

LITERACY LEADERSHIP BRIEF

Meeting the Challenges of Early Literacy Phonics Instruction

Learning to read can, at times, seem almost magical. A child sits in front of a book and transforms those squiggles and lines into sounds, puts those sounds together to make words, and puts those words together to make meaning.

But it's not magical.

English is an alphabetic language. We have 26 letters. These letters, in various combinations, represent the 44 sounds in our language. Teaching students the basic letter–sound combinations gives them access to sounding out approximately 84% of the words in English print. Of course, equal amounts of time need to be spent on teaching the meanings of these words, but the learning of these basic phonics skills is essential to becoming a fluent reader.

Research has shown the power of this early instruction in phonics for young students' reading and writing development. Government-funded documents have shown that phonics instruction is helpful for all students, harmful for none, and crucial for some. A recent brain research study out of Stanford explained how beginning readers who focus on letter–sound relationships, or phonics, instead of trying to learn whole words, increase activity in the area of the brain best wired for reading. And the meta-analysis work has detailed the significant effect size of phonics instruction on students' early reading growth.

So why is there a debate when the research evidence has been consistent for decades? It's because how we translate that research into instructional practice varies widely, resulting in practices that are sometimes ineffective or unbalanced and instructional materials that too often have serious instructional design flaws. Some phonics instruction is random, incomplete, and implicit. Other instruction is overdone and isolated, devoid of the extensive application to authentic reading and writing needed for mastery. Neither is as effective as it needs to be.

Explicit and Systematic Phonics Instruction

The question of whether to include phonics instruction has been resolved. The answer is *yes*. The discussion now should be how to include phonics instruction as part of an overall literacy plan that is efficient, effective, and timely for all students. What does that instruction look like? And how do we overcome

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the common obstacles teachers often face in delivering that instruction?

Although phonics can be taught in different ways, research supports instruction that is explicit and systematic. *Explicit* means that the initial introduction of a letter–sound relationship, or phonics skill, is directly stated to students. For example, we tell students that the /s/ sound is represented by the letter *s*. This is more effective than the discovery method because it does not rely on prerequisite skills that some students might not have.

Being explicit, however, does not mean that students cannot play with letters and sounds during the instructional cycle. In fact, word awareness activities like word building and word sorts allow students to become flexible in their knowledge of sound-spellings and solidifies that learning.

Being *systematic* means that we follow a continuum from easy to more complex skills, slowly introducing each new skill. Systematic instruction includes a review and repetition cycle to achieve mastery and goes from the known to the new in a way that makes the new learning more obvious and easier for students to grasp. For example, after students learn to read simple short-vowel CVC words like *run*, *cat*, and *hop*, they are often introduced to the skill final-*e* as in the words *hate* and *hope*. This is a conceptual leap for young students where, often for the first time, they learn that two letters can work together to make a sound and these letters are not even beside each other in the word. Not easy!

In systematic instruction, teachers display a known word and compare it to the new to highlight this new concept, as in *hop–hope* or *hat–hate*. This side-by-side minimal contrast makes the learning of the new concept more obvious and easier to grasp. The discussion that teachers can have with students about the two words increases students’ word awareness and understanding of how words work. This exemplifies strong phonics instruction: active, engaging, and thought provoking.

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Key Characteristics of Effective Phonics Instruction

In addition to being explicit and systematic, strong phonics instruction has the following seven key characteristics.

Readiness Skills

The two best predictors of early reading success are alphabet recognition and phonemic awareness. These skills open the gate for reading. Alphabet recognition involves learning the names, shapes, and sounds of the letters of the alphabet with fluency. Phonemic awareness is the understanding that words are made up of a series of discrete sounds, called phonemes. A range of subskills is taught to develop phonemic awareness, with oral blending and oral segmentation having the most positive impact on reading and writing development in kindergarten and grade 1 and phonemic manipulation tasks playing a crucial role up to grade 3.

Scope and Sequence

A strong scope and sequence builds from the simple to the complex in a way that takes advantage of previous learning. The sequence allows for many words to be formed as early as possible and focuses on teaching high-utility skills. Although there is no “right” scope and sequence, programs that strive to connect concepts and move through a series of skills in a stair-step way offer the best chance at student success.

Blending

This is the main strategy for teaching students how to sound out words and must be frequently modeled and applied. It is simply the stringing together of letter-sounds to read a word. It is the focus of early phonics instruction but still plays a role when transitioning students from reading monosyllabic to multisyllabic words.

Dictation

To best transfer students’ growing phonics skills to writing, dictation (i.e., guided spelling with teacher think-alouds) is critical and begins in kindergarten. Although not a spelling test, this activity can accelerate students’ spelling abilities and understanding of common English spelling patterns and assist students in using these phonics skills in writing. Used in combination with word building and structured and unstructured writing experiences in phonics instruction, students have increased opportunities to “try out” their developing skills to express ideas in written form.

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Word Awareness

Word building and word sorts are key activities to increase students' word awareness. In word building, students are given a set of letter cards and asked to create a series of words in a specific sequence. This increases students' ability to work with letter-sounds flexibly and fully analyze words for their component sounds and spellings. In word sorts, students look for common spelling patterns, engage in discussions about what they learn about words from this examination, and increase their ability to notice larger chunks in words (an important skill as students transition from monosyllabic to multisyllabic words).

High-Frequency Words

High-frequency words are the most common words in English. Some are irregular; that is, they do not follow common English sound-spellings. Others are regular and needed by students during reading before they have the phonics skills to sound them out. The top 250–300 words are generally taught in grades K–2. Past grade 2, when the majority of the key high-frequency words have been introduced, students need to be continually assessed on their mastery of these words, as a lack of fluency can impede comprehension. Some words are more difficult to master (e.g., reversals like *no/on* and *was/saw*, *of/for/from*, and words that begin with *wh* or *th*). More instructional time and assessment needs to be given around these words.

Reading Connected Text

The goal of phonics instruction is to develop students' ability to read connected text independently. Controlled, decodable text (also known as accountable text) at the beginning level of reading instruction helps students develop a sense of comfort in and control over their reading growth and should be a key learning tool in early phonics instruction. The tight connection between what students learn in phonics and what they read is essential for building a faster foundation in early reading. This is especially critical when students encounter less-controlled leveled readers during small-group lessons. These accountable (phonics-based) texts need to be reread to build fluency, discussed to develop comprehension, and written about to provide opportunities for students to apply their growing phonics skills in writing.

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The success of these key characteristics of phonics instruction rests both on the shoulders of highly trained teachers with a background in phonics routines and linguistics and in instructional materials that aid teachers in meeting a wide range of students' phonics needs.

Common Causes of Phonics Instructional Failure

The reality is that the hard work of teaching phonics begins after all these characteristics are in place. Why? Common obstacles related to instruction and instructional materials too often stand in the way of maximizing students' learning of basic phonics skills. These range from a lack of application to authentic reading and writing experiences (where the learning “sticks”) to a lack of review and repetition resulting in decayed learning. The following are the 10 most common phonics instructional obstacles or pitfalls, all of which teachers have some degree of control over.

Inadequate or Nonexistent Review and Repetition Cycle

We underestimate the amount of time it takes young learners to master phonics skills. When a new skill is introduced, it should be systematically and purposefully reviewed for at least the next 4–6 weeks. The goal must be to teach to mastery rather than just exposure. Only then can students transfer the skill to all reading situations. With the fast pacing of most curricula, a more substantial review and repetition cycle often must be added. This can be achieved through increased opportunities to practice previous skills in blending work, dictation, and the repeated readings of previously read accountable texts.

Lack of Application to Real Reading and Writing Experiences

Students progress at a much faster rate in phonics when the bulk of instructional time is spent on applying the skills to authentic reading and writing experiences, rather than isolated skill-and-drill work. At least half of a phonics lesson should be devoted to application exercises. For students who are below level, the amount of reading during phonics instruction must be even greater.

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Inappropriate Reading Materials to Practice Skills

The connection between what we teach and what we have young learners read has a powerful effect on their word reading strategies and their phonics and spelling skills. It also affects students' motivation to read. Having accountable texts as part of the daily phonics lessons provides more substantial decoding practice and helps to scaffold the leap from most phonics lessons to the reading of leveled texts, which are far less controlled for phonics skills. The amount of control (e.g., decodability) and the amount of time needed in this type of text varies on the basis of student needs. Adherence to a specific percentage of decodability is problematic.

Ineffective Use of the Gradual Release Model

Some teachers of struggling readers spend too much instructional time doing the “heavy lifting,” such as overmodeling and having students simply repeat (e.g., “parrot” activities). Whoever does the thinking in a lesson does the learning. Students might struggle, but they must do the work and the teacher's role is to provide timely corrective feedback and support.

Too Much Time Lost During Transitions

Phonics lessons often require a lot of manipulatives and materials. Transitional times when materials are distributed or collected should be viewed as valuable instructional moments in which review skills can be addressed (e.g., sing the ABC song, do a phonemic awareness task, review letter-sound action rhymes to focus students' attention on an instructional goal). Every minute of a phonics lesson must be instructive. Planning these transitions is critical for their effectiveness.

Limited Teacher Knowledge of Research-Based Phonics Routines and Linguistics

Teachers with a background in phonics or linguistics are better equipped to make meaningful instructional decisions, analyze student errors, and improve the language and delivery of instruction. Also, teacher attitudes toward phonics instructional materials (e.g., decodable text) and routines (e.g., sorts, word building, blending) matter.

Inappropriate Pacing of Lessons

Some teachers spend too much time on activities they enjoy or are easier for students and less time on the more challenging or substantive activities that increase learning. Lessons should be fast paced and rigorous. They should focus on those activities that more quickly move the needle in terms of student learning, such as blending practice, dictation, word awareness activities, and reading and writing about accountable texts.

No Comprehensive or Cumulative Mastery Assessment Tools

Assessment of phonics skills must be done over an extended period of time to ensure mastery. Weekly assessments focusing on one skill often give “false positives.” That is, they show movement toward learning but not mastery. If the skill is not worked on for subsequent weeks, learning can decay. Cumulative assessments help teachers determine which skills truly have been mastered. They are a critical phonics instructional tool.

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Transitioning to Multisyllabic Words Too Late

Most curricula focus on monosyllabic words in grade 2, yet the stories students read at that grade are filled with more challenging, multisyllabic words. More emphasis needs to be given to transitioning to longer words at this grade (e.g., going from known to new words like *can/candle* and teaching the six major syllable types). This work can begin at the end of grade 1 to provide a closer alignment between phonics instruction and reading demands.

Overdoing It (Especially Isolated Skill Work)

Some curricula overemphasize phonics (especially the isolated skill-and-drill type of work) while ignoring other key aspects of early reading needs (e.g., vocabulary and background knowledge building) that are essential to long-term reading progress. Modifying reading time to provide a better balance is important, because all these skills plant the seeds of comprehension as students encounter increasingly more complex texts.

Phonics instruction is an essential part of early reading and writing instruction. Students need to learn how to efficiently decode words to increase their word recognition skills. The more words students recognize automatically, the better their

reading fluency, which has a powerful effect on their comprehension of text. And that's the point. Phonics instruction is designed to increase students' ability to read and make meaning from text. However, it needs to be done in a way that is most effective and efficient. It is paramount that teachers and creators of curriculum materials take an objective and thorough look at how we improve that instruction to maximize student learning.

MOVING FORWARD

- Embrace early phonics instruction as integral to elementary literacy plan.
- Incorporate explicit and systematic phonics instruction that directly addresses skills, follows a continuum of skill complexity, and includes a review and repetition cycle that leads to eventual skill mastery.
- Assess phonics instruction to ensure key characteristics are in place, including blending, dictation, word awareness, and high-frequency words.

ILA RESOURCES

[*Advocating for Children's Rights to Read*](#)

This manual informs teachers and reading/literacy specialists, administrators, school and public librarians, families and caregivers, and policymakers how to enact the rights in classrooms, communities, and the world.

[*The Case for Children's Rights to Read*](#)

The goal of ILA's Children's Rights to Read campaign is ensuring every child has access to the education, opportunities, and resources needed to read. This companion resource identifies why the 10 fundamental rights were selected.

[*Literacy Glossary*](#)

Curated by a team of literacy experts, this interactive resource defines the shared language of literacy research and instruction.

[*Standards for the Preparation of Literacy Professionals 2017*](#)

This updated resource provides an evidence-based benchmark for the development and evaluation of literacy professional preparation programs.

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