
“Educators have long argued over the best way to teach reading to children. The research, however, indicates that a highly popular method is inadequate on its own” (Rayner et al., 2002, p. 85).
Overview on Teaching Reading

During the 1990s many educators in America abandoned the traditional phonics method of reading instruction (teaching the correspondences between spoken sounds and the letters that represent them).

Elementary teachers turned to whole-language methods (students learn connections between letters and sounds incidentally through literature-based activities).
General Approaches to Reading Instruction

1. Whole-word

2. Phonics

3. Whole-language
Whole-word approach

• “Look-say” method
• Children learn by rote how to recognize at a glance a vocabulary of 50-100 words
• Gradually acquire other words (usually after seeing them used over and over in stories)
• “Run, Spot, run.”
  • Example of a sentence designed to aid this type of learning
Phonics approach

- Children are taught how to use their knowledge of the alphabet to sound out words
  - Connections between letters and phonemes

- Lack of perfect correspondence between letters and sounds can be a source of confusion—led many schools to adopt whole-language method
Whole-language approach

- Aims to make reading instruction enjoyable
- Rules of phonics should *not* be taught directly
  - The connection between letters and sounds should be learned incidentally through exposure to text
- Similar to whole-word approach, but relies more on a child’s experience with language
  - Engaging books
  - Children are encouraged to guess words they do not know by looking at context of the sentence, clues in the story, or illustrations rather than sounding them out
- Rationale: learning to read, like learning to speak, is a natural act that children can teach themselves how to do
“Although many parents might think that innate intelligence will govern how well their kids learn to read, the evidence suggests otherwise” (Rayner et al., 2002, p. 86).

- IQ has little bearing on early reading ability
- Many children who have difficulty learning to read have above-average IQs
How Beginners Learn to Read

• The gap between more and less able readers generally grows over the years

• “Teaching children to read well early on obviously helps to develop a valuable lifetime habit; thus, it is no wonder that educators have placed enormous emphasis on finding the best way to teach these skills” (Rayner et al., 2002, p.86).
Adoption of whole-language

• Many teachers adopted the whole-language approach because of its appeal
  • Making reading fun promised to keep children motivated
  • Teachers could compose their own curricula
  • Teachers were encouraged to treat children as active participants

• The presumed benefits of whole-language—and the contrast to the perceived dullness of phonics—led to its growth across America in the 1990s
State Debates

• Massachusetts
  • Whole-language almost became the official state method of instruction with the passage of the Massachusetts Education Reform Act of 1993
  • Dozens of linguists and psychologists signed a letter taking issue with the document’s assertion that research supported whole-language

• Reading debates were heating up in other states, especially California and Texas
• Sides were often divided along political lines—conservatives backing phonics and liberals favoring whole-language
Why phonics?

• Research has clearly demonstrated that understanding how letters relate to the component sounds of words is important in reading.

“Teaching that makes the rules of phonics clear will ultimately be more successful than teaching that does not. Admittedly, some children can infer these principles on their own, but most need explicit instruction in phonics, or their reading skills will suffer” (Rayner et al., 2002, p.89).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Organizer</th>
<th>Scope</th>
<th>Summary Statement</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children</td>
<td>National Academy of Science/National Research Council</td>
<td>Literature review covering more than 700 publications</td>
<td>“Failure to grasp that written spellings systematically represent the sounds of spoken words makes it difficult not only to recognize printed words but also to understand how to learn and to profit from instruction. If a child cannot rely on the alphabetic principle, word recognition is inaccurate or laborious and comprehension of connected text will be impeded.”</td>
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<td>Teaching Children to Read: An Evidence-Based Assessment of the Scientific Research Literature on Reading and Its Implications for Reading Instruction</td>
<td>National Reading Panel</td>
<td>Includes a meta-analysis of 38 controlled studies of phonics instruction published since 1970</td>
<td>“The meta-analysis indicated that systematic phonics instruction enhances children's success in learning to read and that systematic phonics instruction is significantly more effective than instruction that teachers little or no phonics.”</td>
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(Rayner et al., 2002, p. 90).
Finding a Balance

• Research shows that systematic phonics instruction produces higher achievement for beginning readers
  • The differences are greatest for students as risk of failing to learn to read

• Using whole-language activities to supplement phonics instruction can help make reading fun
  • “Recent work has indicated— and many teachers have discovered—that the combination of literature-based instruction and phonics is more powerful than either method alone”
    • (Rayner et al., 2002, p. 91).
Early Reading

• Children who are poor readers at the end of first grade almost never acquire above-average skills

• Children who fall behind in areas of critical reading skills miss opportunities to practice reading

• However…
  • We can identify children who are likely to be at risk for reading failure
  • If we intervene early, intensively, and appropriately, we can provide these children with the early reading skills needed

(Torgesen, 2004)
What Weak Readers Need to Diminish Early Reading Failure

1. Strong core classroom instruction

2. Screening to identify children at risk of reading failure

3. Appropriate and extra instruction that matches at-risk students’ needs

(Torgesen, 2004)
1. Strong core classroom instruction

- Early reading instruction should include explicit teaching to build phonemic awareness and phonemic decoding skills, fluency in word recognition and text processing, reading comprehension strategies, oral language vocabulary, spelling, and writing skills

- Regular use of small instructional groups
2. Screening to identify children at risk of reading failure

• Early assessments include letter-name knowledge, phonemic awareness, letter-sound knowledge, and vocabulary
• By the end of first grade assessments should include measures of oral reading fluency
• In second and third grade, word-level reading should continue to be monitored as well as measures of reading comprehension

• Screening and progress monitoring measures are typically administered several times a year
3. Appropriate and extra instruction that matches at-risk students’ needs

Instruction for at-risk children must be more *explicit*, more *intensive*, and more *supportive* than for other children.