

# Book Review: Essentials of assessing, preventing, and overcoming reading difficulties

Reviewed by **Emma Nahna.**

*David A. Kilpatrick, Essentials of assessing, preventing, and overcoming reading difficulties, Wiley, 2015*

**D**avid Kilpatrick, PhD, is a crusader in the field of reading acquisition. He is one of the founding members of The Reading League, whose mission is 'to advance the awareness, understanding, and use of evidence-based reading instruction'. He is a practising school psychologist in New York, having completed over 1,000 psychological evaluations of students, in addition to being an Associate Professor at State University of New York College, Cortland.

In the opening pages, David Kilpatrick states "The goal of this book is to open up the vast and extensive world of empirical research into reading acquisition and reading disabilities in order to capitalize on the most useful findings for assessing reading difficulties and for designing highly effective interventions." (p. 2). He certainly meets this objective.

A child learning to read is a marvel to behold. Although the process can seem almost magical (when it goes well), it is imperative that those providing reading instruction know exactly what goes on 'behind the curtain' to make that magic happen. The truth is, what it takes to grow skilled readers is no longer a mystery. There is an avalanche of reading science from the past four decades – reading is one of the most

researched human skills on the planet. David Kilpatrick takes us on a journey through the towering mountains of journal articles and meta-analyses with his collegial commentary – a friendly and extremely well-versed tour guide. He synthesises multitudes of research findings, translating them into understandable language and giving clear direction for how to apply them to the practical business of teaching children to read.

Although brimming with references and highly technical - delving deeply into scientific theories and the established knowledge base on reading development - it is not a difficult read. It has a distinctly conversational tone, and like a good novel, I couldn't put it down. There are valuable nuggets of information and practical tips on every page. The chapters are well organised, following a clear, logical sequence. Information is easily located thanks to precise subheadings, call-out boxes with tips and key points, and extensive indexing. There are additional materials provided online: an audio guide to pronouncing English phonemes in isolation, a chapter on promoting orthographic mapping from *Equipped for Reading Success* (David Kilpatrick's other book), and the *Phonological Awareness Screening Test (PAST)*.

The book is arranged around four main themes:

- How we got to where we are currently in reading instruction – historical approaches; the 'reading wars'; the research-to-practice gap; ineffective practices.
- The developmental process of transforming from non-reader to skilled reader. Orthographic mapping – its critical role in proficient word recognition, and conversely in difficulties with growing sight word vocabulary.
- Intervention-oriented assessment:

frameworks to understand and assess reading sub-skills: reading comprehension, phonological processing,



phonics, word identification and fluency, vocabulary, rapid automatized naming, and working memory. There is highly practical guidance on the selection and use of specific assessments. Case illustrations highlighting different patterns of reading difficulties (e.g. dyslexic, compensator pattern, mixed-type) are provided at the end of the book, presenting real assessment results and summaries.

- Effective approaches to *prevent* reading difficulties, and to *intervene* if reading difficulties persist. This section examines approaches with minimal / modest results, contrasts these with highly successful interventions yielding strong effects in the research. Specific programs and curriculums are discussed. Implementing these highly effective Tier 1, 2, and 3 teaching practices should reduce the incidence of struggling readers from 30-34% down to 1-3% (p. 12). Crucial features of highly effective teaching include: "(a) direct and explicit phonological awareness training, (b) ample letter-sound instruction, and (c) ...teach the connections between the two." (p. 12) as well as extensive practice in reading connected text with feedback, applying the skills which have been directly taught.

Key concepts in understanding reading are carefully presented – Gough

and Tunmer’s simple view of reading; Share’s self-teaching hypothesis; and Ehri’s orthographic mapping. David Kilpatrick states that orthographic mapping is the most important concept explored in this book. To this end, he takes complex reading science and renders it as clear as he possibly can, helping us thoroughly understand this critical ingredient of skilled reading. Unfamiliar words transform from being decoded grapheme-by-grapheme to become instantly and accurately recognised ‘sight words’. This occurs through a mental process which bonds specific letter strings to phonemes and meaning in memory, to allow effortless reading and spelling.

I particularly valued a framework David Kilpatrick presents; its simplicity belies the powerful implications it contains. The framework outlines the reciprocal relationship between developing phoneme awareness and reading skills (p.92), see below.

Importantly in this text, a concerted effort is made to address ineffective approaches to reading instruction (visual memory/whole word, three-cueing/whole language, and phonics in isolation), explaining why and how reading researchers have come to their conclusions.

I feel that there are two minor drawbacks. The first is that the book has a heavy emphasis on one pillar of “The Big Five” (phonemic awareness), and a light sprinkling of the other four components (phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension). Each is comprehensively addressed in terms of assessment practices, and evidence supporting its status as one of the main skills underpinning reading acquisition. However, there is a clear emphasis on intervention for ‘phonemic proficiency’ to support orthographic mapping, and thus, automaticity of word-level reading. Those looking for in-depth learning about the provision of effective instruction in fluency,

vocabulary, oral language, and comprehension will need to look to other sources.

Secondly, although it comprehensively defines highly effective literacy instruction, I still felt compelled to purchase David Kilpatrick’s other book *Equipped for Reading Success* (2018, Casey & Kirsch Publishers, USD\$50 + shipping) to really grasp the nuts and bolts of exactly how to apply the principles with students. I am pleased that I did – in addition to a summary of the key concepts explored in “*Essentials...*” this provides the scope and sequence, assessment, and program resources to carry out effective teaching in basic and advanced phonemic awareness.

Louisa Moats (2016) said this book “represents one of the most potent linkages between science and educational practice available to us now” and I must agree. I strongly recommend this book to all those interested in deepening their knowledge and understanding of precisely how skilled reading happens, and how to effectively support *all* learners to become strong readers. It will be a valuable read for anyone involved in assessing reading skills, teaching children to read, or working with struggling readers: teachers, educational psychologists (who will particularly appreciate the assessment sections), tutors, reading specialists, and speech language pathologists. Students and new graduates, right through to highly experienced professionals will learn a great deal to immediately apply to their practice. To get a feel for the book, 48 pages are available as a preview online through Google Books. I would also encourage readers to watch some of David Kilpatrick’s professional development lectures freely available online (through the Reading League’s YouTube channel) which really consolidate the learning offered in the text. Better still, go and hear him in

person when he tours Australia for LDA in August 2019!

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### Reference

Moats (2016) – quotation is from the book review in International Dyslexia Association’s *Perspectives on Language and Literacy*, Summer issue, pp. 51-52.

Developmental Levels of Phonological Awareness and Reading	
Phonological skill development	Word-Reading Development
1. Early phonological awareness Rhyming, alliteration, first sounds	1. Letters and sounds Requires simple phonology to learn sounds.
2. Basic phonemic awareness Blending and segmentation	2. Phonic decoding Requires letter sounds, and blending
3. Advanced phonemic awareness Phonemic proficiency	3. Orthographic mapping Requires letter-sound skills, and advanced phonological awareness.