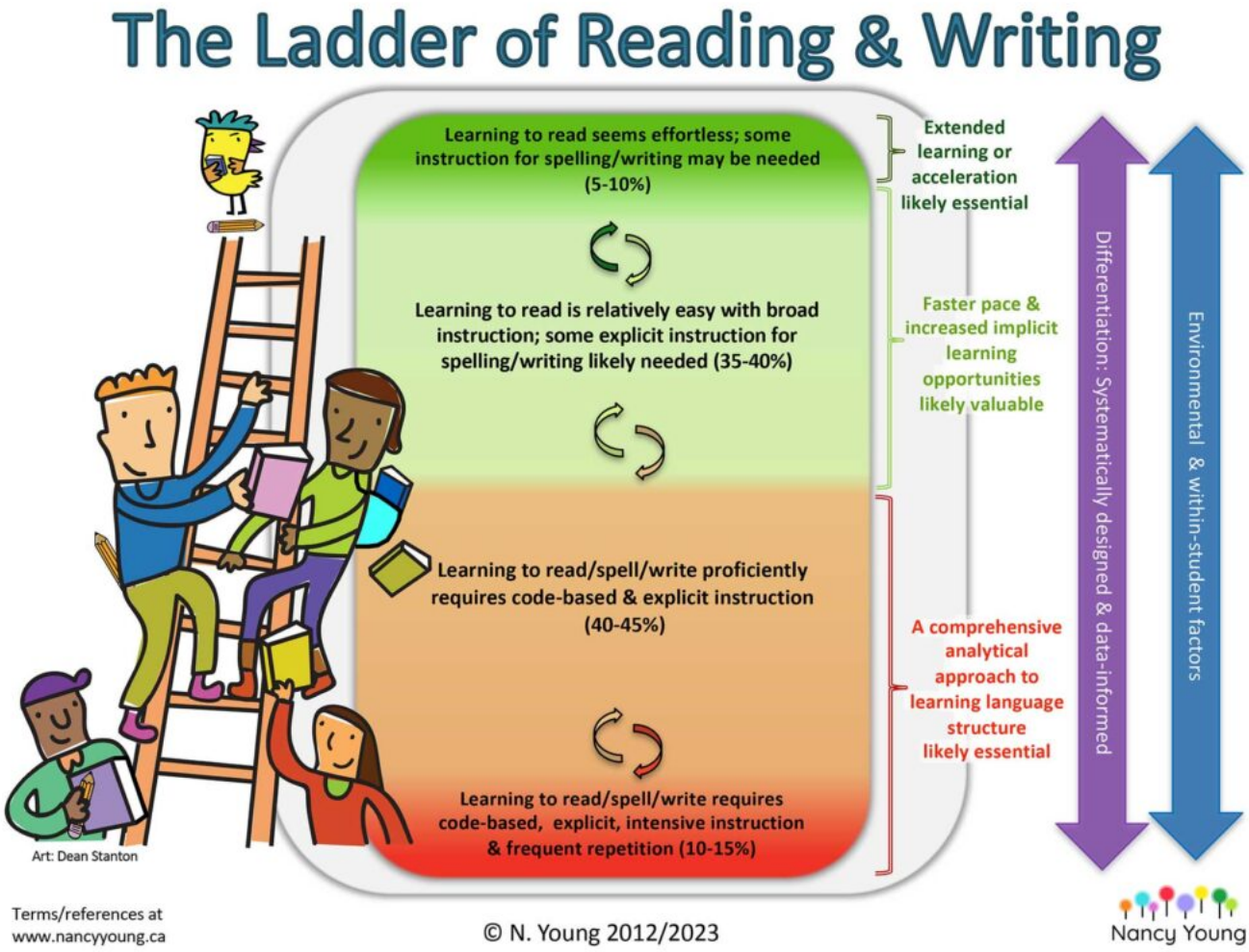
Reading fluency, reading fast or reading well? Interview with Dr. Jan Hasbrouck

Auður Soffíu Björgvinsdóttir in an interview with Dr. Jan Hasbrouck

Dr. Jan Hasbrouck is an academic and educational consultant with expertise in literacy studies. Dr. Hasbrouck worked as a literacy specialist and counselor for 15 years, then began teaching at the University of Oregon and later served as a professor at Texas A&M University. In recent years, Jan has worked as a consultant and expert for both public entities and independently from Seattle where she lives. Jan's expertise lies in the field of literacy, especially literacy, assessment of reading, and teaching reading.

Jan Hasbrouck has written a number of articles and books on literacy. Among them is *Conquering Dyslexia* (2020), which has been taught at the University of Iceland School of Education. In January this year, the book *Climbing the Ladder of Reading and Writing: Meeting the Needs of ALL Learners* by Jan Hasbrouck and Nancy Young was published. This book will undoubtedly be a good addition to the teaching materials used at the School of Education, as it discusses how to meet the needs and strengthen the reading skills of a diverse group of students, whether students are struggling with challenges or whether reading learning is easy and needs further challenges. The book is based on *Reading and the Writing Ladder* by Nancy Young, which has been translated into Icelandic with the author's permission (Nancy Young´s website).



Jan Hasbrouck is very well known for developing literacy measures. The fluency benchmarks developed by Hasbrouck and Tindal literacy benchmarks are recognized and widely used in the United States. These benchmarks were last standardized in 2017 with over 6 million students.

In November 2023, Jan Hasbrouck visited Iceland and gave a talk at the symposium *Hvernig ná öll börn árangri í lestrarnámi* (How to Achieve Reading Success for All Children?), where she explained the topic of oral reading fluency and addressed common misconceptions. In her talk, *Reading Fast or Reading Well? Let's Take Another Look at Fluency*, she explained the concept of fluency and addressed a common misconception that often arises regarding the term. The talk was very informative and well received and raised various questions, as there has been considerable discussion about reading fluency and literacy measurements in Iceland in recent years. As a reading teacher for many years, a literacy specialist, and a doctoral candidate in educational sciences specializing in reading teaching, I have sometimes found the debate to be misguided, characterized by exclamations and misunderstandings, and rarely supported by research.

Oral reading fluency is complex and involves accuracy, automaticity, and prosody (Kuhn et

al., 2010). Of these three factors, two are measured in fluency tests, i.e., accuracy and automaticity, and the result is given in the number of correctly read words per minute. The discussion in Iceland has revolved, among other things, around reading comprehension, i.e., the ability to obtain information from read text, being the goal of reading, and that it is not related to the automation part of reading fluency, which is only seen as an unnecessary measurement of reading speed. Therefore, reading fluency measurements should be omitted, and instead of that, reading comprehension should be measured. However, a number of studies have shown that there is a clear link between reading fluency and reading comprehension (White et al., 2021), and reading fluency has been called a bridge between decodings and reading comprehension (Duke & Cartwright, 2021; Rasinski, 2004). When we do two things at the same time, such as reading a text and thinking about the content of the text, we either have to constantly jump between reading and thinking, or one of the skills needs to be completely automatic (LaBerge & Samuels, 1974). In this way, those who can read automatically have the opportunity to think about the content of the text, while those who have to concentrate on reading may have problems understanding the text.

The measure of correctly read words per minute may explain the misunderstanding that exists about fluency tests and their value. The presentation of the results and the criteria set by the Directorate of Education in Iceland could also have an impact and it is probably about time to revise them. The widespread misunderstanding in Iceland about oral reading fluency being unrelated to reading comprehension has led to a parliamentary resolution being submitted twice, which includes the repeal of oral reading fluency tests. Instead, it suggests focusing on letter knowledge, reading comprehension, and writing assessments, among other things (Parliamentary Document No. 87/2023. Changes to the National Curriculum Guide for Primary Schools).

Considering my own experience with teaching reading, my research, and the discourse on literacy and reading fluency, I was particularly impressed by Dr. Jan Hasbrouck's arrival in Iceland. Following encouragement from Kolbrún Þ. Pálsdóttir, Dean of the School of Education, I decided to request an interview with Jan about, among other things, oral reading fluency and her thoughts on the situation in Iceland.

On a December evening in Iceland, but during lunchtime in Seattle, I met Dr. Hasbrouck on Teams. I felt the need to apologize for asking her to address reading fluency, a topic she's repeatedly asked to talk about. She responded that she genuinely wants students to benefit from appropriate instruction and for teachers to do it right. Although it was only noon in Seattle, she had already discussed fluency twice that day but was still not tired of the topic.

Given that a high proportion of children in 1st to 3rd grade in Iceland are below the lowest and middle benchmarks and the robust evidence of the importance of children reaching enough fluency before the end of 3rd grade, we started our discussion there. Following is a

summary of our discussion.

What is the importance of benchmarks, and how do you feel about the Icelandic benchmarks for the end of 1st grade, where the lowest is 20 words per minute (wpm), the middle is 55 wpm, and the highest is 75 wpm?

What I know from the past decades of research is how much evidence we have about measuring words correct per minute. We have so much evidence that it is a really accurate, not perfect, but very accurate indicator of where students are in their reading. We really can trust it, and obviously, most of that work has been done in English, but researchers in other languages have also studied this.

The point is that correct words per minute (cwpm) is an indicator of how well students comprehend. Automaticity is only one piece of it, but it's a really, really big piece in the early grades. So that's why we trust the words correct per minute metric or benchmark and the numbers that we've come up with. And I feel very confident about those.

We look at students in their development, and we can be quite confident that children reading 50, 55 wpm by the end of first grade are well launched and that they're going to go forward and continue to learn. I mean, for heaven's sake, there's a whole lot more to learn about reading than what is achieved at the end of first grade. But 55 wpm or higher up to 75, those kids are either probably fine or actually doing very well. Kids hovering around 20 wpm, they have not gotten it, they might be floundering, maybe guessing at words. If you're reading 20 some words correct per minute, or attempting to, you're not reading, and we don't want, and we shouldn't have students leaving first grade attempting to read like that.

We also have other measures and benchmarks that seem to have the same robust, strong predictive ability: letter name and sound fluency. If students can't do that at all at the beginning of kindergarten or first grade. We need to start our instruction where the students are, and although we don't expect them to be, you know, instantaneously knowing their letter names and letter sounds at the beginning of first grade, they should be able to say most of them correctly at a fairly reasonable rate when beginning first grade.

So yes, we should be looking at benchmarks, certainly because benchmarks inform what we do, they indicate if our kids are sailing along. Are they adequately progressing or is it a red flag? We should use those benchmarks, and we should be very, very concerned and ready to take action. But we want to know this before the end of the school year. The least valuable to us overall in terms of instruction is the end of the year benchmarks, and we want the beginning and the middle of the year. The end of the year gives us an idea of how successful we've been, and it tells us something about our instruction.

But if a large number of your children, are below benchmark at the end of the year, your program isn't working, and something needs to be changed for next year's children.

So, if over half of the kids are not reaching the desired benchmark of 55 wpm by the end of 1st grade, does that tell us that we need to improve our programs?

Yes, yes.

Well, that is the case and something for us to consider in Iceland. What would you suggest for the beginning-of-year benchmarks for 2nd grade?

We're talking about reading in English and reading in Icelandic. But it's comparable. What we find, particularly between those two grades, 1st grade, and 2nd grade, is that there are more drop in words correct per minute than the drop across the other grades. I think that just has to do with the fact that these are just beginning readers, and they don't do very much academically between 1st and 2nd grade. There's a couple of months or so where they're not reading, and that brain that got started with literacy just didn't practice it, so, they go down.

So our middle norm, where we hope most students will be at the end of first grade, would be 60 words correct per minute, and 55 honestly statistically is the same number; it's not fine-tuned. So, 60 or so at the beginning of 2nd grade and now reading harder 2nd grade material, our norms are at 50 wpm.

So those kids who did get launched—and that's the difference—their brains are wired for reading now, so even though they might not have a lot of practice over the summer, it doesn't go away. It's a permanent thing. Those kids dropped a slight bit, but not much.

But second grade is where we see a lot of expected growth, too, because our study shows that at the end of the year, the middle benchmark, 50th percentile for 2nd grade, is 100. So, they are supposed to gain 50 words on average across that year.

What are your thoughts about that in Iceland, at the end of first grade, about 25% of children are beneath 1st benchmark of 20 wpm and in second grade around 30% of children are beneath the 1st benchmark of 40 wpm?

The evidence is that whatever you're trying to do with children is getting worse over time because more children are below the lowest benchmark in 2nd grade than 1st grade. At least for those low-income children, those children who need the most help, support, and instruction are not getting it.

And if we're willing just to say, OK, you know, 20 to 30% of Iceland's population is not going to be literate. But that flies in the face of the evidence we have that says pretty close to 100% of children can be taught to read, but they need to be taught. So yeah, I would say that's really not good news.

That leads us to the discussion of training reading skills. In Iceland, there is much emphasis on the parent's role in reading instruction in the younger grades. Also, the outcome of PISA was recently published. It was not good for Iceland, and now, the ongoing discussion tends to lean towards the parents and the homes. What are your thoughts on that?

In the United States, many of those parents who are becoming activists in the dyslexia world are lawyers, pediatricians, university professors, and people with that kind of education who have a child with dyslexia. They say we read to them before they were born, we read to them every single night and we use high levels of language. It's what we do, but my child needs instruction, and I'm just a lawyer. I'm just a pediatrician. I don't know what that instruction looks like, nor do I have time to do that.

So, I think the message is beginning to get across that just providing all that wonderful support at home is not going to be enough for some children. All children deserve this support. We should help parents be able to provide access to libraries and make sure the parents themselves can read and all of those kinds of things, but it's not enough and we know that. And it's not just the children with dyslexia. So, parents are the icing on the cake, but the cake is the instruction that children receive in school to rewire their brains.

We don't want to exclude the parents either?

No, we should never. We need to work with our parents and support them so that they can provide that kind of support at home. But it's not their responsibility to teach reading, and not all kids are going to be, as we all know, easily taught. It's on us, not the parents, not society, the teachers.

AB: We have established that it is important for schools and teachers to ensure that all children excel in reading and that oral reading fluency plays a crucial role in it. However, in Iceland, sometimes I feel that fluency is set up against creativity, critical thinking, and teamwork, and therefore, we should not focus on fluency. These voices can be heard from both parents, teachers and education leaders, Is this the case in the United States as well?

Yes yes, there's these two camps. The goal is student success. We all want students to be able to read well and enjoy reading. Nobody disagrees. The separation then becomes those of us who are more aware of the science and the fact that in order to get them to that place of reading, we have to rewire the brain. We have to teach that brain how to read, and I love

the message of Nancy's ladder that learning to read and write is a process for everybody, and those colored bands show the fact that people are going to have different levels of ease in climbing that ladder.

The dark green kids' brains figured it out. And then there's the green, then there's the orange, and then there's the red. All those brains are different, but what we also know is that they almost all can learn to read. Science says almost all 95% and a good part of those children are going to need really careful, thoughtful, systematic instruction, and we do it because we want everybody to have that wonderful reading.

So there is no pointing fingers and saying, you know you're wrong. Yes, we want creative thinking. Yes, we want problem-solving. Yes, we want deep analysis. Yes, we want the love of reading. We want all children to climb that ladder successfully, but they're going to do that in different ways, and fluency plays a role. You're not going to get to the top of that ladder without automaticity and fluency. You're not going to get there without a good vocabulary, without good language. For some kids, that needs to be very systematically and explicitly taught, but it has to happen. We have to connect their language to the code.

But it's not an either-or; it's an and. If they can't, if they're down at the bottom of the ladder, we've got some work to do before they can fully participate. Ask those 10th graders who are about to leave school and who don't read well how happy they are. We want them to be happy, and children who can read are much happier than children who can't read. So, let's teach them all to read. It's not going to guarantee happiness, but if you can't read, you won't be a happy adult.

I couldn't agree more, but when can a child read efficiently? Let's discuss fluency measures. In Iceland, we have benchmarks from 1st to 10th grade; I understand that you only have benchmarks up to 6th grade or so, is that the case?

A previous study went up through 8th grade, but in this current study, we didn't go past 6th grade only because we could not access data. It was very complicated, and we tried, but the fact is, too, looking at the 2006 study and the 2017 study, you just don't see a whole lot of change between 5th grade, 6th grade, 7th grade, and 8th grade.

I've not studied above 8th grade to do norms, but other people have, and the general consensus is if we can get students to read grade-level text unpracticed, somewhere around 150 to 175 words, that doesn't change. Things change a lot between first grade, 2nd grade, 3rd grade, 4th grade. But It looks like around 5th grade, fluency or automaticity starts to level out, but it doesn't mean that kids are stuck because their 150 stays the same; as the text is getting harder.
We want, by the end of 5th grade, about 150 words correct per minute, maybe a little bit

higher, and at 6th grade and at 8th grade, they can still do that. So, we really don't need to have norms for all of those other grade levels.

My understanding is, and I would like to ask you if I am correct, only reaching the lowest benchmark in 1st grade, 20 wpm, is not good enough, but reaching the lowest benchmark in 10th grade, 145 wpm, is actually fine. Do you agree with me?

Yes, I do, yes, yeah.

Then we have the middle benchmark, 180 wpm which I find very appropriate, and the highest, 200 and 210 words, which is fast. That is not useful, or is it?

There is no evidence that those kids who reach that highest benchmark are better at comprehending. And really, that's what we care about. We care about comprehension, so about 140 is a threshold to comprehension. 180 probably maximizes comprehension; above that, you're just reading for speed.
You're not reading for comprehension any longer, so the early grades text is so simple that we do want to get kids to that higher benchmark because that's an indicator of ease of reading, and it's allowing comprehension. But later, when the text is so complicated, we have to slow down for our brain to be able to process the text. We are really measuring the same thing, but we need to consider them quite differently for a first grader to a tenth grader.

Fluency measures in Iceland have been questioned, and I wonder if that is because they are somehow overrated or overused because we have so few standardized tests. I think teachers rely on them a lot because they don't have much to measure progress with. I think we need to use the tests differently and wisely to ensure the children are making adequate progress in the youngest grades, and if so, we need to focus on other things like Tim Rasinskis' fluency scale. In my mind if a child in 8th grade is reading 165 wpm that is enough, leave it alone. What are your thoughts?

Yeah, leave it alone. There's so much else to do. I mean, vocabulary writing, spelling, genre. You don't need to keep getting higher and higher and higher. That is not the point. A good explanation for those who question the fluency measures may be the difference between early reading and later reading.
Everybody knows that 10th graders are completely different from first graders. One way they're really different from each other is reading, and we know that the brain has to be restructured to become a reading brain. Once that restructuring has happened, we're into a different kind of reading.

We talk about learning to read until 3rd grade, and then at 3rd grade and above, reading to

learn, and there's some real truth in that. Once the brain has been rewired, and for most neurotypical children who received good instruction, that work is pretty much done by the middle of 2nd grade. Then reading becomes a different thing for most kids. For those who didn't get their brains rewired and are being asked to read grade-level text in the 4th grade and 5th grade, they can't, and they need different instruction.

In general, I would say I want to measure words read correctly per minute three times a year for the 1st and 2nd grades and in 3rd grade at the beginning of the year. Because if the kids can read, they're not going to not read by the end of the year. You can just do the beginning of the year in 3rd grade and 4th grade, maybe, and from then on, use Rasinski's rating scale. But also keep in mind that if we want that extra piece of information, then it is a quick measure, and we should do it. But from my experience and what the research shows, the 3rd grade fluency test at the beginning of the year will tell you what kids are on track and not on track. If your main point is to make sure you have found the kids who are really struggling, I think the beginning of the year in 3rd grade, 4th grade, maybe, maybe 5th grade. But for the remainder of those years, and certainly past fifth grade, a rating scale will do as well.

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After this useful and informative conversation, much comes to mind. It comes with a responsibility to teach children and assess their skills. Although the interview confirmed the undeniable value of oral reading fluency measures and their usefulness in drawing conclusions about reading comprehension, it is clear that there are several considerations regarding how reading is assessed in Iceland.

We should, for example, ask ourselves about the purpose of assessing reading fluency for as long as we actually do, given that the threshold we want to get our students over is 140 correctly read words, and anything over 180 words probably adds little. In connection with this, it comes to mind whether the way the Directorate of Education publishes the results, showing each school's average against the national average, affects whether strong students continue to be tested unnecessarily.

When looking at the Directorate of Education's criteria, there would be a reason to review them from various angles, raising the minimum criteria at the youngest level but abolishing the criteria above 180 correctly read words per minute. It would also be useful to define benchmarks for the beginning and middle of the school year because, as Jan pointed out, the benchmarks for the end of the school year have the least value, but they are the only ones we have in Iceland.

However, what remains most striking after this conversation is that we seem to be

measuring reading fluency repeatedly without using the results to change teaching methods. When looking back at the results from the Directorate of Education over time, there appears to be minimal change from year to year. As Jan pointed out, students should learn to read before the end of 3rd grade in order to be able to focus on reading to learn after that. According to information from the Directorate of Education, 66% of students in 3rd grade were below the desired middle benchmark of 100 correctly read words per minute in the spring of 2024; 92% of 3rd-grade students in the country were assessed. When looking at the results of the 5th grade that same spring, it can be seen that 69% of students are below the desired middle benchmark of 140 correctly read words per minute and thereof 35% below the minimum criterion of 90 correctly read words per minute. The results are from 91% of students in 5th grade in Iceland. These numbers indicate that a significant portion of our students struggle to read effectively for successful learning. It is unlikely that these students will engage in deep reading and reflection, thus resulting in a lack of growth in their reading skills to match the increased complexity of the text.
When we look at how clear the connection between fluency and comprehension is and how much research has been done, we can clearly use fluency test results considerably better and more sensible to strengthen our students' reading skills. These results indicate the necessity to change our teaching approach. We don't need to rely on PISA results only to take action.

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