

Alert note from the CSEN —

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New warning signs for reading instruction in first grade

Reading is a fundamental skill that underpins all schooling. It is also an area where scientific evidence is particularly robust.

Since its creation, the [French Scientific Council for Education \(CSEN\)](#) has given top priority to training teachers to the science of reading. A document entitled ["Teaching methods and manuals for learning to read: how to choose?"](#) was drafted by a working group of researchers, inspectors and teachers. This 30-page text presents the essential information that we feel all first grade teachers should know.

At the time of its publication in 2019, a lot of effort was put into its promotion in teacher training centres. This included the distribution of an "orange guide" on the same topic.

Three years on, we would like to draw your attention to **the need for additional training and information** on this important issue, as:

- In 2022, many teachers are still using inefficient manuals:

An ongoing investigation among a representative sample of 16,149 teachers, conducted by Jérôme Deauvieu, Professor of sociology at Ecole Normale Supérieure, and in partnership with the statistical department of the French Ministry of National Education and Youth (DEPP), indicates that:

1. Unsurprisingly, phonics strategies, based on the rapid and systematic learning of grapheme-phoneme correspondences, the progressive assembly of letters into syllables and words, and the absence of "tool words" that need to be memorized, lead to the best results among students.
 2. As of January 2021, despite their effectiveness, these manuals and methods are still among the **least** used¹.
- In the absence of training, some teachers use whole-word methods which are completely unacceptable in the light

of current scientific knowledge (see example below).

At the start of first grade in September 2022, there are still a lot of classes where reading instruction begins with a whole-word approach. This is the case with the method mentioned in the example below, one of the most abnormal we've ever seen. It presents texts of several dozen lines, some of which are deliberately made illegible (why?). Although these texts cannot be read by pupils, they are often accompanied by instructions such as "Find the words you discovered yesterday", "Search the text for a sentence or group of sentences read by the teacher", "Underline the small words you know", or "Now look at the letters that make up the other words and try to decode them". However, research has repeatedly shown that these instructions are ineffective for teaching. What could pupils learn from them, other than reading is guesswork, and that they must be very stupid if they can't do it?

The document from the French Scientific Council for Education outlines several gestures to avoid, which this aforementioned method accumulates. These include : (1) presenting beginning readers with words to "read", which are often very irregular and whose grapheme-phoneme correspondences have not yet been taught; (2) making learning more



¹ Research carried out by Paul Gioia under the supervision of Jérôme Deauvieu, which will be the subject of a future note by the French Scientific Council for Education.

Ce matin, la maîtresse dit aux lutins : « Prenez votre crayon ! »

Rocololo sort son crayon de la trousse. Mais le bout est tout rongé, tout grignoté, tout mordillé, tout mâchouillé.

— Qui a abîmé ce crayon ? dit la maîtresse en fronçant les sourcils.

Rocololo baisse la tête.

Soudain, Turlututu crie : « C'est un petit rat qui l'a mordu ! Je l'ai vu. Il a filé dans son trou ! »

Tout les lutins éclatent de rire.

Observe les parties en jaune du texte caché.

EN CHANON EN HOCCHONO

« Oe melle, le moellese Hii ouu lillie : « Hionou notre oregon ! »

Hocolele est son oregon de la hionou. Melle le Hont est loul rouné, loul guignolé, loul moellillé, loul mœlleuillé.

— Qui a abîmé ce oregon ? Hii le moellese ou lounpou les conseil.

Hocolele Helle le lile.

OuHelm, Hionouin ou : « O'est un gellil tel qui l'a moellu ! Hii l'el ou. Il a Hiié Hous son trou ! »

Example of texts (French) presented to pupils from low-income background in the Ile-de-France region three weeks after the start of the school year in 2022².

difficult by dedicating a lot of time on irrelevant information (such as riddles, word outlines, names of characters in the manual); and (3) introducing the international phonetic alphabet to pupils, which represents the “u” sound by the letter “y” in the 2nd week of first grade (see example below).

It is worrying to note that this approach persists despite the explicit mention of its counterproductive nature in the document from the French Scientific Council for Education and the “orange guide”, which are both more than three years old. When questioned, the teachers explained that they had not received any training before starting teaching in first grade. They were therefore unaware of the existence of these documents and had chosen this method because it was free on the Internet...Better support for

teachers seems essential to prevent such mistakes from damaging their pupils’ learning. This is what we propose:

- Each first grade teacher has a budget to purchase manuals in line with current scientific knowledge, if their class is not already equipped.
- No teacher can start first grade without having received the document from the French Scientific Council for Education and the “orange guide”.
- Before the start of the new school year, all first grade teachers receive training in reading instruction at teacher training centres, and are followed up by inspectors and pedagogical advisors.
- National assessments in the middle of first grade help to identify pupils who are struggling, so their teachers can receive extra support.

In his speech to the academic rectors on August 25, 2022, to launch the new 500 million euro fund for pedagogical innovation, the French President encouraged teachers to show more initiative and dynamism, even if this meant acknowledging their “right to make mistakes”. However, as scientists, we cannot accept repeating the mistakes of the past, especially when they affect the education of thousands of pupils. The French Scientific Council for Education is at the disposal of the entire educational community to help disseminate scientific findings on reading and other areas, such as mathematics or pupil and teacher wellbeing, notably via its website.



Find out more about publications from the French Scientific Council for Education on learning to read at our website

reseau-canope.fr/conseil-scientifique-de-leducation-nationale (French)

reseau-canope.fr/conseil-scientifique-de-leducation-nationale-site-officiel/outils-pedagogiques/international (English and Spanish)

Teaching methods and manuals for learning to read: how to choose? (English)
Research summary and recommendations from the CSEN (2019)

Learning to read: from decoding to comprehension (French)
Research summary and recommendations from the CSEN (2019)

ÉvalAide, a scientific initiative to prevent reading and math difficulties in first and second grade (French)
Research summary and recommendations from the CSEN (2019)

² Method www.lutin-latulu.fr