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LITERACY LEADERSHIP BRIEF

Explaining Phonics Instruction

An Educator's Guide

The relative weight of phonics instruction is one of the most debated topics in education. Research establishes that phonics is an essential part of instruction in a total reading/language arts program.

Because phonics is often students' first experience with formal literacy instruction, families might be anxious about their children's learning. They may ask questions such as the following:

• What method will teachers use to teach phonics?

• What phonics will my child learn this year?

• How can I assist my child at home?

• Is sounding out words the approach my child should use?

• Should I help my child memorize common words?

Educators will want to answer families' questions and share effective learning activities. As an educator, letting families know that together you will make literacy interesting and meaningful, and not a boring memorization task, is important.

Assure family members that by engaging with text at home, their children have already learned a tremendous amount about reading and writing, including many understandings about print, letters, and letter sounds. Let them know that the pace of instruction will vary for individuals, and that not all students are ready to learn the same skills at the same time. Explain that teachers differentiate instruction to match students' development.

The information that follows summarizes some key points from research that will help you to explain phonics to non-educators. You will find information about phonics for emerging readers, phonological awareness, the layers of writing, word study instruction, approaches to teaching phonics, and teaching English learners. The references include research that supports the ideas presented and phonics resources that you can use and share with others.

What Is Phonics?

Phonics is the study of the relationship between sounds and letters. It is an essential component of reading and writing practice and instruction in the primary grades. Phonics knowledge

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leads to word knowledge. Along with plenty of experience reading, students begin to read words fluently with little effort.

Phonics instruction helps students to learn the written correspondences between letters, patterns of letters, and sounds. It should be noted that phonics is one element of a comprehensive literacy program that must also include practice in comprehension, fluency, vocabulary, writing, and thinking.

When Are Students Ready to Learn Phonics?

There are several prerequisites to consider before involving students in a formal phonics program. Language development is the first consideration and includes an ability to recognize and produce speech sounds, use language structures (syntax), engage with meaning systems (semantics), and use language appropriately (pragmatics). Phonics works in concert with all these language systems.

Phonological awareness is a particularly important language skill to acquire before phonics instruction begins. Phonological awareness includes the ability to separate oral language into syllables and individual phonemes, the distinctive sounds for the language the student is learning to read (English has 44). Phonological awareness is learned through singing, tapping syllables, rhyming, and dividing words into individual sounds.

When children are read to, and with explicit instruction at home and school, they develop *concepts of print* that can be expansive, such as learning the purposes of writing and illustrations; understanding what an author is; and identifying text features including the front and back of a book, uppercase and lowercase letters, reading top to bottom, reading left to write, return sweep at the end of a line, and the meaning of punctuation.

After students have heard stories read to them repeatedly, they try to point to the words as they recite their favorite memorized parts. Students develop a *concept of word in text* when they point accurately to the words as they recite the text. Concept of word in text develops in parallel with students' phonics knowledge of letter–sound correspondences (e.g., learning that the letter *b* makes the /b/ sound by repeatedly seeing *b* words in a text).

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It is important for students to know the names of nearly all the letters of the alphabet. Knowing the letter names is a first step in phonics instruction and is associated with later success in reading. The names of many letters correspond to their sounds. When students understand that letters represent sounds and have mastered several letter–sound correspondences, they have acquired the *alphabetic principle*. With this principle, in tandem with concept of word in text in place, they begin to finger-point read and remember written words.

How Phonics Is Taught

There are many ways to teach phonics, and there are similarities underlying the various methods used to teach letter–sound relationships and word patterns. Successful programs or methods use explicit phonics instruction that is systematic. They also provide clear examples for students to build on as they develop their awareness of the written code, of how words are spelled.

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English Orthography

English orthography is complex and may be confusing even to some teachers. English is described as a deep writing system with three layers:

1. The alphabetic layer, in which basic letter–sound correspondences are learned
2. The pattern layer, where students examine consonant–vowel patterns (e.g., CVCe/*cake*, CVVC/*nail*, CVV/*say*)
3. The meaning and morphological layer, where students learn new vocabulary and make generalizations about the meaning structures of affixes (e.g., prefixes: *un-*, *re-* and suffixes: *-ed*, *-ful*) and word roots (e.g., Greek: em*path*y, *path*, meaning *suffering* or *feeling* and Latin: re*bel*, *bel*, meaning *war*)

Although readers always use and learn about phonics, students who have learned the first two layers for single-syllable words have learned the fundamental of phonics. These students can read nearly all single-syllable words quickly and accurately. Most students acquire these fundamentals by the end of the third grade.

Analytic and Synthetic Approaches

Most phonics programs incorporate both analytic and synthetic activities to teach the 26 letters of the alphabet and the 44 phonemes or distinctive sounds of English. In analytic instruction, students compare words to identify patterns and apply this knowledge to new words (e.g., *ran/can*), or they examine word families to make analogies between segments of words (e.g., onset and rime, *r-an/c-an/f-an/m-an/p-an*). In synthetic phonics, students blend individual letter sounds together to form words (e.g., *c-a-t/cat*).

Word study is an approach to teach the alphabetic and pattern layers of the writing system by including spelling instruction that is differentiated by students' development. There are multisensory aspects of many phonics and word study activities such as articulation in pronouncing the sounds, tracing and writing letters, and tapping sounds in a word. The research literature, however, does not indicate that a multisensory program is required for all students to learn phonics.

There is a similarity in the sequence of features taught in phonics programs. Most programs begin by teaching students the letter–sound correspondences for consonants, short vowels, and consonant digraphs (e.g., *sh*, *th*, *wh*) and blends (e.g., *bl*, *st*, *tr*). To learn the second, more complex, pattern layer, students learn to decode the orthographic patterns for long vowels and complex vowels (e.g., *ar*, *au*, *oi*, *ou*, *ow*). The overlapping seam between the pattern and the third layer, the meaning and morphological layer, is reached when students study homophones (e.g., *tail/tale*) and homographs (e.g., *read/read*) and examine the spelling of inflected endings (e.g., *-ed* in *walked*).

Phonics Instruction in Other Languages

Phonics is a part of learning to read in all languages. Students who learn to read in multiple languages apply phonics that fit the respective letter–sound, pattern, and meaning layers. There is a wide variety in the balance of the three layers among writing systems, including the way letters and characters represent sounds. Phonics instruction always depends on the characteristics of a specific language.

For example, in shallow orthographies in which there are highly predictable letter–sound correspondences, such as writing in Spanish and Italian, the alphabetic layer applies across

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nearly all simple words, and this explains why the words are easy to sound out, whereas in deep orthographies, such as English and Chinese, there is a greater emphasis earlier on the pattern or orthographic and meaning layers, and learners must know the patterns to read many single-syllable words.

Phonics Instruction With English Learners

Emergent bilingual readers and writers use what they know in one language to learn other languages. Given the variety of languages among students, researching the characteristics and phonics of students' first languages and orthographies and finding out about their reading and writing experiences in their first languages is worthwhile.

There are distinct sounds and letters in other languages that contrast or that may not exist in students' first languages. Students benefit from examining these cross-language differences. Consider these three examples of contrasts between English and Spanish:

1. /h/ sound in Spanish is silent (e.g., *huevos/eggs*)
2. The short *o* in English sounds like words spelled with an *a* in Spanish (e.g., the *a* in *gato* [*cat* in Spanish], which sounds like a short *o*)
3. The difference in how *j* is pronounced in Spanish (e.g., *Juan, jugo* [juice]) compared with English (e.g., *jump*)

Teachers can help students contrast English with other languages by consulting resources that explicate the differences between English and other languages. These contrasts commonly exist in the sounds of vowels and ending consonant blends. Explicit phonics instruction with students learning English helps them to learn unfamiliar sounds, pronunciations, and their letter–sound correspondences.

Emergent bilingual readers and writers use what they know in one language to learn other languages.

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ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

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