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The Role of Phonics in Reading Instruction

Questions regarding the nature, extent, and role of phonics instruction in beginning reading programs are not a modern phenomenon. These concerns have existed in public education for over three hundred years. Throughout the history of reading instruction, phonics, like other methods, has had its high moments and its low moments—from being essential to being ignored. Today, thanks primarily to the findings of the National Reading Panel (NRP), phonemic awareness (which lays the foundation for phonics instruction) and phonics instruction itself are beginning to find their proper role in teaching reading.

HISTORY OF TEACHING READING

Although the content of reading instruction changed considerably in the first two centuries of public education in this country, there was very little change in the method of teaching reading. *What* was being taught—the Bible, morality, and patriotism—were much more important than *how* it was being taught. Beginning with *The New England Primer*, published in England in 1683, instruction in the alphabet and phonics was always

stressed first. The children first learned the letters, letter syllables, spellings of sounds, and then the reading text.

After *The New England Primer* came a long string of spelling books that were used to teach reading. The most famous of these was Noah Webster's *The American Spelling Book*, affectionately called "the blue-backed speller," which over a period of about thirty years became one of the best-selling readers of all time, with a total distribution of 24 million copies (Smith, 1986, p. 45). The first part of the speller contained rules and regulations, followed by lessons on learning the alphabet, syllable, and consonant combinations, and various word lists to be sounded out according to the number of syllables.

With the arrival of Horace Mann on the educational scene in the middle 1800s, however, the almost two hundred years of phonics-based reading programs came to a sudden end. Horace Mann, as secretary of the Massachusetts Board of Education, was so impressed by the order and universality of Prussian education, that he publicly denounced phonics and advocated the whole-word method of teaching reading. Mann (sometimes referred to as the "Father of Modern Education") was such a persuasive individual that his system gradually spread to other states. *The McGuffey Eclectic Reader* was published in 1857. This book stressed learning-appropriate sight words according to grade levels and an organized plan that controlled sentence length and vocabulary to match the developmental level of the child (Strickland, 1998). Comprehension became the key to reading, and phonics instruction was relegated to a limited role or neglected altogether. Over a period of seventy years, the whole-word method and controlled-vocabulary readers gradually became the dominant types of reading instruction (Smith, 2002).

In the 1920s, the noted educator William Gray pushed phonics into virtual oblivion by categorizing phonics as "heartless drudgery" and helped develop the famous *Dick and Jane* readers, which captured the attention of many educators (Gray & Arbuthnot, 1946). By the 1950s, these "basal readers," which followed the "whole-word, look-say, meaning-first, phonics-little-and-later approach" (Adams, 1998, p. 26), were used by almost all public school teachers.

Just as Horace Mann began to question the value of phonics a hundred years before, so too, reading authorities in the mid-1950s began to question the value of the whole-word philosophy of reading. First came the publication of Rudolph Flesch's *Why Johnny Can't Read* in 1955 and his stinging attack on the look-say method, which he believed to be the great destroyer of democracy and the American Dream. Although rejected by most educators for its lack of research, it nonetheless became a bestseller and was quoted widely by just about anyone who found fault with educational practices of that time. With the popular backlash at reading methods triggered by Flesch's book, many researchers tried to determine the best way to teach reading.

The most decisive answer to this issue came as a result of extensive research by Jeanne Chall and her subsequent 1967 book *Learning to Read*:

The Great Debate. Chall's three-plus years of research concluded that programs that emphasized systematic instruction in teaching letter-sound relationships (phonics) lead to higher achievement. Many subsequent studies, such as "The Cooperative Research Program in First Grade Reading Instruction," undertaken by Bond and Dykstra in 1997, tended to substantiate Chall's conclusions. With the publication of *Becoming a Nation of Readers: The Report of the Commission of Reading* (Anderson, Hillbert, Scott, & Wilkerson, 1985), the popularization of commercial programs such as *The Phonics Game* and *Hooked on Phonics*, and Marilyn Adams's 1990 classic *Beginning to Read: Thinking and Learning About Print*, which supported Chall's original findings, educators began to rethink the role and value of phonics instruction in the classroom.

As the pendulum of change once swung from phonics to look-say to whole language, by the close of the twentieth century the pendulum began to swing back to phonics.

Fortunately, as the twentieth century came to a close, the debate about the best way to teach reading and the rhetoric coming from all sides of the issue were beginning to subside. Over time most educators began to realize that this was not an either/or type of issue, but one that lent itself to common sense. The International Reading Association's position paper (1998) on the role of phonics in reading instruction sums it up this way: "Rather than engage in debates about whether phonics should or should not be taught, effective teachers of reading and writing ask when, how, how much, and under what circumstances phonics should be taught." Another educator put the issue in proper perspective when she cautioned teachers, "Don't spend time debating whether to teach phonics, spelling, grammar, and other skills of literacy. Do spend time discussing how to teach them in a way that contributes to the learner's self-improvement" (Strickland, 1995, p. 299).

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, two federal initiatives began to dramatically change the methods and emphasis of future reading programs. These were the initiation of a National Reading Panel (NRP) during the presidency of William Clinton, and No Child Left Behind (NCLB), initiated by President George W. Bush, which began to implement the previous recommendations of the NRP. These two initiatives reinstated the importance of phonemic awareness and phonics in beginning reading programs.

THE NATIONAL READING PANEL

Displeased by the high rate of illiteracy among young adults and the lack of reading progress in many school districts, especially among lower-economic groups, Congress, in 1997, decided to get involved. It asked the director of the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) along with the U.S. secretary of education to set up a national panel of experts to study what could be done about improving

reading instruction. A panel of fourteen, composed of leading educators in reading research, representatives of colleges of education, and parents, was selected for this all-important task.

The initial responsibility, which took over two years to complete, was threefold. First, it set out to examine a variety of databases to determine what research had been conducted on how children learn to read. The panel selected research from over one hundred thousand reading research studies published since 1966 and another fifteen thousand that were published before that time and considered only those from that selection that met rigorous scrutiny for reliability and accuracy. Second, the National Reading Panel sought information from the public regarding their ideas about teaching reading and their understanding of research in this area. Regional public meetings were set up in several locations in the U.S. so that parents and others could express their concerns and ideas. Third, the NRP consulted with leading educators and organizations that had interest in the debate over reading instruction. The panel received input from 125 individuals and organizations, including classroom teachers, administrators, university faculty, researchers, and others (NRP, *Frequently Asked Questions*, 2005).

After two years, the panel completed its report and submitted a document entitled “The Report of the National Reading Panel: Teaching Children to Read” at a hearing before the U.S. Senate Appropriations Committee on Labor, Health and Human Services, and Education. This report provided analysis and discussion in five areas in reading: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and text comprehension.

The report is a consensus doctrine based on the best judgments of diverse groups of researchers, individuals, and organizations whose sole purpose is to improve reading instruction in the U.S. A thirty-five-page summary report called “Report of the National Reading Panel: Teaching Children to Read” is available on the Internet and is highly recommended for anyone interested in the issues surrounding reading instruction.

Duane Alexander, the director of the NICHD, sums up the conclusions of the NRP as follows: “For the first time, we now have guidance based on evidence from sound scientific research on how best to teach children to read. The panel’s rigorous scientific review identifies the most effective strategies for teaching reading” (NICHD, 2005, p.1).

THE FINDINGS OF THE NATIONAL READING PANEL

While recognizing the extreme importance of the last three areas of analysis and discussion in the NRP report discussed above—fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension—for the purposes of this book, we will restrict our discussion in the following section to the first two areas: phonemic awareness and phonics.

Phonemic awareness (PA): The report from the National Reading Panel showed that teaching children to manipulate phonemes in words was highly effective under a variety of teaching conditions with a variety of different learners across a wide range of grade and age levels. It stressed

that teaching phonemic awareness to children significantly improves their reading more than instruction that lacked attention to phonemic awareness (NRP Findings, 2000).

Some of the findings of the National Reading Panel may be summarized as follows:

- Phonemic awareness can be taught and learned.
- Phonemic awareness instruction helps children learn to read.
- Phonemic awareness instruction helps children learn to spell.
- Phonemic awareness instruction is most effective when children are taught to manipulate phonemes by using letters of the alphabet.
- Phonemic awareness instruction is most effective when it is focused on only one or two types of phoneme manipulation, rather than on several types.

These findings substantiated earlier ones that concluded that phonemic awareness and phonics instruction were the two best indicators of success in reading (Adams, 1990).

Phonics: Concerning the value of teaching phonics, the NRP came to the following conclusions:

- Systematic (planned) phonics instruction produces significant benefits for all students in kindergarten through sixth grade, especially for children having a difficult time learning to read. First graders who were taught phonics were better able to decode and spell, and had better ability to comprehend printed material. Older students who were taught systematic phonics were better able to decode and spell, but their comprehension was not greatly improved.
- Systematic phonics benefits students with learning disabilities and low-achieving students who are not disabled.
- Systematic phonics instruction was significantly more effective in improving low economic status, children's alphabetic knowledge, and word-reading skills than instructional methods that were less focused on phonemic awareness.
- The early reading success of children in the kindergarten and first grades indicate that phonics instruction should be implemented at these grades and age levels.

The NRP report concluded that the facts and findings provide convincing evidence that explicit, systematic phonics instruction is a valuable and essential part of a successful classroom reading program

Teaching students the sound structure of language reduces the level of reading failure. Teaching students to blend sounds to create words and then to segment words into their individual component sounds are important features of a good reading program. "Simply immersing students in interesting stories or providing the occasional and unsystematic clue from time to time does not constitute effective teaching for students" (Hempenstall, 2003).

IMPORTANT CONSIDERATIONS FOR TEACHING PHONICS

In order to get a clearer understanding of just what is involved in the teaching of phonemic awareness and phonics, we first consider what it is not.

Phonics instruction is not a complete reading program by itself: Phonics is simply one part of the total program. Although it is a very important part of beginning reading programs, it cannot, by itself, guarantee reading success for all students. The benefits of phonics instruction will depend on the comprehensiveness and effectiveness of the entire literacy curriculum. Nor is phonics the only way to teach reading. Millions of students have learned to read with little or no exposure to any phonics.

We must keep in mind that the ultimate objective of teaching reading is not to teach children how to sound out (or “attack”) words, but rather to help them to understand what is being read—i.e., comprehension. It should be pointed out that developing students’ reading fluency and vocabulary and incorporating practices such as reading aloud, silent reading, and exposure to good literature, were all shown to have a positive effect on reading comprehension and should be implemented in addition to phonics instruction. Research shows that a combination of methods, rather than a single teaching method, leads to the best learning (NRP Report, 2000).

Phonics is not a one-size-fits-all program: Although phonics needs to be taught in a systematic, effective manner and is useful for class or group work, we must not conclude that phonics must always be taught in this manner, or that it is of equal value to everyone.

In the beginning, it is extremely helpful to have both whole class and small group participation, as both methods will benefit all students—especially those with lesser skills who often learn from the responses of their classmates. But as children progress in developing skills, some of them will need more help than others and will be working at different levels. Some students will be engaged in easier types of instruction (e.g., identifying initial sounds in words), while other may be engaged in more advanced types (segmentation of words, deletions, etc.). As time goes on, group participation becomes less important while individual instruction becomes more important.

The best way to proceed is to assess individual needs before instruction. That way the teacher has some idea of the particular needs of each student and then can plan instruction along those lines. Hopefully, by the end of the second grade or thereabouts, there will be less and less need for phonics for most students.

Phonics instruction should not be about rules and drills: As had often occurred in the past, phonics programs required that students memorize rules, even

when the rules were not consistent, and spent sixty percent or more of their time on workbook activities and little time actually reading. Studies indicate that although a particular rule or generalization may be useful for application for a group of words being studied, students need not necessarily memorize the rule (Clymer, 1963). Today in most schools, students spend less time on workbook activities. Today we teach students only those phonics generalizations that are most prevalent in our language (Block & Israel, 2005).

Phonemic awareness and phonics instruction should not be boring: Teaching phonics should be “phun.” Yopp (1992) gave five general recommendations for phonemic awareness activities:

- Keep a sense of playfulness and fun; avoid drill and rote memorization.
- Use group settings that encourage interaction among children.
- Encourage children’s curiosity about language and their experience with it.
- Allow for, and be prepared for, individual differences.
- Make sure the tone of the activity is not evaluative but rather fun and informal.

Unlike other academic subjects, explicit phonics instruction should not consume much classroom time, even in kindergarten. For best results, the sessions should be short—fifteen to twenty minutes—and restricted to one or two concepts. They should be varied in nature and involve student participation and interaction. In a normal school year, approximately twenty hours of phonemic awareness and/or phonics instruction would be sufficient (National Institute for Literacy, 2005).

For most students, the time spent on phonics instruction should be less and less for the first three years. If some children are still in need of additional instruction, it should be provided in daily tutorial sessions, pullout programs, or afterschool activities.

Phonics instruction lends itself nicely to inclusion in spelling and writing classes since all three are interrelated. Reading is decoding, i.e., making sounds from letters. Spelling is encoding—that is, making letters from sounds. Writing is the decoding of sounds into written letters. Each subject area reinforces the other. Presenting phonics in the context of spelling and writing not only reinforces the skills, but also lends a greater variety to the activity. In other words, phonics is not just about reading—it’s about spelling and writing as well.

PHONICS FOR ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS

The results from the National Reading Panel have clearly demonstrated that phonemic awareness activities and explicit phonics instruction are more relevant for minority and low socioeconomic-status children. But do these methods work for the increasing number of students who are entering our

schools with little background in English? The answer is a resounding yes—phonics instruction is effective for English language learners.

When working with students who are learning English while learning to read, teachers must use instructional materials that are of interest to students. In addition, these students need to use materials that will enable them to experience reading success (Jesness, 2005, pp. 8–11). All instruction should be positive and relevant, but in the case of English language learners, even more so.

Strategies for Teaching Reading to English Language Learners

As a preparation for learning to read, English teachers should encourage parents to read to their children at home in their primary language. Research and theory both show that there is a carryover from reading in the primary language and learning to read English. As English literacy grows, the primary language skills begin to transfer to reading in English (Peregoy & Boyle, 1997).

Getting Started: As soon as possible, teachers should get their students started on a reading program that not only emphasizes phonemic awareness and phonics skills, but also is presented to them at their interest level. Too many easy-to-read books that are written with younger children in mind are a turnoff to older readers. The trick is to find material that presents basic skills on the students' interest level.

Use phonics readers: Fortunately, there are a growing number of publishers who have chapter books that promote development of phonological skills. For younger readers, for example, there are *Dr. Maggie's Classroom Phonics Readers*, a set of twenty-four books that develop progressive skills with attractive formats and follow-up. For older readers, there is *READ XL*, published by Scholastic Press, designed to fit the needs of special education and older, struggling readers. Both these series align with the objectives of No Child Left Behind for phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. There is also federal money available under NCLB that can be used to purchase these materials.

Teach high-frequency words as whole words: At the same time that the children are beginning some independent reading in material that stresses phonemic awareness, it is recommended that they also begin learning high-frequency words as whole (or sight) words. There are two reasons for this. The first is that many high-frequency words are not phonetic (e.g., *was, come, is, one, two, laugh*) and therefore need to be taught as sight words. Second, the high-frequency words (e.g., *ball, sing, and day*) that are phonetic can be learned first as sight words. As language skills develop, phonetic words can be used later to sound out new or unfamiliar words. Research tells us that having a large sight vocabulary is invaluable in helping to identify words (Heilman, Blair & Rupley, 1998, p. 152).

There are several prepackaged, high-frequency word lists (i.e., flash cards) that can be purchased at the local teacher's store. These lists, and many others, are also available free of charge on the Internet. Two of the better-known word lists are those compiled by Edward Fry, and the old standby (and still reliable) Dolch Basic Sight Word List.

Teaching Phonograms: If teachers are uncertain just where to begin instruction for older students who are just beginning to learn to read English, a good place to start would be with the phonograms. These word families are short and phonetically consistent, and generally represent common high-frequency words that are often used in print. Learning one phonogram easily leads to learning many other words of similar sound and nature. Learning phonograms also assists in the sounding-out process that is so necessary for figuring out (by sounding out) unfamiliar words. For the many common words that are irregularly spelled or are not phonetic, flash cards could be provided so that the words are learned as sight words.

Another approach is to start with rime phonograms; (The word *rime* is used here to distinguish it from the more traditional term *rhyme* as used in relation to poetry) knowing that *strain* and *drain* rime, may allow learning *main* and *brain* by analogy (Hempenstall, 2003). It has been demonstrated with dyslexic students that the learning of onsets and rimes is one of the most effective ways of promoting phonemic awareness activities that are so essential for beginning reading and spelling (Bowen & Francis, 1991).

It is important to keep all instructions short and to the point and to keep an accurate accounting both of skills learned and those to be learned. A phonetic skills checklist such as the one presented in Resource C would be helpful for tracking purposes.

Using Web Sites: I would be remiss, at this point, if I didn't mention what a marvelous resource the World Wide Web is, especially in providing high-interest texts for readers. More and more Web sites on the Internet now contain material, stories, and essays written by children of all grade levels that can be viewed and reproduced free of charge.

THE NEED FOR A BALANCED READING PROGRAM

While phonics instruction is important, other methods that put emphasis on learning whole words also have a role, especially at the beginning stages of reading, to get children started. There are dozens of very common and high-frequency words (e.g., *one, laugh, love, come, does, two, gone*) that defy phonetic analysis and may be better taught as whole words.

Whole language and other linguistic approaches, which attempt to apply scientific knowledge of language to reading, have a valuable coordinating role of putting the reading process in a broader perspective and directing it toward the ultimate end of reading—comprehension. It is difficult to conceive of anyone becoming a good teacher of reading by using

only one method exclusively. As several authorities put it, “Any strategy of reading instruction based on a single principle is incomplete, no matter how valid the principle” (Smith, Goodman, & Meredith, 1970, p. 270). This concept was reinforced in a national survey of elementary teachers’ beliefs and priorities regarding the best methods of teaching reading. It concluded that the majority of teachers embraced a balanced, eclectic approach to elementary reading instruction, blending phonics and holistic principles and practices (Bauman, Hoffman, Moon, & Duffy-Hester, 1998).

Teachers need to be more like doctors in their approach to their profession. Doctors find out what’s wrong with their patients before they prescribe the medicine. Some teachers prescribe the medicine before they know what’s wrong with the students. Doctors may prescribe an aspirin for some patients and minor surgery for others, and a few may need a heart transplant. Doctors would be very limited in what they could do for their patients if they were restricted to one size of bandage to cover every sore, one type of needle for every injection, or the same prescription for every ailment. So teachers need to be specialists too. Some children may just need a little shot of encouragement to get going; others, at times, may need a specific medicine for a specific need. Hopefully, only a few will need life-saving help. No two children are exactly alike. No two needs are exactly the same. No one approach will solve all their problems. Everything else being equal, the more teachers know about phonetic principles, psycholinguistics, miscue analysis, whole-language concepts, and other theories of learning—with all their strengths and weaknesses—the more likely they are to have the right kind of medicine at the right time to cure the needs of all their students.

In all of this, it must be remembered that methods of teaching reading, by themselves, solve nothing. It’s how and when the methods are used and applied that makes the difference between success and failure. Teaching reading is more than just a science; it’s an art.

THE “TEACHER EFFECT”

More than anything else, teachers of reading ought to be aware of an underlying principle that directly affects the total outcome of efforts. This principle, which is so hard to detect or even define, is called “teacher effect.” Simply put, it means that if teachers don’t understand or believe in what they are expected to do, they will sabotage even the best of programs and make them ineffective (Stahl, Duffy-Hester, & Dougherty Stahl, 1998). This can happen even when the teachers think they are following the lesson plans or prescribed curriculum. *The two key ingredients of making any educational program work effectively, then, are knowledge of the subject and belief in the system.*

“Teacher effect” partially explains why teachers in the same grade level, using the same system and materials, can produce dramatically different results and, inversely, why teachers using different systems and

materials can produce the same results as others using different systems. When it comes to teaching phonemic awareness, phonological awareness, and structural analysis of words, the conclusion is obvious: The teacher needs training in this field and must believe that the system will work. As one authority put it:

The “teacher effect” [research] tells us that teachers need to be given a clear rationale for being asked to change their methods for teaching reading. The new method has to make sense and be designed so that it works in the classroom, with curriculum materials and lesson plans. The teacher must be thoroughly trained, so that she feels confident and comfortable with the new approach. (McGuinness, 1997, pp. 171–172)

CONCLUSION

After many years of trying to determine the role of phonics in reading programs, it is probably safe to say that we may now have some good answers. It seems from an abundance of research, not only from the National Reading Panel and the International Reading Association, but from other sources as well, that the best way to teach reading is through a systematic, explicit presentation of phonemic awareness activities and phonics skills. Finally, almost all educators and authorities agree that the two best predictors of early reading success are alphabetic recognition and phonemic awareness.

The re-emphasis on phonics, however, does not mean a return to the “bad old days” of “drill and kill” but has ushered in with it a refreshing enthusiasm for new and innovative ways to teach phonetic concepts.

Never in the history of education in the United States have early elementary teachers been more creative and resourceful in helping children learn to read. More and more teachers are reading, and rereading, favorite nursery rhymes, poems, and stories to their students. Children in kindergarten are learning the alphabet through song, dance, and making their own alphabet books. They are learning phonemes and syllabication through clapping or chanting. They are learning sound relationships through alliteration, tongue twisters, onsets, and rimes. They are learning to read independently and with a partner. They are involved in making their own signs and writing letters and words. They now have TV, videos, CDs, games, and computers to assist whenever they may be needed. The hundreds of ways to make these activities enjoyable and effective are limited only by the teacher’s imagination.

Reading programs today have become so full of variety that kindergarten and first grade students must look forward to reading and reading instruction more than ever. Who can get bored? Who cannot learn in a situation full of excitement and variety as exists in today’s classroom?