



The Quiet Crisis

*I*t's graduation day, 2030. High school students and their families are filing into stadiums and auditoriums around the United States, awaiting the chant-like announcements of hundreds of students receiving their diplomas.

It seems like only yesterday these students were babies. They arrived in the world at a time of immense change in how people communicated and learned—days that began to include smartphone apps, on-the-fly video making, instant photo sharing, text messaging, blogging, YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and more. Some of these students have become focused, careful readers with skills in filtering, creating, and making sense of the continual streams of information coming their way. Guided by a community of parents and educators who recognized the potential of new tools and mentors, they have become über readers, literate in a way that was almost unimaginable in the days before they were born.

Others are flailing. Some didn't make it to this graduation moment at all. Never given consistent attention and disconnected from tools and teaching strategies that could help, they have failed to master the habits of mind and the requisite skills to succeed in a global and digital age. This waste of their potential will have been, tragically, wholly preventable.

The digital age brings a paradox: as workplaces become increasingly dependent on the exchange of information, good reading skills are more important than ever. And yet children and their families are increasingly surrounded by new tools and digital distractions that affect the act of reading and communication. How will children ever learn to read?

That question is what prompted this book. For many, it is a question uttered in fear. The paradigm for instilling reading skills feels like it is crumbling away, as bedtime books morph into bedtime videos and daily routines leave no time for solitary, uninterrupted hours to read and think. The percentage of children who say they read books for fun every day or at least five days a week has dropped since 2010, according to Scholastic.¹ The National Endowment for the Arts has spotlighted what it calls a “general decline in reading,” with data showing that nearly half of young adults read no books for pleasure.² Publishers are reporting declines in print book sales and slowed rates of growth in e-books.³ Some business leaders say it is difficult to find employees who can read and write at even a high school level.⁴

Adding to the worry is the newfound recognition that over the course of human history, our brains have had to be trained to read. “In the evolution of our brain’s capacity to learn, the act of reading is not natural,” writes cognitive neuroscientist Maryanne Wolf. “We were never born to read.”⁵ It’s the plasticity of our brains—the ability of neurons to create new connections every time we challenge ourselves in new ways—that has enabled our species to advance from utterances to words, to symbols, to print, to the fluency that enables you to read this last sentence without even having to think about it. Once it sinks in that we really *are* what we experience, the always-humming experiences of the digital age should give us pause. In her book *Proust and the Squid: The Story and Science of the Reading Brain*, Wolf puts the fear this way: “Will the present generation become so accustomed to immediate access to on-screen information that the range of attentional, inferential, and reflective capacities in the present reading brain become less developed?”⁶

THE SORRY STATE OF READING TODAY

For us, the question of how twenty-first-century children will learn to read is not spoken with fear as much as urgency. In essence our nation is facing a “quiet crisis”: an alarming number of children in the United States never become good readers. Some never really learn to read at all. According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), a biannual record of children’s abilities published by the US Department of Education, more than two-thirds of American fourth graders are not reading at a “proficient” level.

What does proficient mean? It is the marker of whether a student has, in the words of the authors of the NAEP, “demonstrated competency” in reading texts deemed appropriate for their grade level.⁷ There are other labels too, such as “advanced,” which means being better than proficient, and “basic,” which is a level below proficient and means that a student has only partially mastered the skills needed for competency. Research shows that proficient readers are on track to success in school and life.⁸ They are two-and-a-half times as likely as basic readers to be earning \$850 or more a week, or \$44,200 or more a year. And a study in 2011 showed that children who have not reached proficiency by the time they finish third grade are at higher risk of dropping out of high school.⁹ Third graders who are not proficient and who are also growing up in poverty are even more likely to drop out. Shockingly, the rates of nonproficient fourth graders among children of color, and children in poverty, are more than 80 percent.¹⁰

Not everyone agrees with the NAEP’s definition of proficiency.¹¹ Some education researchers say it is too high a bar and argue that children with basic reading skills might look like proficient readers on other types of tests. Yet even on other tests of reading, large proportions of American children are not doing well. Each spring every state, for example, administers standardized tests. The test items and cut scores vary considerably (a problem that understandably irritates education reformers), but even given those variations, there is no question literacy rates are troubling. Take Massachusetts, a state that gets high marks for its education system.¹² In that

state, 43 percent of third graders are not hitting Massachusetts's proficient mark in reading. That is a high number of children who are likely to have a hard time doing simple things like completing their homework. They struggle to understand the writing prompts, they can't read the five-paragraph assignment on ecosystems, or the Civil War, or how to create a line graph, and they will, without intervention, lag further and further behind.

Reading achievement scores are even more distressing when put in context over decades. Low reading skills have characterized America's nine-year-olds since they began taking national tests in 1971. Reading scores climbed in the late 1990s, but between 2004 and today, the average score has stayed relatively flat. The average score among nine-year-olds—all nine-year-olds, not just those in poverty—hovers around 220 on a 500-point scale.¹³ They are not even getting halfway to the top score.

Educators have tried valiantly to fix this. Reading and literacy have been on the radar of experts for decades as the science on how children learn to read has become more and more settled. Years ago, it wasn't unusual to find people (sometimes grouped as "whole language" advocates) who believed children learned to read almost automatically as long as they were exposed to books in one way or another. But these days, you'd be hard-pressed to find a reading expert who thinks reading happens by osmosis. Consensus has formed around a two-pronged, skills-plus-knowledge strategy: teach letters and sounds and help children practice the "de-coding" of written words *while also* immersing them in stories and back-and-forth dialogues that introduce new vocabulary and show them the multilayered worlds of science, art, history, literature, different cultures, and more. This two-pronged strategy should be at the heart of literacy learning everywhere.

Polls show the majority of the public recognizes the importance of starting early and investing in programs to help families when children are very young.¹⁴ This recognition should also be working in children's favor. Society is starting to realize that learning to become literate starts earlier than kindergarten or first grade. The building blocks of literacy start with the smiles and gurgles of babies looking at their parents and caregivers while those adults

return the smiles and coo in response. As babies point to what they want and utter their first words, they learn to communicate, then speak, and then, over time, build upon that experience to develop as readers and writers. That framework sets them up for reading those words years later, written on a page or etched across a screen.

Our government has tried to help. The US Department of Education put considerable attention on reading for most of the 1990s and 2000s with public engagement campaigns like America Reads and well-funded programs such as Reading First, a \$6-billion grant program. The administration of President Barack Obama awarded millions to “scale up” reading programs with evidence of good results, such as the Children’s Literacy Initiative, Reading Recovery, and Success for All. Officials for Head Start, the federal government’s early learning program for children in poverty, have required teachers to focus on early literacy skills for more than a decade. Many governors and mayors have launched early education initiatives and passed legislation devoted to get everyone reading. And a coalition of nonprofit organizations, philanthropies, business leaders, and more than 150 communities, organized by the Campaign for Grade Level Reading in 2012, has won wider attention to the quiet crisis in recent years.

Given this momentum, why are two-thirds of American children not reading proficiently and half of children from low-income families not even able to hit the lower level of “basic” on reading tests?¹⁵

WHAT’S HOLDING US BACK

Unequal access to early learning, spotty funding, and weak teacher training are obvious culprits. Take Head Start, for example. Although it has been shown to moderately improve children’s literacy skills after a year of enrollment,¹⁶ the program has never received enough funding to serve more than half of the children in poverty.¹⁷ And the US child poverty rate has recently climbed to one in five children.¹⁸ Even if all children in poverty had access, there would be many more whose parents may be earning incomes above

the poverty threshold but still unable to afford tuition for quality preschool. Momentum has been building across the United States to fill that gap by creating pre-kindergarten programs for low-income families or even, as is already the case in states like Oklahoma and Georgia, free to anyone regardless of income. But universal pre-K is far from a reality in most parts of the country.

Then there is the teaching of literacy in pre-K, kindergarten, and the first through third grades. Many school districts continue to get by with a hodgepodge of approaches, zig-zagging between fads and switching curricula from year to year. Reading experts say that they have witnessed underprepared faculty in teachers' colleges and underprepared teachers in pre-kindergarten through the third grade. And sometimes the push for literacy is accompanied by uninformed or even harmful techniques, such as when teachers of young children are pressured to drill children on the ABCs and phonics without recognizing the research on how young students can develop language and literacy skills when teachers use playful techniques, expose them to complex vocabulary, and give them opportunities to ask questions and explore.

These significant hurdles have to be removed. The United States must take a more comprehensive approach to improving teaching and learning environments for children from infancy up through elementary school. But even if we do more of what we already know, is that all it would take for all children in the United States to become strong readers? Is there some elephant in the room no one wants to talk about?

TVs, touchscreens, and smartphones are now almost ubiquitous in living rooms, bedrooms, and nurseries. Many preschoolers and elementary schoolers are watching, listening to, or interacting with two to three hours of screen media per day. E-books and videos populate library shelves and coffee tables. Parents and even grandparents are incessantly looking down at personal devices. Classrooms without computers and interactive whiteboards seem antiquated. Is the real barrier to improved reading skills that books can't possibly compete with exciting multimedia products for our attention? Let's face it: screen media is the elephant in the room.¹⁹ True

understanding of children's literacy in the twenty-first century is impossible without turning to face this creature and take a long look.

NOTES

1. **The percentage of children:** *The Kids & Family Reading Report* 2015, 12. For more information on this report, see "4 Surprises in Scholastic's National Survey of Kids and Reading," January 12, 2015, on New America's EdCentral blog: <http://www.edcentral.org/4-surprises-scholastics/>. Also, *Children, Teens, and Reading*, a research brief published in 2014 by the non-profit advocacy group Common Sense Media, presents data between 2006 and 2013 that could be interpreted as a dip during those years in the amount of time parents spent reading to their young children. However, the survey methodology was different between the two studies. The 2006 data were based on a random-digit-dial telephone survey, while the 2013 data were collected using a probability-based online sample. "It is not possible to know for sure," the report's authors state on page 15, "whether the difference between the findings is an artifact of the change in methodology, or reflects a real drop in reading."
2. **The National Endowment for the Arts:** *To Read* 2007.
3. **Publishers are reporting:** Milliot 2014b, "Print, Digital."
4. **Some business leaders say:** For example, see Chastity Pratt Dawsey, 2014, "As Good Jobs Finally Arrive, Few Detroiters Have the Skills to Fill Them," *Bridge*, a publication of The Center for Michigan, December 16, at http://www.mlive.com/news/detroit/index.ssf/2014/12/as_good_jobs_finally_arrive_fe.html.
5. **"We were never born to read.":** Wolf 2007, x and 3.
6. **In her book:** *Ibid.*, x.
7. **It is the marker:** National Assessment of Educational Programs 2014.
8. **Research shows:** According to the US Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, in *To Read* 2007, 17.

9. **a study in 2011:** Hernandez 2011.
10. **the rates of nonproficient fourth graders:** According to data from the 2013 Nation's Report Card, "What Proportions of Student Groups Are Reaching *Proficient*?" at http://www.nationsreportcard.gov/reading_math_2013/#/student-groups.
11. **Not everyone agrees:** See Gerald Bracey, in the June 2008 issue of *The School Administrator* at <http://www.aasa.org/SchoolAdministratorArticle.aspx?id=5096>. Bracey writes that comparisons of the NAEP and an international test known as TIMSS have shown that high-scoring countries would not do well on the NAEP. "Sweden, the highest scoring nation, would show about one-third of its students proficient while the United States had 31 percent," he says.
12. **Take Massachusetts:** Based on the 2014 MCAS results: <http://www.doe.mass.edu/mcas/2014/results/summary.pdf>.
13. **The average score:** The Nation's Report Card 2012.
14. **Polls show:** See the results of a July 2014 public opinion poll by Public Opinion Strategies and Hart Research Associates for the Grow America Stronger campaign, commissioned by the First Five Years Fund, at <http://growamericastronger.org/poll>.
15. **Given this momentum:** Forty-seven percent of fourth graders eligible for free and reduced-price meals finished below "Basic" on the NAEP reading test in 2013. See 2013 Reading Assessment Report Card, National Center for Education Statistics, page 9.
16. **Although it has been shown:** Puma et al. 2012. Of note: "There is clear evidence that access to Head Start had an impact on children's language and literacy development while children were in Head Start," as reported on page xvi. Head Start has been criticized, however, for not being able to produce enough positive change in children's outcomes to carry through five years later, and the education policy community continues to debate why that is and what it takes to ensure that children in Head Start programs continue to show growth through kindergarten and the early grades.

17. **the program has never received:** See Christina Walker, “Head Start Participants, Programs, Families and Staff in 2013,” CLASP, August 2014, at <http://www.clasp.org/resources-and-publications/publication-1/HSpreschool-PIR-2013-Fact-Sheet.pdf>. About four in ten eligible are served.
18. **the US child poverty rate:** DeNavas-Walt and Proctor 2014.
19. **screen media:** In fact, pediatric researchers Dimitri A. Christakis and Frederick J. Zimmerman published a book in 2006 entitled *The Elephant in the Living Room: Make Television Work for Your Kids* (New York: Rodale), which includes several chapters to help parents make smart choices about the types of content their children should watch. Some of the same studies are described in Lisa’s 2012 book, *Screen Time: How Electronic Media—From Baby Videos to Electronic Software—Affects Your Young Child* (New York: Basic Books).