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Phonics and the Beginning Reader

by

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PREFACE

All children deserve the gift of reading. As educators, we bear the responsibility and honor of delivering that gift. For our beginning readers, transferring those strange squiggles and lines into meaningful words and ideas is sometimes a difficult task. It's critical to make learning the English language simple and systematic. This is where phonics plays a key role.

The purpose of phonics instruction is to teach children sound-spelling relationships and how to use those relationships to read words. The most effective way to do this is through explicit and systematic instruction, such as that found in the *Scholastic ReadingLine Phonics Kit*. Explicit instruction is teaching in which the sound-spelling relationships are directly taught. Systematic instruction follows a clear scope and sequence that allows children to form and read words early on. Skills are constantly reviewed and applied to real literature so that students achieve early mastery of these skills and greater application to real reading tasks.

Phonics Instruction: What Research Tells Us

- *Systematic and explicit phonics instruction significantly improves kindergarten and first grade children's word recognition and spelling. (Put Reading First)*
- *One major reason children fail to learn to read is because too much information is presented too fast with too little review and meaningful application. (Shefelbine, 1995)*
- *Systematic and explicit phonics instruction is particularly beneficial for children who are having difficulty learning to read and who are at risk for developing further reading problems. (Put Reading First)*
- *Phonics programs are effective when they are systematic. (i.e.,The program of instruction includes a carefully selected set of letter-sound relationships that are organized into a logical sequence. (Put Reading First)*
- *The recommended sequence has the following characteristics:*
  - *Teach short vowel sounds before long vowel sounds.*
  - *Teach consonants and short vowels in combination, so that words can be generated as early as possible.*
  - *Teach continuous consonants early (sounds that can be sustained, such as /s/, /m/, /f/).*
  - *Use a sequence in which the most words can be generated.*
  - *Progress from simple to more complex sound-spellings. (Blevins, 1998)*

To become skilled readers, students must be able to identify words quickly and accurately. To do so, they must be proficient decoders. A reader decodes a word by sounding it out, using structural analysis and syllabication techniques, or recognizing the word by sight. In order to sound out words, a reader must be able to associate a specific spelling with a specific sound. Phonics involves this relationship between sounds and their spellings.

One of the critical early hurdles in reading instruction is helping children to grasp the alphabetic principle. Children must learn that the series of symbols we call the alphabet map onto the sounds of our language in roughly predictable ways. This alphabetic principle enables children to quickly start corresponding sounds to spellings and thereby decode words.

Early and systematic phonics instruction leads to better reading through a progression of related skills development. Phonics instruction first aids in the development of word recognition. Word recognition, in turn, increases fluency. Reading fluency improves reading comprehension since children are not struggling with decoding, and are able to devote their full attention to making meaning from text.

Ten Important Phonics Research Findings with Examples from the Scholastic ReadingLine Phonics Kit

Numerous studies have been conducted on phonics instruction. This research laid the foundation for the instruction found in the Scholastic ReadingLine Phonics Kit. *Below is a list of ten of the top phonics research findings with examples of* Scholastic ReadingLine Phonics Kit *application.*

FINDING #1: PHONICS INSTRUCTION CAN HELP ALL CHILDREN LEARN TO READ

All children can benefit from instruction in the most common sound-spelling relationships and syllable patterns in English. This instruction helps children to decode words that follow these predictable sound-spelling relationships and syllable-spelling patterns. The *Scholastic ReadingLine Phonics Kit* begins instruction with short vowel CVC words, such as *sat*, *run*, and *dog*. These words are easily decoded, contain stable sounds, and are common to early-reading text.

Phonics instruction is particularly beneficial for children at risk for learning difficulties. This includes children who come to school with limited exposure to books, who've had few opportunities to develop their oral language, are from low socio-economic status, have below-average intelligence, are learning English as a second language, or are suspected of having a learning disability. However, even children from language-rich backgrounds benefit from phonics instruction (Chall, 1967). As Chall states "By learning phonics, students make faster progress in acquiring literary skills—reading and writing. By the age of six, most children already have about 6,000 words in their listening and speaking vocabularies. With phonics they learn to read and write these and more words at a faster rate than they would without phonics."

FINDING #2: EXPLICIT PHONICS INSTRUCTION IS MORE BENEFICIAL THAN IMPLICIT INSTRUCTION

According to Chall (1996), "Systematic and early instruction in phonics leads to better reading: better accuracy of word recognition, decoding, spelling, and oral- and silent-reading comprehension." The most effective type of instruction, especially for children at risk for reading difficulties, is explicit (direct) instruction (Adams, 1990; Chall, 1996; Honig, 1995; Evans and Carr, 1985; Stahl and Miller, 1989; Anderson et al, 1985.)

In the *Scholastic ReadingLine Phonics Kit*, new sound-spellings are explicitly taught. This instruction is followed by students applying the skill to the reading of words in isolation and in context.

FINDING #3: MOST POOR READERS HAVE WEAK PHONICS SKILLS AND A STRATEGY IMBALANCE

Most poor readers have a strategy imbalance. They tend to over-rely on one reading strategy, such as the use of context clues, to the exclusion of other strategies that might be more appropriate (Sulzby, 1985). Unfortunately, children who get off to a slow start in reading rarely catch up to their peers and seldom develop into strong readers (Stanovich, 1986; Juel, 1988). Individuals who experience early decoding difficulties tend to read less and thereby grow less in terms of word recognition skills and vocabulary.

A longitudinal study conducted by Juel (1988), revealed an 88% probability that a child who is a poor reader at the end of first grade would still be a poor reader at the end of fourth grade. Stanovich (1986) refers to this as the "Matthew Effect" in which the "rich get richer" (children who are successful decoders read more and therefore improve in reading), while the "poor get poorer" (children who have difficulties decoding become increasingly distanced in reading ability from the strong decoders).

FINDING #4: PHONICS KNOWLEDGE HAS A POWERFUL EFFECT ON DECODING ABILITY

Phonics knowledge positively affects decoding ability (Stanovich and West, 1989). Early attainment of decoding is important because it accurately predicts later reading comprehension skills (Beck and Juel, 1995).

The ultimate goal of reading instruction is to make meaning from text. Teachers can facilitate this by helping children achieve automaticity in decoding words (Gaskins et al, 1988). Skilled readers recognize the majority of words they encounter in text quickly and accurately, independent of context (Cunningham, 1975-76; Stanovich, 1984). The use of graphophonic cues (knowledge of sound-spelling relationships) facilitates word recognition abilities. In fact, a child's word recognition speed in first grade was found to be a strong predictor of reading comprehension ability in second grade (Lesgold and Resnick, 1982; Beck and Juel, 1992).

The inability to automatically recognize frequently encountered words adversely affects reading in the following ways (Royer and Sinatra, 1994):

- Since words can be stored in working memory for only a limited amount of time (approximately 10–15 seconds), slow decoding will result in some words "decaying" before a meaningful chunk of text can be processed.
- Devoting large amounts of mental energy to decoding words leaves less mental energy available for higher-level comprehension. This can result in comprehension breakdowns.

FINDING #5: GOOD DECODERS RELY LESS ON CONTEXT CLUES THAN POOR DECODERS

Good readers rely less on context clues than poor readers do because their decoding skills are so strong (Gough and Juel, 1991). It's only when strong readers can't use their knowledge of sound-spelling relationships to decipher an unfamiliar word that they rely on context clues. In contrast, poor readers, who often have weak decoding skills, over-rely on context clues to try to make meaning of text (Nicholson, 1992; Stanovich, 1986). Any reader, strong or weak, can use context clues only up to a certain point. It has been estimated that only one out of every four words (25%) can be predicted by using context (Gough, Alford, and Holley-Wilcox, 1981). The words that are the easiest to predict are function words such as *the* and *an*. Content words—the words that carry the bulk of the meaning in a text—are the most difficult to predict. Researchers estimate that content words can be predicted only about 10% of the time (Gough, 1983). A reader needs to use his or her knowledge of phonics (sound-spelling relationships) to decode these words.

FINDING #6: THE READING PROCESS RELIES ON A READER'S ATTENTION TO EACH LETTER IN A WORD

Eye-movement studies have revealed that skilled readers attend to almost every word in a sentence and process the letters that compose each word (McConkie and Zola, 1987). Therefore, reading is a "letter-mediated" rather than a "whole-word-mediated" process (Just and Carpenter, 1987). Prior to these findings, it was assumed that readers did not process each letter in a word, rather they recognized the word based on shape, a few letters, and context.

Research has also revealed that poor readers do not fully analyze words. For example, some poor readers tend to rely on initial consonant cues only (Stanovich, 1992, Vellutino and Scanlon, 1987).

Therefore, phonics instruction should focus children's attention on all the letters or spellings that make up words, as well as the sounds each represents by emphasizing the full analysis of words. The Word Building Pocket Chart activities in the *Scholastic ReadingLine Phonics Kit* are ideal for helping students attend to every sound and letter in a word. In addition, phonics instruction must teach children appropriate strategies for using the sounds and letters to decode words. This attention to the spelling patterns in words is necessary for the reader to store the word in his or her memory. It also helps children to become stronger spellers since the common spelling patterns of English are emphasized and thereby more fully learned (Ehri, 1987).

FINDING #7: PHONEMIC AWARENESS IS NECESSARY FOR PHONICS INSTRUCTION TO BE EFFECTIVE

Before children can use the knowledge of sound-spelling relationships to decode words, they must understand that words are made up of sounds (Adams, 1990). Many children come to school thinking of words as whole units—*cat*, *dog*, *run*. Before they can learn to read, children must realize that these words can be broken into smaller units—and sounded out. Phonemic awareness is the understanding, or insight, that a word consists of a series of discrete sounds. Without this insight, phonics instruction will not make sense to children. Some students with weak phonemic awareness skills are able to progress through the first couple of years of reading instruction by memorizing words. This strategy breaks down when the number of unique words in text increases in grades three and beyond. Therefore, if weak phonemic awareness skills are not detected and corrected, these students may enter the intermediate grades with a very serious reading deficit. Each lesson in the *Scholastic ReadingLine Phonics Kit* begins with phonological awareness work.

FINDING #8: PHONICS INSTRUCTION IMPROVES SPELLING ABILITY

Reading and writing are interrelated and complimentary processes (Pinnell, 1994). Whereas phonics is characterized by putting together sounds to form words that are printed, spelling involves breaking down spoken words into sounds in order to write them. To spell a word, or encode, a child must map a spelling onto each sound heard in the word. Each week in the *Scholastic ReadingLine Phonics Kit*, students engage in dictation exercises during which they transfer their phonics skills from reading to writing with the assistance of the teacher.

Good spellers are generally good readers because spelling and reading share an underlying knowledge base. Poor readers, however, are rarely good spellers. Phonics is a particularly powerful tool for improving spelling, because it emphasizes the spelling patterns which become familiar from reading. Good spellers have not memorized the dictionary; they simply apply the phonics rules they know and have a large store of sight words.

FINDING #9: A TEACHER'S KNOWLEDGE OF PHONICS AFFECTS HIS OR HER ABILITY TO TEACH PHONICS

A teacher's knowledge of phonics has a strong effect on his or her ability to teach phonics (Carroll, 1990; Moats, 1995). Knowledge of the English language enables the teacher to choose the best examples for instruction, to provide focused teaching, and to better understand students' reading and writing errors in relationship to their developing language skills. It is highly recommended that all teachers take a basic course in phonics or linguistics to gain further insights into our language that can be used in the classroom in productive and purposeful ways.

FINDING #10: IT IS POSSIBLE TO OVERDO PHONICS INSTRUCTION

Some teachers may unknowingly overdo phonics instruction (Stanovich, 1993–94; Chall, 1996). Likewise, some teachers may underemphasize phonics instruction, thus doing a disservice to children by not providing them with a valuable decoding strategy.

For many children, a little phonics instruction can go a long way. The awareness children have that sounds map onto spellings enables them to deduce other sound-spelling relationships from wide reading, especially if the material contains a large number of decodable words (Juel, 1991; Blevins, 2003). However, many children (especially children at risk) require teaching that makes these relationships explicit through direct and systematic instruction. That is why the instruction in the *Scholastic ReadingLine Phonics Kit* is so beneficial for struggling readers. These lessons are ideal for follow-up and small-group reading sessions, as well.

Finally, phonics instruction should focus on applying learned sound-spelling relationships to actual reading, with smaller amounts of time devoted to learning phonics rules or generalizations and out-of-context work.

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