READING IN THE DIGITAL WILD WEST: WHAT STILL MATTERS MOST

LISA GUERNSEY 04 FEBRUARY 2013 BLOG/LITERACY/RESEARCH AND STUDIES 0

As touchscreen tablets became the breakaway holiday gift this past year for children—even for tots still learning to walk and talk—many parents are still feeling a little confused and skeptical about this new trend. Is the digital deluge good or bad for kids? And, critically, do the educational apps on the iPad and Android-enabled devices that claim to help children learn to read actually work?

As partners with the Campaign for Grade-Level Reading, a national coalition that has engaged more than 120 communities to tackle reading problems, we recently set out to answer those questions.   For the past eight months, we scanned the technology and literacy landscape, and what we found was a digital Wild West, especially in the teeming app marketplace. It's uncharted terrain where tens of thousands of apps are labeled educational and marketed to parents who receive little or no information about whether and how they work.

Our analysis of popular educational apps shows that most attempt to teach basic skills, such as identifying the ABCs, but fail to address higher level competencies that young children also need to become strong readers, such as developing vocabulary and understanding words in a narrative. A snapshot of the iTunes App Store's most popular paid literacy apps showed that 45 percent targeted letters and sounds and half targeted phonics, but only five percent targeted vocabulary and none addressed comprehension or the ability to tell stories.

This imbalance comes as research shows that the ABCs and other basic literacy skills, while important, are not enough to help children become strong readers. Children need background knowledge and vocabulary, too, as made clear last month in the release of vocabulary scores from the National Assessment of Educational Progress. The scores, distressingly low for children from disadvantaged backgrounds, showed an integral link between vocabulary and reading comprehension. Until comprehension is addressed, American kids will continue to lag behind children from nations in Asia and Europe whose reading competencies far outstrip our own.

Our findings were brighter outside the app store. In interviews, we discovered many digital pioneers who are keenly aware of the multiple factors that affect literacy. They have harnessed the power of technology to help educators and families give children both knowledge and skills. These leaders range from established public media organizations and research-based initiatives

such as the Success for All and the Children's Literacy Initiative, to promising new projects like Comienza En Casa | It Starts at Home. That's a family literacy program, a part of the Maine Migrant Education Program, designed to prepare dual-language learners for digital-age reading. Trained professionals visit parents and their children in rural Maine and lend them iPads preloaded with apps chosen to augment offline activities that build language skills. These could include puzzles, block-building, and outdoor nature walks. The critical factor that makes programs like Comienza effective is that the technology complements the work of trained teachers and parents. It doesn't replace it.

Also promising is the emergence of online reviews and ratings by groups like Common Sense Media and app-organizing systems like Yogi Play that prod parents and educators to become critical thinkers about how to use and choose digital media for young children.

The Fred Rogers Center is helping, too: They're developing programs to provide guidance and resources in developmentally appropriate digital media. The Fred Rogers Center's Early Learning Environment™ (*Ele*) is a web-based support system in early literacy and digital media literacy for underserved and under-resourced teachers, home-based providers, and families of children from birth to age 5.

Technology is omnipresent in the lives of most young children—the typical four year old spends more than three hours consuming media every day. New platforms and content for the preschool set are arriving all the time—from 3D motion capture cameras to modern telephony like Skype and Face Time—each making its way into the households and daily routines of families. Meanwhile, the iTunes app store boasts more than 700,000 apps and, as the Joan Ganz Cooney Center discovered last year, nearly 80 percent of the top-selling paid apps in the education category are aimed at children.

Clearly, current policies and practices have done little to address a national crisis in literacy that is sapping the potential of millions of young children. Our findings suggest that we are at an opportune moment for harnessing digital media to support parents, educators and children in building the next generation's reading skills. The rapid adoption of technology is roiling public debate over what young children should know and be able to do, but it has yet to forge a new pathway to reading success. We will not reach technology's potential to be a game changer unless we tap it to provide vital new supports for parents and educators. In the digital age, these caring adults still matter most.

The Fred Rogers Center is a partner in the Campaign for Grade-Level Reading.