

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Learn how existing texts can be reorganized to give beginning readers opportunities to apply and extend their developing knowledge of letter–sound correspondences and of physical and social worlds.

Enhancing Opportunities for Decoding and Knowledge Building Through Beginning Texts

High-quality literature, whether narrative or informational, is at the center of any English/language arts program. Trade books are read aloud and are part of core reading programs. Magazines, newspapers, animated texts, and other textual materials are also part of reading programs. But for specific aspects of instruction, especially early reading instruction and interventions, leveled or decodable texts are often used (Gersten et al., 2020).

From the First-Grade Studies (Bond & Dykstra, 1967), research has consistently confirmed that guidance in connections between letters and sounds is necessary for proficient reading acquisition. Further, even in the early stages of reading, students benefit from applying letter–sound correspondences (LSCs) from lessons to texts (Juel & Minden-Cupp, 2000). Ensuring that students have texts that are the most efficacious and engaging for reading acquisition is a goal shared by educators, caregivers, and the public.

At present, messages of how leveled and decodable texts contribute to this goal are numerous and frequently contradictory (Bomer et al., 2022; Buckingham, 2022). Journalists and advocates have made the case for the superior efficacy of decodable texts relative to leveled texts (Hanford, 2022; Schwartz, 2019), and policymakers have listened. As of late 2022, 37 states have passed legislation that requires primary-grade curriculum and materials to align with the science of reading and, in at least 12 of these states, districts are required to purchase only materials from a list of designated science of reading programs.

The specifications and guidelines that accompany mandates frequently recommend decodable texts and in some cases dismiss leveled texts, implicitly or explicitly. For example, Louisiana's Act 517, passed in 2022, prohibits the use of the three-cueing system in curricular and instructional materials. The legislation does not proscribe leveled readers, but guidelines from Louisiana Department of Education describe leveled texts as "books that are designed to encourage students to rely upon three-cueing strategies to be able to successfully read them" (n.d., p. 2).

Instantiation into law of requirements for one text type and the elimination of others suggests that the science underlying these recommendations is considerable. In this paper, I focus on three questions related to decodable and leveled texts:

1. What does research show about the efficacy of decodable and leveled texts in supporting reading acquisition?
2. How do decodable and leveled texts compare in features that have been shown to influence reading acquisition?
3. Can leveled texts be organized to better support students' reading acquisition?

What Is the Evidence on the Efficacy of Decodable and Leveled Texts in Supporting Reading Acquisition?

A starting point for a discussion of text types requires a definition of each text type, followed by a brief review of research on the efficacy of each text type.

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Decodable Texts

As with any alphabetic language, learning how letters are associated with sounds is necessary for successful reading in English (National Reading Panel, 2000). Many types of texts have been offered to give beginning readers experience in decoding. Prior to the early 21st century, programs designated as decoding based were assessed on percentages of words that followed a progression from consistent to complex and variant patterns (Juel & Roper/Schneider, 1985). At present, Lesson-to-Text-Match (Stein et al., 1999) is the basis for defining decodable text.

In the Lesson-to-Text-Match model, texts are deemed decodable to the degree that all LSCs in words have been covered in prior lessons of the program. For example, if a teacher's guide has provided lessons on a/[æ], i/[ɪ], m/[m], n/[n], and s/[s] and the words *on* and *a* as sight words, the following text is judged to be decodable: "Sam sat on a mat. A man sat on a mat. Nan sat on a mat." Beck (1997), whose work (Beck & Block, 1979) was seminal in crafting the Lesson-to-Text-Match model, observed that "[I]t would seem that about 70%–80% decodable would be reliable enough for children to refine their knowledge of the spelling-to-speech mapping system" (p. 17).

Validation for what Beck (1997) called an educated conclusion of a 70%–80% Lesson-to-Text-Match has been sparse (Cheatham & Allor, 2012). In the only study of substantial duration using the Lesson-to-Text-Match model (Jenkins et al., 2004) identified by Cheatham and Allor in their review of decodable texts, two groups received the same decoding instruction but read from more or less decodable texts; classroom peers received the business-as-usual condition. Over the three intervention phases, the percentages of words fitting the Lesson-to-Text-Match criterion were as follows: more decodable: 86, 72, and 80 and less decodable: 11, 40, and 69. By the third phase, the differences in decodable words were small relative to the first two phases. Both intervention groups performed significantly better than the control group on several reading outcomes, including decoding and comprehension, but there were no significant effects reported between the more or less decodable text groups.

PAUSE AND PONDER

- To what degree are the texts in your reading program organized around critical word and world knowledge rather than text complexity levels?
- How does instruction in your reading program support students who are in the early stages of reading acquisition or challenged in becoming proficient readers to access the wealth of knowledge available in texts?
- How does word study instruction in your reading program support students in becoming flexible with the variation between letters and their associated sounds or what has been described as "set for variability"?

In Juel and Roper/Schneider's (1985) study, decoding instruction was similar for two groups, but reading application was in either decodable or basal texts. The researchers did not measure decodability by the Lesson-to-Text-Match model, but according to a phonetically regular model that assigned numbers to vowel patterns: 1: predictable, easy; 2: predictable, hard; and 3: unpredictable, variant. Across the three phases of first grade, the decodable texts had an average of 1.2, 2.0, and 2.0 on the three-category decoding scheme; the basal texts averaged 1.8, 1.8, and 2.0. Students who read phonics texts were more likely to use a decoding strategy when they read other texts, whereas peers in the basal group used unique letter strings to identify words. These strategies were most evident in the first third of first grade, but even in the third phase, when decodability ratings of texts were the same for both groups, a significant number of students continued to rely on the same strategies. However, no significant differences were apparent between the two groups at the end of first grade on the Iowa Reading Total Score (reading comprehension and vocabulary). Further, in that the study was not longitudinal, the longevity of strategies beyond first grade is not clear.

Other than these two studies, Cheatham and Allor (2012) located no research works of significant length where the investigators examined the efficacy of decodable texts relative to other text types with other instructional elements (e.g., writing and spelling activities) held constant. Cheatham and Allor cautioned that the lack of empirical evidence for decodable texts does not negate the importance of consistency in the patterns of the words of beginning texts or the connection of these patterns in texts to lessons. They proposed that texts should be viewed in terms of degree of decoding consistency. For example, all four of the excerpts from the middle of beginning reading programs in Table 1 have words with at least some consistent vowel patterns. When excerpts are evaluated for presence of words with short and long vowels (predictable, easy category in Juel and Roper/Schneider's (1985) study), texts range from 35% to 62% in decoding consistency.

Table 1
Short and Long Vowel Words in Excerpts from Mid-First-Grade Programs of Four Text Types

Text type	Excerpt[a]	Short vowel words (%)	Long vowel words (%)
Decodable text	"We did a fine job. Thank you for all your help," said Ray to Jill and Dee. They walked out of the shed. A sweet breeze floated by.	21	14
Leveled	"You did help me get the ball past Papa," Sam said. "We make a good team," Sam said. "Yes, we do," Jesse said. "You, me, and the ants!"	29	7
Reorganized leveled text	The tide has just gone out. The sand is still wet. Who made these marks in the sand? A snake made these marks in the sand.	39	23
Text based on decoding consistency	The skin of snakes is covered with scales. The scales of snakes can have different shapes. Some snakes have scales with dots and spots. Others have scales with stripes.	31	31

[a]*Excerpts are drawn from the text in the middle of each program.*

Leveled Texts

Ordering texts by increasing complexity has a long history in reading education. Over the past decades, the most frequent means of assigning complexity to texts for beginning reading instruction has been text leveling (Pearson & Hiebert, 2014). Leveled texts refer to those that have been evaluated according to a set of qualitative features, the most widely used version of which is the guided reading level system (Fountas & Pinnell, 2012). This system assigns one of the 26 complexity levels (A–Z) to texts based on a human judge's evaluation of 10 book criteria that include themes and word patterns. Research studies have consistently shown that one variable—total number of words in texts—accounts for the most variance in text level (Cunningham et al., 2005; Hiebert & Tortorelli, 2022). Texts with fewer words have lower levels; texts with more words have higher levels. In contrast, neither word frequency nor the LSCs in words have been shown to predict designated text levels (Cunningham et al., 2005; Hiebert & Tortorelli, 2022).

Trade books are included on the lists of guided reading levels (Fountas & Pinnell, 2021), but most leveled texts come from programs written specifically to comply with the system's criteria. To date, no researchers have compared the efficacy of leveled texts with another text type when all other dimensions of instruction have been held constant.

Summary

At present, evidence is slim that use of either text type by itself can ensure reading acquisition. A recent review suggests that the combination of the two text types may be more supportive than either text type on its own. In a meta-analysis of texts used in interventions (Pugh et al., 2023), neither decodable nor nondecodable texts differed in their effects on student outcomes. However, interventions that included reading of both decodable and nondecodable texts had greater effects than interventions using only one of the text types. The data indicated that this effect was especially robust for standardized word recognition outcomes.

How Different or Similar Are Decodable and Leveled Texts in Features that Are Associated with Students' Reading Acquisition?

The rhetoric surrounding recommendations and mandates for decodable and leveled texts imply substantial differences between these two text types. The studies of Juel and Roper/Schneider (1985) and Jenkins et al. (2004) pointed to initial differences in the decodability of the two text types that decreased from the middle to the end of first grade. Excerpts from the two text types appear in Table 1, each drawn from the same point in their respective programs. A critical question is as follows: How different are the features of these two text types?

My current interest lies in differences between decodable and leveled texts in the middle of beginning reading programs. A first reason for this focus is that the predictable genre of texts that can be prominent in leveled text

programs and that discourages beginning readers from attending to word features (Johnston, 2000) have been replaced with conventional text structures (Fitzgerald et al., 2015). Second, by this point, the curriculum has typically moved from words with short vowels that have one-to-one correspondences between letters and sounds to words with long vowels, which correspondences are not one to one. Reading words with long vowels requires what has been described as set for variability (Steacy et al., 2019)—a flexibility in applying different sounds to the letters in words. Consider, for example, graphemes associated with the sound /ē/: vowel digraphs (e.g., *team*), the silent e (e.g., *these*), the letter e at the end of an open syllable (e.g., *me*), and /y/ at the end of some multisyllabic words (e.g., *very*).

The present analysis addressed the presence of words with vowel digraphs and CVC-e patterns in the two text types. The CV pattern was not a focus. Little research is available on how words with CV patterns are learned and, unlike vowel digraph and CVV-e patterns, the vowel in the CV pattern has a one-to-one correspondence in which the sounds are those of the letter's name in the alphabet.

Design of the Comparison of the Two Text Types

To describe similarities and differences in the presence of words with long vowels in decodable and leveled text in the middle of first-grade programs, I analyzed exemplars of both text types.

Programs. The program of decodable texts came from a list of recommended decodable texts on the Reading League's website in 2020 (The Reading League, 2020). The program of leveled text is based on the guided reading level system (Fountas & Pinnell, 2012). I drew a sample of similar size—6200 words—from the middle of the first-grade programs: Levels 3 and 4 of the decodable program and Levels E, F, and G of the leveled program.

Measures and Analyses. The WordZone Profiler (WZP; Hiebert, 2011), a digital text analyzer, was used to analyze three features of the words in the two text samples: (a) LSCs of vowels, (b) frequency, and (c) familiarity.

Vowel Patterns. In the WZP, a word is assigned to one of the nine categories according to its vowel or syllabic structure (Menon & Hiebert, 2005). The first eight categories pertain to vowel patterns in monosyllabic words, moving from simple to complex vowel patterns. Multisyllabic words are assigned to category 9.

Frequency and Familiarity. Both the frequency of a word's appearance in written English and its familiarity (i.e., likelihood of its presence in children's oral language environment) predict recognition of words and their meanings (Morrison & Ellis, 1995). The WZP reports the U function, which predicts the frequency of a word per million words of text (Zeno et al., 1995) and age of acquisition (Kuperman et al., 2012), which predicts the age at which students typically encounter a word in oral language.

Findings

Table 2 presents the distributions of the three word features—frequency, familiarity, and vowel or syllabic pattern—in the two text samples. The distributions across frequency bands are remarkably similar. Regarding vowel patterns, decodable texts provide two more words with

Table 2
Distributions of All Words in Decodable, Leveled, and Reorganized Texts: Frequency, Vowel Patterns, and Age of Acquisition (Percentages)

	Frequency[a]			Vowel patterns[b]					Age of acquisition[c]		
Text type	High	Mod	Rare	Short & CV	Long	Complex	Variant	MS	<5.5	5.5–7	>7
Decodable	77	16	7	39	11	11	26	13	81	12	7
Leveled	78	16	6	39	9	14	24	14	91	7	2
Reorganized	76	18	6	29	16	14	24	17	85	11	4

[a]*Frequency: Categories are based on predicted appearances of words per million words of text (Zeno et al.*, 1995): High = 100+; Moderate = 99–10; Rare = 9 or fewer.
[b]Vowel patterns: Categories are based on Menon and Hiebert's (2005) vowel pattern scheme: One-to-one correspondence: Short vowels (e.g., *cat*) and CV in monosyllabic word (e.g., *me*); Long: Vowel digraph (e.g., *team*) and silent-e (e.g., *late*); Complex: Vowel diphthongs (e.g., *boy*), r-controlled (e.g., *car*), variant but prolific vowel families (e.g., *kind*); Variant: Vowel pattern does not conform to typical LSC vowel patterns (e.g., *front*); Multisyllabic: Words with two or more syllables.
[c]Age of acquisition: Categories are based on Kuperman et al. (2012) norms of when words appear in children's oral language environments: <5.5: Before age 5.5; 5.5–7: Between ages 5.5 and 7; >7: After age 7.

vowel digraphs and CVVC-e in every 100 words of text than leveled texts. Each text type provides similar percentages of words with short/CV words, variant vowels, and more than one syllable. The leveled texts have a slightly higher percentage of words with complex vowels than words with long vowels, while decodable texts have a similar percentage of words with long and complex vowels.

Familiarity was the feature that most distinguished words in decodable and leveled texts. In decodable texts, 7% of words are likely to be in children's oral language environments only after first grade; the comparable number in leveled texts is 2%. Examples of words that are unfamiliar in the decodable program are *poach* and *deed*. When the goal of instruction is to develop automaticity in word recognition, optimal words are ones that are already in students' vocabularies (Oakhill & Cain, 2012).

Summary

Texts that emphasize consistent and common LSCs should be prominent in the beginning stages of reading (Juel & Minden-Cupp, 2000), but at present, evidence that one text type is superior to other text types in supporting a strong reading foundation is sparse. Furthermore, questions can be raised about both text types. The Lesson-to-Text-Match model that currently drives the design and selection of decodable texts requires validation. For example, the match between the pace of LSC presentation in lessons and children's ability to use this information in recognizing words is yet to be established.

Critiques of leveled texts have included instructional strategies that direct beginning readers away from word features in decoding (Hiebert, 2023) and the lack of a clear decoding curriculum (Hiebert & Tortorelli, 2022). However, a text does not need to be confined to a particular instructional strategy or level. When leveled texts have been used in interventions without the typical instructional machinery advocated by program authors and publishers, benefits to students' reading acquisition have been reported (Ehri et al., 2007; Hiebert et al., 1992; Menon & Hiebert, 2005). A common denominator of these studies has been the reorganization of texts according to a decoding curriculum.

Can Programs of Texts be Reorganized to Increase Students' Word and World Knowledge?

The remainder of this article provides a summary of research on and a demonstration of reorganizing leveled texts around a decoding curriculum. Combined with decodable texts, the use of reorganized texts may have several benefits for beginning readers, including (a) increased volume, (b) support for automaticity in recognizing words, and (c) building and/or extending background knowledge.

Reorganizing for Increased Volume

In *Language at the Speed of Sight*, Seidenberg (2017), a scientist whose work is frequently cited, made no mention of decodable texts, but he described the need for large amounts of data in learning to read:

> Readers become orthographic experts by absorbing a lot of data, which is one reason why the sheer amount and variety of texts that children read is important … Major statistical patterns emerge as the child encounters a larger sample of words, and later, finer-grained dependencies. (p. 92)

Seidenberg (2017) did not hypothesize as to what constitutes "a lot of data." In a meta-analysis of 99 studies, Mol and Bus (2011) reported that reading achievement was linked to reading volume in the primary grades. However, in neither Mol and Bus's meta-analysis nor studies they analyzed were levels of optimal text volume to reading acquisition examined. Text reading, however, is essential to develop prowess as a reader (Juel & Minden-Cupp, 2000). In many classrooms, especially in communities heavily impacted by poverty, the number of texts in classrooms is limited (Duke, 2000). One potential solution for increased reading volume in beginning reading classrooms is to reorganize existing leveled texts according to a decoding curriculum.

Reorganizing to Support Decoding

As the comparison of the two text types showed, leveled texts have some words with long vowels. However, the progression of decoding content is not systematic. Several studies show that leveled texts can be reorganized to ensure greater consistency in the patterns within words to the benefit of beginning readers.

In one study, Hiebert et al. (1992) examined first graders' reading development in two contexts with the same leveled texts. In the typical context, teachers used leveled text as recommended by the publisher. In the restructured intervention, teachers chose texts from lists that had words that progressed from predictable and easy to predictable and hard vowel patterns. At the end of the 6-month program, students in the restructured context had significantly higher performances on word and text reading than students in the typical context.

In a subsequent study, Menon and Hiebert (2005) compared the reading outcomes of two groups whose reading practice was either in the district's core reading texts or

in the reorganized leveled texts. At the end of the intervention, students who read the reorganized leveled texts performed at significantly higher levels in text and word reading than their counterparts who read from the district's core reading program.

Ehri et al. (2007) compared the reading growth of at-risk first graders divided into three groups, two of which received similar systematic phonics instruction but read different texts, and the third participated in the district's typical curriculum. One intervention group read leveled texts reorganized according to the phonics curriculum. The second intervention group read from Lesson-to-Text-Match-aligned decodable texts. At the end of the school year, students who read the reorganized leveled texts had higher word reading and comprehension scores than either the decodable text or control group.

Several additional studies have used intensive word study activities with leveled texts (Morris et al., 2000; Santa & Høien, 1999). The curriculum in these studies has not been as explicit in its decoding progression as the studies that have just been reviewed. However, results of these studies provide further proof that, when leveled texts are chosen for their word patterns and instruction revolves around these patterns, benefits for reading acquisition are substantial.

Reorganizing to Support Knowledge Building

A consistent theme from research of the past several decades is the critical role of knowledge in reading development (Hwang et al., 2023). When words are not within young readers' oral language, children cannot access the appropriate meaning to build a representation of what they have read (Oakhill & Cain, 2012). Because comprehension is heavily influenced by background knowledge, topical sets of books may lay a foundation for background knowledge. Research may not yet have documented the benefits of organizing texts topically in beginning reading programs for world knowledge as well as word knowledge, but one advantage is clear: topical text sets ensure that students see similar words across several different textual contexts. For example, the third and fourth excerpts in Table 1 give students occasions to see the word *snake* in different contexts. Such varied encounters with words support students in attending to word features and their meanings (Hoffman et al., 2013).

A Demonstration of Reorganizing Texts by Decoding and Knowledge Building

The texts in decodable programs are already organized according to a decoding curriculum. Texts with high percentages of specific word patterns can be written to emphasize topics, as illustrated by an excerpt in Table 1 from an open access set of topical texts (TextProject.org, 2023). Creating such texts, however, is a time-consuming process and is unlikely to proceed with sufficient speed to meet the pressing needs in many classrooms. In the meantime, the application of decoding and content criteria to leveled texts can increase the volume of text available for beginning reading instruction.

Activities in the Reorganizing Process. To establish if leveled texts could be reorganized to increase exposure to words with long vowels and topic knowledge, I used the following procedure:

(1) *Clustering texts from programs and levels*. The sample consisted of 50 texts from the middle range of Grade 1-guided reading levels (E through G) from each of the three programs of leveled texts (see Hiebert & Tortorelli, 2022 for fuller descriptions of the three programs). Research shows that combining texts from adjacent levels into a single group is justified because of a lack of variation in decodability across levels (Hiebert & Tortorelli, 2022).

(2) *Sorting texts by vowel patterns*. The goal was to establish a sample size of 6200 words of topically connected texts with percentages of words with long vowel patterns comparable to the decodable program (11%) summarized in Table 2. Consequently, the 150 texts were first vetted with the WZP (Hiebert, 2011) to determine percentages of the target long vowel patterns. Of the 150 texts in the original sample, 51% (77) of the texts had 11% or more words with long vowel patterns.

(3) *Sorting texts by topics*. I evaluated the texts with the target percentage of 11% long vowel words next for content. The WZP includes a semantic category analysis in which each word is assigned to one of the 61 semantic clusters identified by Marzano and Marzano (1988). For informational texts, this step was straightforward because the target words came from one or two semantic clusters. For example, *Seeds grow into plants* had nine unique words with long vowel patterns in the cluster of vegetation (e.g., *seeds and vines*).

Unlike informational texts, narrative texts typically did not have a single prominent semantic cluster. For example, *Home sweet home* had three semantic clusters with target words: traits (e.g., *sweet*), movement (e.g., *paint*), and colors (e.g., *green*). When a single theme was not evident, texts were read for a primary theme (friendship in the case of *Home sweet home*). Of the 77 texts with the target percentage of long vowel words, 65% (50) fell into five topics: The Sea, Communities We Live in, Food We Eat and Grow, Fun with Friends, and Animals: Big and Small. Table 1 includes an excerpt from the middle of the reorganized set of texts.

Comparing Features of the Reorganized Texts to Decodable and Leveled Texts. Data on features of reorganized leveled texts in Table 2 permit a comparison with

decodable and leveled text sets. The percentage of 16% of total words with the target vowel patterns in the reorganized texts is substantially higher than percentages of similar words in leveled texts (7% higher) and in decodable texts (5% higher).

Several observations are in order about the reorganizing process. First, since research provides little information on optimal exposures to LSCs in words, the criterion of 11% for inclusion in the text sets reflects a judgment. Current research has not addressed the amount of exposure needed to become automatic with specific word patterns, especially those in which relationships are not one to one. Percentages, at this point, including the 16% of words in reorganized texts with long vowels require validation.

Texts among the 50% of the original group of 150 texts that did not meet the decoding criterion of 11% long vowel words may be appropriate for application of other vowel patterns. Similarly, texts with target decoding percentages but not falling into the five topics could be used individually or clustered with texts from other guided reading levels or programs.

Finally, texts that met the criterion of 11% with target vowel patterns came primarily from two of the three programs. Because the third program with the fewest texts that met the decoding criterion was the one used in the comparison with decodable texts, at least some leveled text programs may have decoding opportunities with target patterns that surpass the data in Table 2.

Guidelines for Reorganizing Texts by Vowel Patterns and Topics. A critical question relates to the responsibility for reorganizing leveled texts. Publishers could efficaciously provide educators with information on texts such as that in Table 2 on a large scale. Publishing companies have digitized versions of texts that are used for analyses such as Lexiles. Databases such as those that underlie the WZP (Hiebert, 2011) that I used to reorganize texts are publicly available for publishers to use. Publishers can provide data on word features of their texts that go beyond Lexiles and guided reading levels, when states, districts, and schools require this information.

For individual or teams of educators wishing to reorganize texts, the task can seem daunting. A critical insight about topics and vowel patterns can help make the task doable: Some topics have greater numbers of words with consistent and common vowel patterns than other topics. In Table 3, I have provided a list of the 10 topics that each have at least 50 words within the most frequent 1500 words in first-grade texts (Zeno et al., 1995). The topics are ranked from the one with the most words in the 1500 most frequent words to the one with the fewest words. As a group, the words aligned to these 10 topics account for almost half of the 1500 first-grade words.

Table 3
Topics with Numerous Words with Short and Long Vowel Patterns among the 1500 Most Frequent Words in First-Grade Texts

	High-frequency words with vowel patterns	
	Short vowel	**Long vowel**
School, including colors, numbers, music & art	add	read
	desk	line
	bell	page
Household including food	bed	clean
	box	beans
	eggs	phone
Animals	dog	tail
	cat	sheep
	frog	snake
Physical world (including growing things & weather)	sun	sea
	rock	tree
	hot	rain
People & jobs	job	queen
	king	coach
	chef	baker
Body & clothing	socks	coat
	pants	nose
	cap	feet
Money & time	rich	time
	sell	pay
	clock	week
Transportation & machines	bus	boat
	truck	plane
	van	bike
Places	camp	cave
	tent	street
	hill	home
Games	bat	play
	tag	game
	win	race

Among the top 10 topics are numerous words with which to reorganize texts to extend decoding and

knowledge opportunities. Further, while most words that are specific to a topic are nouns, there are also numerous words that are not specific to a topic but have target vowel patterns: verbs, adjectives and adverbs, function words, and the names of characters. For example, a verb such as swim is not restricted to one topic but can appear in a text on animals (e.g., fish swim) as well as a text on children playing with friends (e.g., they like to swim in the lake).

In that certain topics have numerous words with key vowel patterns, I recommend that the first step of the reorganizing process is to cluster leveled texts, decodable texts, and trade books around topics. Once groups of texts have been identified topically, the next step is to identify texts with target vowel patterns.

I used the information in Table 3 to select topics for a program of open access texts, TopicReads-Primary (textproject.org) that is organized around topics and vowel patterns. The last excerpt in Table 2 comes from this program—a book bundle on Snakes. Even in the short excerpt in Table 2, the topic of snakes clearly has numerous words with long vowel words: *scales*, *shapes*, and *stripes*. To support educators in reorganizing texts, the words with target vowel patterns for the topics of TopicReads-Primary are provided at textproject.org.

Conclusion

New mandates are promoting decodable texts and imposing restrictions on the use of leveled texts under the aegis of science (Peak, 2022). Texts with regularity in LSCs are critical in beginning reading programs (Cheatham & Allor, 2012) as are lessons and activities that support students in automaticity with critical patterns. However, most programs currently promoted as decodable have yet to be empirically validated. I do not present current programs of leveled texts that have dominated the marketplace as an alternative to decodable texts. In their current configurations, leveled texts are not organized in ways to promote decoding. Furthermore, some recommended instructional strategies in leveled text programs such as picture–text match have long been known to deter students from attending to LSCs (Samuels, 1970). However, current configurations and practices of leveled text programs do not preclude reorganizing leveled texts according to a decoding curriculum. This reorganizing of leveled texts should be integrated with decodable texts and accompanied with lessons and word study and spelling activities.

As states enact policies that require decodable texts, a set of pressing questions pertains to the assumptions of the Lesson-to-Text-Match model. The underlying assumption that the content of decoding lessons needs to align with the words in texts is not in question. But numerous ancillary assumptions are yet to be validated, such as the pace at which patterns are introduced relative to students' learning. This research is likely to take the form of relatively short experimental studies, rather than the random controlled tests (RCTs) that have been described as characterizing scientific research (The Reading League, 2022). The features of texts and words are sufficiently numerous and complex to render the use of RCTs in validating all potential text features impractical and impossible.

Jettisoning thousands of leveled books because of claims that decodable texts as currently designed will close the reading gap seems shortsighted. Using leveled texts reorganized by vowel patterns and topics alongside decodable texts offers potential for increasing the volume of text that many students need for becoming adept in word recognition, while simultaneously developing the background knowledge that underlies comprehension.

TAKE ACTION

1. Sort texts according to common themes. Within each topical text set, select the texts that give students opportunities to apply target phonics patterns.
2. Have students keep their own records of words from topical text sets with target word patterns. Encourage students to label these word maps with captions that acknowledge their ability to read specific words and extend their knowledge of vowel patterns to other words (e.g., I can read *may*; I can also read *way* and *day*).
3. Create vocabulary maps with students for content-specific words in topical text sets. Review previous vocabulary maps periodically and add words that students have subsequently encountered on the topic.

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None.

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MORE TO EXPLORE

For more information on reorganizing texts by topics and prominent vowel patterns:

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