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ABSTRACT

The best evidence available today shows that children who are taught phonics get off to a better start than those who are not taught phonics. Research indicates that children should learn phonics early, that children should be taught only the most important and regular of letter-to-sound relationships, and that children should read words within texts very early in their reading program. Research also tends to favor explicit phonics over implicit phonics, but little evidence of well designed phonics programs has been found. Current research projects include studies on: (1) formulating guidelines for phonics instruction; (2) evaluating existing reading programs; (3) conducting classroom experiments on phonics; (4) developing a model phonics program; and (5) developing and evaluating a phonics program for reading-disabled children. (RS)

Research in Brief

Chester E. Finn, Jr., Assistant Secretary

William J. Bennett, Secretary

What We Know About Phonics

Since the *New England Primer* taught colonial children their ABCs, American educators have debated the best way to provide early reading instruction.

The best evidence available today shows that, on average, children who are taught phonics—which stresses the relationship between spoken sounds and printed letters—get off to a better start than those who are not taught phonics. Research shows that the advantage is most apparent on tests of word identification and of sentence and story comprehension, particularly in the early grades.

What We Know

While indicators point toward teaching phonics, some educators remain hazy on how best to do so and when. Research provides the following guidelines.

- Children should learn phonics early. As *Becoming a Nation of Readers*, a report prepared by the Commission on Reading and approved by the National Academy of Education, explains, "It makes sense that beginning readers receive phonics instruction, because English is an alphabetic language in which there are consistent, though not entirely predictable, relationships between letters and sounds." Learning these relationships enables children to identify most words in their spoken language when they see the words in print. Once this happens, children are said to have "broken the code." In most cases, children should complete their study of phonics by the end of the second grade. Instruction must account for individual differences, however, and some youngsters will require more time.
- Phonics instruction should aim to teach only the most important and regular of letter-to-sound relationships, because this is the best way to lay bare for children the basic alphabetic principle.
- Very early in their reading program, children should read words within texts. Providing children with repeated opportunities to read is the best way to help them refine and reinforce their understanding of letter–sound correspondences. Early reading can also help them to recognize that reading is enjoyable.

Which Works Better—Implicit or Explicit Phonics?

The evidence tends to favor explicit phonics, in which children identify the sounds associated with letters and "blend" them together to form words. For instance, the teachers may first point to the word "cat" on the blackboard and ask youngsters to say the separate sounds, which they have learned previously—'c,' 'a,' and 't.' The children then merge the sounds—'c–a–t'—and finally collapse the sounds to form "cat." (See Chall, J. *Learning to Read: The Great Debate*, updated edition, 1983, McGraw-Hill.)

With implicit phonics, students do not pronounce the sounds separately. Instead, the teacher might write several words on the blackboard starting with the same letter—"cat," "cup," "cot"—and ask students what the words have in common. When students recognize that all begin with a "c," the teacher tells them that this letter stands for the sound they hear at the start of the three words.

Practice has revealed some problems with both implicit and explicit phonics. The "ideal" phonics program would probably incorporate some features from both approaches.

No evidence exists that phonics instruction prevents or delays a child's ability to extract meaning from what he or she reads. Indeed, the evidence reveals that it enhances reading for meaning. Yet phonics instruction has often been criticized for failing to do this. What *is* true, however, is that in the zeal to teach children phonics, some programs introduce the sounds of many letters without providing ample opportunities for youngsters to use what they have learned by reading sentences and stories. Likewise, the zeal to teach reading for meaning right from the start, without teaching phonics, has resulted in difficulties with word identification and reading for understanding.

Phonics instruction is not an end in itself. It is one of the first steps toward the ultimate goal of helping children to identify words quickly and accurately, to read fluently, and to read with understanding.

Do American Children Learn Phonics?

From the 1920s to the early 1970s, "look-and-say," a method in which youngsters learned mainly to recognize and identify whole words, combined with small amounts of phonics dominated American classrooms.

Since then, phonics has gained in popularity. However, it is hard to gauge just how widely phonics is taught in today's classrooms because

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no systematic effort has been made to find out. We *do* know, however, that basal readers contain more phonics instruction today than they did two decades ago. Furthermore, tests examine the phonics skills of elementary school children more frequently, and textbooks used to train teachers are more apt to include phonics.

Despite these apparent changes, San Diego State University Professor of Education Patrick Groff believes that most elementary school children still suffer from insufficient phonics instruction. In his recent publication, *Preventing Reading Failure: An Examination of Myths of Reading Instruction,* Groff outlines certain misapprehensions about the teaching of reading. He believes these misapprehensions stem from negative views about phonics.

Another scholar, Isabel Beck of the University of Pittsburgh, found in an analysis of eight basal reading series that primers fail to integrate phonics and reading selections adequately.

Moreover, the Commission on Reading found little evidence of well-designed phonics programs and noted many areas in which the Nation's elementary school reading programs continue to fall short of the ideal.

Still Unanswered Questions

The U.S. Department of Education's Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI) has funded phonics research projects to be conducted at the Reading Research and Education Center at the University of Illinois at Urbana–Champaign. Among efforts to be completed by 1992 are projects to

- **Formulate guidelines for phonics instruction** based on school programs known to be successful and on past research on phonics. The guidelines will be made available to school administrators and teachers evaluating their reading programs and to publishers as they develop and revise basal readers.
- **Evaluate existing reading programs** to see how big a gap exists between the way phonics actually is taught and the way phonics should be taught.
- **Conduct classroom experiments on phonics** to learn such things as whether and under what conditions children are helped by having the sounds of letters pronounced in isolation.
- **Develop a model phonics program,** which will be tried in first-grade classrooms and compared with conventional programs.
- **Develop and evaluate a phonics program for reading-disabled children** that will be based on learning to identify words systematically.

As these projects and others fine-tune our knowledge of phonics, educators are optimistic that more youngsters will develop the literacy skills they need to succeed in school and throughout life.

To order the full report, *Becoming a Nation of Readers: The Report of the Commission on Reading,* send $4.50 per single copy (up to 50) to

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