

## **Phonemic Awareness, Phonics, and What Else?**

### **A Teacher Survival Kit for the Phonics-First Era**

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The Science of Reading (SOR) subgroup of reading researchers, policy makers, and selected reading specialists continue to advocate for a phonics-first approach to beginning reading instruction, claiming that phonemic awareness and phonics are foundational skills and thus must be the priority. However, a successful early literacy program must include much more. We are not arguing that phonics is unimportant but rather that phonics should be one of several equally important components, not the priority. Enlightened and successful teachers understand this. Many are frustrated. Others are intimidated by mandates to use so-called scientifically-based instruction that focuses so heavily on decoding that other important elements of reading are minimized or even excluded. We regularly receive messages from practicing teachers who are frustrated and demoralized by having to implement narrowly-focused early literacy programs. In some instances we are seeing outstanding teachers retiring early because of phonics-first mandates.

Fortunately, we know this era will pass. A literacy curriculum that is too one sided or radical, whatever the perspective, has always lost its momentum eventually. The phonics-first movement will suffer the same fate, but it will take longer than usual because it has the backing of the federal government and funding sources, with the implied threat that if a school doesn't use the "right" program, it doesn't get the money. However, in 2022-23 we are beginning to see some cracks in the support for phonics-dominated approaches. We suspect that by the end of the 2020s we will see a different and more comprehensive instructional focus for early literacy instruction.

In the interim, what is a classroom teacher to do? Our answer: Use strategies that go beyond phonics, increase student achievement in literacy, and are gratifying for both teachers and their students. Now is the time to broaden instructional programs that have become too narrow.

Even the strongest advocates of phonemic awareness and phonics suggest limiting this instruction to 15-20 minutes a day (e.g., Adams, et al., 1998). Yopp (1992), an early and strong advocate of phonemic awareness and phonics instruction, is reluctant to put a time limit on the instruction but cautions that too much steals instructional time from other important early literacy components. Heggerty (2014) claims that this instruction should be completed within 35 hours, which resolves to about 21 weeks of daily 20-minute lessons. These recommendations are all similar, and all leave a considerable amount of time for other instruction, given the fact that the typical reading/language arts block in most early grade classrooms is approximately 90 minutes per day. What else should the instructional program include in kindergarten and first

grade classrooms during the other 70 minutes each day? The typical kindergarten or first grade teacher is often confused about what to do and what not to do.

SOR advocates provide little guidance that goes beyond phonemic awareness and phonics. A random survey of the literature from this group yields the occasional reference to reading aloud to students as well as children reading on their own but little specific guidance as to the what and the how of these or other activities. On occasion there is a recommendation for the use of decodable texts—specially constructed texts that contain only words with regular spelling patterns—even though the National Reading Panel (2000) makes the point that there is little empirical evidence on their effectiveness.

We are not sure why the SOR advocates have avoided providing a comprehensive curriculum for kindergarten and first grade literacy instruction. Some may believe that phonemic awareness and phonics are enough. Then, too, many are primarily researchers, not educators, so they may not be familiar with the instructional procedures available to skilled teachers of young children.

### **What Else?**

Below we recommend five instructional components and their benefits. Used with effective phonemic-awareness and phonics instruction, these will constitute a comprehensive early literacy program that will develop competent, mature, and thoughtful readers over the long term.

- **Shared-Book-Experiences (SBEs)** of the type described by Holdaway (1979, pp 64-80). In this procedure, the teacher reads a story or poem to children and then has them read from a large-format version of the text that all can see. The teacher might print the story in large print on chart paper or use a Big Book version of the story. As the teacher tracks the print, the children read in unison with teacher support. Predictable texts such as *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* (Carle, 1969) or *Pumpkin, Pumpkin* (Titherington, 1990) or even the classic *Three Little Pigs* are examples of the type of texts that work particularly well. The students reread the texts several times and often add illustrations to the printed sentences. There is no attempt to have children memorize the text. The focus is on engaging them in the experience of reading. Despite the protestations of some in the SOR community, there is no rational nor evidenced-based reason why SBEs—with predictable texts and other titles—should be avoided in early literacy instruction.

*Benefits: SBEs develop the concept of reading as a left to right process, develop the concepts of words and sentences, involve the children in reading meaningful text, and begin to build a core of known words. SBEs are also very enjoyable and motivating for young children.*

- **Language Experience Stories** as described by Stauffer (1970), Nessel and Jones (1981), Holdaway (1979), and others. With this procedure the teacher engages children in discussing an activity and uses their statements to create a brief story, or account, of the activity. If it is

an individual account, the teacher records the story in the child's notebook. If it is a group effort, the teacher uses large chart paper for all of the students to see. After writing the story, the teacher rereads the text to the children and then invites them to read along, as is done in SBEs. Children reread their story several times over the next few days and then dictate another story. The stories can also be used as the basis of other literacy activities.

*Benefits: Experience stories make reading personal and relevant to young students. The stories are written in the language of the learners and reflect their interests. Just as with SBEs, experience stories develop the concept of reading as a left to right process and establish the concepts of words and sentences. Invariably as children read their stories, they learn many of the words, extending their reading vocabulary, but they are not expected to learn all of the words in a story. Experience stories also are an effective way of integrating reading into the subject areas. Children might create a story about a particular science experiment, a field trip, or other classroom experiences.*

- **Writing with Invented Spellings.** Children are invited to write with the encouragement to use invented spelling as needed, that is, to spell as best they can. At first, their writings combine pictures, scribbles, and a few letters, but as they see their teacher writing, read their experience stories, participate in SBEs, learn letter sound correspondences in their phonics lessons, and engage in handwriting practice, they gain control over letter formation and spelling, and their writing becomes more sophisticated and mature. There is ample research evidence that children move through very predictable stages of spelling development when they are encouraged to write every day and are allowed to use invented spelling. (See for example Henderson and Beers, 1980; Gentry, 1987)

*Benefits: Early writing complements early reading. It gives young learners opportunities to practice and apply what they are learning in phonics. It allows them to be creative and constructive. Their writing is personal and relevant, giving teachers insights about what they are thinking. The invented spelling also provides teachers with insights into the children's developing knowledge of sound-letter associations. Writing keeps children more engaged when the teacher may be working with other students in the classroom. Writing provides children with concrete evidence that they are learning. And good writers become better readers.*

- **Read Alouds.** The teacher reads aloud to students every day from age-appropriate narrative and expository texts. It may seem that this enjoyable activity isn't really teaching, but it provides an effective learning experience for children as they follow the sequence, look at the illustrations, and engage in discussion of what's happening in a story and what might happen next or what the group has learned so far from an informational text and what else they might learn.

*Benefits: Children are hearing stories and informational accounts that they cannot yet read themselves. They are strengthening their listening vocabulary and comprehension skills. They don't have to be concerned with recognizing words but can devote all of their attention to understanding. They are hearing good reading behaviors modeled by an adult. They are hearing and familiarizing themselves with the language of texts. They are enjoying a literacy experience that boosts interest and motivation to read for themselves.*

• **Guided Reading Activities.** When children are able to read simple stories and accounts, the teacher conducts Guided Reading sessions to give small groups of children the chance to read and discuss a text together. A group might talk about what is happening in the story and what might happen next. Or when students are reading informational text, they might discuss what they are learning, which ideas they find most interesting, etc. The focus is on the children's responses; teacher talk does not dominate (see Hammond and Nessel, 2019, pp 120-149). In the earliest stages, children may need to read orally or vocalize to themselves, but as soon as possible children are encouraged to read silently so that they are free to focus on meanings rather than performing. Oral rereading is used to support the discussions and share favorite or important parts. During Guided Reading, children may encounter words they don't know, and the need to figure them out to fully comprehend the text is an excellent setting for applying the word recognition skills the children have been learning.

*Benefits: In Guided Reading, comprehension becomes the priority. When this activity is started early on, children learn that reading is about thinking and understanding what they read. Comprehension is developed best when a group of children are reading the same story at the same time and sharing their interpretations and ideas with each other. Discussion is key! It serves not only to improve reading comprehension, but speaking and listening skills as well. The teacher's role is to guide and focus the children and perhaps set the tempo of the lesson. Children can reasonably be expected to engage in Guided Reading lessons on average by the middle of grade one, or before.*

These five components, along with phonics instruction, constitute the core of a comprehensive literacy curriculum for young readers. Instructional time is precious. Many teachers lament, "If I just had more time!" Given the typical 90 minutes devoted to reading and language arts per day—400-450 instructional minutes each week—what we describe here is doable. Time allotments are variable, however, and different teachers will prioritize differently. For example one teacher may focus a great deal on SBEs and devote little time to experience stories, whereas another teacher might see experience stories as the core of her program and thus do fewer SBEs, and still others might prioritize early writing. As children mature, teachers may spend more time on Guided Reading and less on experience stories and SBEs. Drawing from this repertoire of instructional strategies, plus the phonics instruction, teachers will arrive at the right mix for a comprehensive early literacy program.

## Additional Activities

In addition to the five core components, these other classroom activities further promote learning to read.

- **Print Awareness/Environmental Print Activities.** Young readers are encouraged to find words and phrases in their environment from signs to labels on groceries, store and restaurant names and logos, and other such everyday uses of written language. Grocery flyers and newspaper inserts can be used for children to cut and paste words they recognize onto a collage, for example: pizza, Pepsi, Cheerios, STOP, milk, hardware, For Sale, Home Depot, McDonalds, etc. At first the young reader will rely on context to recognize these words, e.g., seeing a store name above the entryway to the store, but seeing the words repeatedly serves to instantiate the phonics generalizations they are learning and adds to their core of known words. In addition it reminds children that words and phrases are all around them and are relevant to their personal world. An added benefit is that these activities can be done independently when the teacher is engaged with other children in the classroom.
- **Independent Reading.** Children are encouraged to read and browse independently, choosing from easy-to-read books, portions of texts, poems and chants or repeated phrases in books, and whatever else captures their interest. They are encouraged to browse through reading material, looking at illustrations, as well as read. The classroom is print rich, with an ample supply of books, periodicals, magazines, brochures, and posters. In a farming community imagine brochures from the local farm machinery dealer of tractors and harvesters or in urban and rural areas brochures from local car dealerships, airports, pet stores, sports teams, catalogues, and many other sources.
- **YouTube Videos.** YouTube offers numerous videos of popular children's books being read aloud. *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* (Carle, 1969) and *Mrs. Wishy Washy* (Cowley, 1999) are two examples. These materials are excellent activities for children to view either with a teacher or independently and serve to enhance children's first-hand reading experiences.
- **Literacy Across the Curriculum.** Many opportunities exist to integrate literacy in science, social studies, and mathematics. For example, after doing a science experiment on objects that float and sink, the teacher can record in print the students' oral summary of the activity. This printed text can then be read and reread by the students, not only as a reading activity but also to reinforce what they learned in science. In social studies, children can build word-and-picture collages illustrating the topic they are learning about. In mathematics numerous poems and chants reinforce the learning of numbers and counting such as: "One two, buckle my shoe....," A.A. Milne's (1927) "When I was one...When I was two....," or Carle's *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* (1969): "...he ate one apple...he ate two plums...." In embracing a reading-across-the-curriculum perspective there are a wide variety of opportunities for integrating literacy throughout the school day.

## **A Few Words About Phonics**

As previously stated, phonemic awareness and phonics should be taught each day until children are adept at their use of both, and these must be taught directly by a teacher, not relegated to work sheets and workbooks. It is also important to give children daily opportunities to use real contexts in conjunction with what they are learning about letter-sound correspondences.

Teaching children to use the context AND phonics when they encounter an unfamiliar word keeps them focused on the meaning of what they are reading. This is an appropriate emphasis from the very first day of reading instruction, and it becomes more important as children mature and begin to encounter words in print that they have never heard before. Sounding these words out doesn't get them very far, so they'll need to consider the context as well. The most successful readers regularly consider the context when they are identifying unfamiliar words. Either they use the context to confirm their initial phonetic analysis of the word, or they use their phonetic analysis to confirm their initial identification based on the context. There is no rational nor evidenced-based reason to avoid teaching children how to use the context when they are figuring out unfamiliar words.

## **A Parting Message to Classroom Teachers**

Don't be intimidated by federal and district mandates. When you are told to teach in a certain way or use a commercial program that is counter to what you know to be best practices, you may have to meet those expectations, but also do your best to integrate the effective practices described here so that you give your students the best possible experience of learning to read.

Don't be intimidated by those who profess to have scientific proof of what is best for you and your students. Scientific studies can provide important information to practitioners, but science is often contradictory, and some studies can be too narrowly focused to reflect the true complexities of learning or too poorly designed to be acceptable. Also, the same scientific study can be interpreted differently by different scientists, as we sometimes see in medicine and other fields as well as education. The notion that science is irrefutable and coldly objective is often not the case at all, and it's possible for so-called scientific studies to contradict what highly effective teachers have learned through decades of experience working daily with children who are learning to read. When we see contradictions between "the science" and what highly effective teachers have gleaned from experience, we tend to side with the teachers.

Find a compatriot if you can, preferably in your school, but in another school or community if necessary. Talk with each other. Read and plan together. Share concerns and successes. Be proactive, positive, and supportive of each other. Also look for supportive communities, perhaps online, with members who share their thoughts and knowledge with one another and alert each other to useful resources.

Focus on teaching your students to read, write, and think effectively. Pay attention to what they need. When what you're doing doesn't seem to be working, try different strategies. Enlist your students' support when you try different things. Talk to them about what helps them the most and what causes them difficulty. Be patient. Good results from such attentive, thoughtful teaching will come over months and years; not days and weeks. Over time, as you gain more understanding and confidence, your colleagues and supervisors will want to know the secret to your success.

Our final piece of advice is to learn as much as you can about the reading process. Read professional literature that provides depth and breadth. Examine research and take a close look at the perspectives of those who have spent thousands of hours in classrooms, working with children and teachers. (See the Suggested Readings below for our recommendations.) When browsing the internet for articles and blogs on reading, navigate with caution. A useful guideline is to ask yourself whether the information is focused merely on decoding individual words or addresses the full process of learning to read, which goes beyond sounding out individual words. A reasonable purpose for your explorations is to consider a variety of viewpoints and draw your own conclusions that align with what you have observed in your own classroom.

We are reminded of a classic book from the late 1960's, by Postman and Weingartner, *Teaching As A Subversive Activity*—a book that remains relevant today. The main message is that teachers should not just go along to get along or blindly follow the edicts of the day. Teachers need to think for themselves and resist the system if the system is not working for their students. Resistance is a good response when teachers are asked to adhere to a set of practices that over the long run will not result in producing highly literate and thoughtful students. We see the need these days for resisting a view of reading that makes phonics the priority and downplays or dismisses the language and thinking that are very clearly at the heart of the learning to read process.

In conclusion, it is important to know that you are not alone and are not powerless. In this present climate of a shortage of teachers—particularly teachers of excellence and experience—you have greater power than you may believe. Act discreetly, competently, and resolutely. You will find satisfaction in doing so, and in the long run you, and a more comprehensive approach to early reading instruction, will prevail.

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### **Suggested Readings**

Flurkey, A.D., Paulson, E.J, & Goodman, K.S. (Eds.). (2008). *Scientific Realism in Studies of Reading*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

These authors discuss significant scientific research into the reading process that has often been overlooked. As noted in the foreword, they “push our understandings of the phenomenon we call reading beyond the accepted and taken-for-granted views that we might have.”



Garin, E. (2002). *Resisting Reading Mandates: How to Triumph with the Truth*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann

Much of the current literature on reading might lead one to believe that a phonics-first curriculum is almost universally accepted by the profession, but such is not the case. Elaine Garin raises concerns not only about this narrow focus but also about the associated mandates that control educational practice. The Foreword by reading researcher Richard Allington is enlightening as well.

Graves, D. (2003). *Writing: Teachers and Children at Work* (anniversary edition). Portsmouth, NH, Heinemann.

In working with young children in the early grades, Donald Graves demonstrated that beginning writers are capable of writing rich texts using invented spellings. Because the early writing focuses on ideas and has personal relevance, young authors are willing to make extensive revisions to their work and are more than able to do so. More than anyone, Graves changed the face of early writing instruction in U.S. and Canadian schools. This classic book is still relevant today.

Pearson, P.D., Madda, C.L., & Raphael, T.E. (2023). “Current Issues and Best Practices in Literacy Instruction” in L.M. Morrow, E. Morrell, & H. Casey, *Best Practices in Literacy Instruction* (7<sup>th</sup> edition). New York: Guilford Press.

These prominent researchers provide an important and timely discussion of the current state of research and practice in the field of reading. They make a strong argument for professionals moving out of their silos, attending to “multiple facets of literacy,” and working together for the good of the children we all want to succeed.

Valencia, S. & Buly, M. (2004). “Behind Test Scores: What Struggling Readers Really Need.” *The Reading Teacher* 57(6), 520-531.

This superb research analyzed test data from incoming 5th grade students who had failed to pass the state fourth-grade reading assessment test. The authors identified six specific profiles within the population of struggling students, each of which needed a different type of help. Interestingly, more than half of the underperforming readers were quite skilled in phonics. The results from this study raised serious questions about the assumption that phonics is the missing link for struggling readers and provided a more nuanced and useful perspective on underachievement in reading.

Routman, R. (2018). *Literacy Essentials: Engagement, Excellence, and Equity for All Learners*. Portland, ME: Stenhouse.

Regie Routman was co-teaching first grade when she published *Transitions* in 1988 about her first-hand experiences moving to a literature-based curriculum. The success of this book followed by *Invitations* in 1994, *Reading Essentials* in 2003, and many other publications led this teachers’ teacher to be viewed as an important influence in literacy education. Her clear voice, grounded in classroom experience, is worthy of being heard by teachers, policy makers, and researchers. For more information, see <https://regieroutman.org>.

Strauss, S.L. (2005). *The Linguistics, Neurology, and Politics of Phonics: Silent “E” Speaks Out*. Mahweh, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Steven Strauss’s expertise as a linguist underpins his concern about the alphabetic principle that currently drives mandates to teach phonics, and his expertise as a neurologist informs his critique of the brain-imaging that has been used to support phonics mandates. This extensively-sourced, informative book is a must-read for those who want to examine the weaknesses in the current science-of-reading perspective.

Yatvin, J. (2000). “Minority View.” in National Reading Panel (2000). *Teaching Children To Read: An Evidence-based Assessment of the Scientific Research Literature on Reading and Its Implications for Reading Instruction*. Washington, D.C.: National Institute of Child Health and Human Development. Available at:

Joanne Yatvin was the National Reading Panel member who had the most experience with classroom instruction. Her informative statement about the panel’s efforts follows Chapter 6 of the report cited in the References above and is an important contribution to our understanding of the panel’s work.

Wells, G. (2000). *The Meaning Makers: Learning to Talk and Talking to Learn*. (2<sup>nd</sup> edition) London, U.K: MPG Books Group.

It’s not possible to understand how young people learn to read and write without understanding how oral language is learned and how talking, listening, reading, writing are inextricably tied together as meaning-making processes. Wells’ classic study of young children and their language, often overlooked, is particularly helpful in illuminating the role and nature of language and its impact on literacy. The book is especially helpful to those who teach young children.

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Denise Nessel, Ph.D., has been a teacher, reading specialist, language arts supervisor, and university professor in the United States. She has authored several books and other publications and has worked for many years with the National Urban Alliance for Effective Education as a consultant and mentor to teachers of underachieving students. As such, she has countless hours in classrooms, working directly with students and teachers to improve literacy learning and teaching. She can be reached at [ddnessel@gmail.com](mailto:ddnessel@gmail.com).

Hammond and Nessel co-authored *The Comprehension Experience: Engaging Readers Through Effective Inquiry and Discussion* (Heinemann, 2011; independently re-issued in 2019 and available at [amazon.com](http://amazon.com)). They are currently collaborating on a new book with a focus on early literacy instruction and comprehension.