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# Everybody's selling it—But just what is explicit, systematic phonics instruction?

The authors explore the meaning of the term explicit, systematic phonics and, following a teacher survey on the subject, propose a definition of their own.

As reading teachers, we are often frustrated by the fads and extremes that tend to plague our field. Following successful marketing strategies, the textbook industry has recognized the power of labels in selling. In materials for beginning reading instruction, the essential label is *explicit, systematic phonics instruction*. For the past several years this phrase has been attached to almost every beginning reading product including software, basal readers, teacher resource books, supplements, and manipulatives. Like the word *balance*, this phrase has become so overused and misused that its meaning has become unclear.

Presumably, everyone knows what *explicit, systematic phonics* is, and everyone shares the same definition. In reality, people are interpreting this phrase to mean many different things, and companies are applying the label to many different types of reading programs. We believe that the use of this term has been driven by a number of forces, including monetary, political, and ideological. In addition, we note that U.S. federal legislation requires that the phonics component in federally funded initiatives be explicit and systematic (e.g., No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, Title I, Part B, 2002).

Whatever the reasons for its emergence, the term needs greater clarification, especially because schools are being asked to sort through a plethora of programs, most claiming to be explicit and systematic (Hiebert, Menon, & Martin, 2005;

Hoffman, Sailors, & Patterson, 2002). We feel that some clear information about this term would be helpful. Although we recognize that there are many forces bringing it to the forefront, we have not chosen to explore these here. Instead, our goal is to pragmatically investigate and define the term, realizing that school personnel must choose programs based on explicit, systematic criteria. In this article, we will unpack the phrase by describing its history and by investigating how teachers we surveyed applied it to specific practices. In conclusion, we describe some surprising insights about the nature of explicit, systematic phonics instruction.

This article contains five sections, each relating to the overarching purposes. In the first section we describe phonics—what it is, why it is useful, and what role it plays in best practice reading instruction. In the second section, we trace the history of the phrase *explicit, systematic phonics instruction*. In the third section, we describe our own understandings of explicit, systematic phonics instruction. In the fourth section, we juxtapose historical and personal understandings of the term with opinions of 362 surveyed primary teachers. In the final section, we discuss our findings and then make conclusions based on all data sources.

## Phonics instruction

### What is phonics?

The term *phonics* has two meanings. First, phonics describes the letters or symbols used to encode a language's spoken components (Venezky, 1999). By this definition phonics is a system for encoding speech sounds into written symbols. The second meaning, more closely tied to educational

practice, refers to teaching learners the relationships between letters and sounds and how to use this system to recognize words (Adams, 1990; Harris & Hodges, 1995; Stahl, Duffy-Hester, & Stahl, 1998).

Phonics is an extremely important component of literacy instruction because English is fundamentally an alphabetic code (Moats, 2000; Venezky, 1999); spoken language is rendered into a written form using letters to represent the sounds in words. Not all languages have an alphabetic script. For example, in the Japanese language, words are encoded at the syllable level using a pictographic base. However, for children learning to read English, phonics instruction unlocks a large proportion of the system of English orthography. When bound morphological units like inflections (e.g., *-ing*, *-s*, *-ed*), prefixes (e.g., *pre-*, *un-*), suffixes (e.g., *-ize*, *-ly*), and Greek or Latin roots (e.g., *cred*, *script*) are layered on top of phonics instruction, an even greater proportion of the English orthography system is exposed.

### **How do readers use phonics?**

Answering this question requires an understanding of how letters combine to form written words. Educational psychologist D.B. Elkonin studied how children learn to read in the alphabetic language of Russian. Elkonin (1973) advanced the notion that the written word is a model of the spoken word. “Characters follow one another spatially in the same succession as sounds do in time in the spoken word” (p. 558). In English the letter-to-sound written model can be a one-to-one correspondence (e.g., *bag*, *step*, *trip*); a two-to-one, letter-to-sound pattern (e.g., *this*, *beat*); or a more complex pattern (e.g., *straight*, *ax*, *like*).

However, English is more complex than some other alphabetic languages because it contains words that are morphophonemic (Johnston, 2001; Venezky, 1999). In addition to the letter-to-sound representations and patterns, other meaning units are layered and their derivational spellings roughly maintained across words regardless of pronunciation (e.g., *sign* and *signal*; *five* and *fifth*; *teeth* and *teethe*). Thus, English spellings can be made up of three layers: a straight sound layer (e.g., *bit*, *got*); a pattern layer that varies in complexity (e.g., *chick*, *lake*, *straight*); and a meaning layer, which maintains unusual and

irregular sound–symbol spellings due to morphemes (e.g., *hymn* and *hymnal*).

Contributing to the difficulty is the etymological distinction of English. Having evolved as a language spoken on the British Isles, English contains the occasional borrowed word that combines straight letter sounds with orthographic references to other romance languages (e.g., *ballet*, *chalet*, *bi-jou*). Nonetheless, phonics plays a necessary role in the reading acquisition process because the use of phonics encompasses each of these layers of English spellings. To illustrate, consider the word *ballet*. A reader might use letter–sound knowledge for the first three phonemes (/b/ /a/ /l/). The second syllable poses more difficulty. A reader might try phonics and come up with a pronunciation that incorporates a short *e* sound, or a reader might try an analogy to a high-frequency word, say *Chevrolet* (Moustafa, 1995, 1997). However, despite its orthographic distinction, *ballet* is not pronounced as *zebra*, or *cattle*, or *shape*. Knowledge of letter and sound correspondences precludes that from happening. Eventually the attention to letter and sound correspondences through the application of phonics to decode unknown words helps the beginner master a multitude of spelling patterns and become a fluent reader.

Reading involves recognizing words and then understanding the individual and collective meanings of those words, with the ultimate goal being to get to the meaning of the text. Phonics, along with other strategies, is used to recognize words. Ehri (Ehri & McCormick, 1988; Ehri & Sweet, 1991) suggested four strategies that a reader might use to recognize a word: (1) predicting—using context and linguistic knowledge to make a likely guess; (2) decoding—converting individual letters and patterns of letters into sounds and blending these sounds; (3) analogy—using word parts including morphemes to analyze the structure of a word; and (4) recall—retrieving a known word from memory. Decoding and analogy strategies both require knowledge of phonics.

We believe that there are three very important points to make about word recognition and phonics. First, phonics, like any other word-recognition tool, is used to assist the reader in obtaining an approximate pronunciation for a written word that, when checked for a match with his or her store of known spoken words and the context, gets the

**TABLE 1**  
**Approaches to phonics instruction**

<i>Explicit</i> contrasted with	<i>implicit</i> (Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, & Wilkinson, 1985).
<i>Explicit, systematic</i> contrasted with	<i>embedded</i> (Dahl, Scharer, Lawson, & Grogan, 1999).
<i>Direct code</i> contrasted with	<i>embedded code and implicit code</i> (Foorman, Francis, Fletcher, Schatschneider, & Mehta, 1998).
<i>Systematic</i> contrasted with	<i>intrinsic</i> (Chall, 1967); <i>opportunistic</i> (Gates, cited in Bond & Dykstra, 1967); and <i>less systematic</i> (Stahl, Duffy-Hester, & Stahl, 1998).
<i>Systematic, intensive</i> contrasted with	<i>holistically oriented</i> (Strickland, 1998).

reader one step closer to the meaning (Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, & Wilkinson, 1985). Second, phonics is a means to an end and not an end unto itself. Third, a sight strategy eventually predominates as readers become more and more skilled.

The goal of word recognition is the predominant use of a sight-word strategy. According to Ehri (1980, 1994), readers use prediction, analogy, and decoding temporarily as they fuse the spellings of words into memory. Once the fusion occurs, words become recognizable by sight. Use of phonics as a word-recognition tool not only provides readers with a temporary strategy for recognizing words, but the process of word recognition in this manner also focuses a beginning readers' attention on the configurations of letters that make up individual words. In the process, they store information about the spellings of individual words (Ehri, 1980). According to Stahl et al. (1998), "early and systematic emphasis on teaching children to decode words leads to better achievement than a later and more haphazard approach" (p. 339).

## The history of explicit, systematic phonics

We wanted to understand how the term *explicit, systematic phonics* came to be so popular. We traced its origin historically through studies of phonics instruction (Adams, 1990; Bond & Dykstra, 1967; Chall, 1967; Dahl, Scharer, Lawson, & Grogan 1999; Foorman, Francis, Fletcher, Schatschneider, & Mehta, 1998), policy documents (Anderson et al., 1985; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998), and reviews of phonics instruc-

tion (Cunningham & Cunningham, 2002; National Institute of Child Health and Human Development [NICHD], 2000; Stahl et al., 1998; Strickland, 1998). *Explicit* and *systematic* were used separately in reference to phonics instruction up until 1990, when Adams used the term *explicit, systematic* to describe recommendations for phonics instruction from a series of studies she reviewed. To understand how researchers have characterized the term *explicit, systematic*, we searched for documents using either word. We then examined how the two words were defined in these documents and which terms were contrasted with *explicit, systematic*. In other words, we sought to understand what researchers meant by *explicit, systematic* by looking at both examples and nonexamples. In Table 1 we simply report the terms researchers used in connection with approaches to phonics instruction. In Table 2 we have cataloged the meanings associated with explicit and systematic approaches.

More recently, the phrase *explicit, systematic phonics instruction* has been associated with the National Reading Panel (NRP) report (NICHD, 2000). We acknowledge that the NRP report has been both heavily critiqued and defended by multiple constituencies (Coles, 2003; Cunningham, 2001; Garan, 2002; Shanahan, 2003), and we reference the report here because of its influence and impact on U.S. schools. With respect to phonics, the NRP report reiterates findings from earlier reviews of research (Adams, 1990; Snow et al., 1998; Stahl et al., 1998). The definition of explicit, systematic phonics instruction advanced in the NRP report is broader and less dichotomized than what we found historically to be the descriptions of phonics instruction associated separately with the

**TABLE 2**  
**Meanings associated with the various approaches to phonics instruction**

Explicit	Implicit/embedded
<p>Children are taught letter–sound relationships and build toward whole words (Strickland, 1998).</p> <p>Children are asked to produce sounds of letters that appear in isolation (Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, &amp; Wilkinson, 1985).</p> <p>Children blend isolated sounds (Anderson et al., 1985).</p> <p>Children receive explicit instruction in the sound structure of oral language (Snow, Burns, &amp; Griffin, 1998).</p> <p>Instruction is direct and involves learner practice (Dahl, Scharer, Lawson, &amp; Grogan, 1999).</p> <p>Practice materials are crafted to emphasize specific phonics concepts (Dahl et al., 1999).</p> <p>Instruction is in letter–sound relationships, and practice is in decodable text (Foorman, Francis, Fletcher, Schatschneider, &amp; Mehta, 1998).</p>	<p>Children learn letter–sound relationships inductively by analyzing known words (Anderson et al., 1985).</p> <p>Sounds associated with letters should not be pronounced in isolation (Anderson et al., 1985).</p> <p>Phonics is viewed as one of the cueing systems (Dahl et al., 1999).</p> <p>Phonics instruction is embedded in ongoing reading and writing activities (Dahl et al., 1999).</p> <p>Teaching of word elements is ad hoc and random (Dahl et al., 1999).</p> <p>Phonemic awareness and spelling patterns are taught through predictable books (Foorman et al., 1998).</p>
Systematic	Intrinsic/holistic
<p>Phonics is usually taught</p> <p>(a) before sight words.</p> <p>(b) separately from connected reading (Chall, 1967).</p> <p>Emphasis is on teaching sound values of letters (Chall, 1967).</p> <p>Usually a synthetic approach is taken (Chall, 1967).</p> <p>Instruction is sequenced and code driven (Strickland, 1998).</p>	<p>Sight-word reading is stressed (Chall, 1967).</p> <p>Meaningful reading is supreme consideration (Chall, 1967).</p> <p>No separate period is set aside for phonics practice (Chall, 1967).</p> <p>Sound values of letters are learned through analyzing known sight words (Chall, 1967).</p> <p>More frequently an analytic approach is taken (Bond &amp; Dykstra, 1967).</p> <p>Context and picture clues are stressed over word analysis (Chall, 1967).</p> <p>Instruction is based on students' needs as determined by the teacher (Chall, 1967).</p>

words *explicit* and *systematic*. The report lists a range of approaches that all fall under the umbrella of explicit and systematic phonics instruction, including synthetic phonics, analytic phonics, embedded phonics, analogy phonics, onset–rime phonics, and phonics through spelling.

Historically, explicit, systematic phonics instruction has converged upon three features. What seem to be the common elements of all explicit and systematic approaches are (a) a curriculum with a specified, sequential set of phonics elements; (b) instruction that is direct, precise, and unambiguous; and (c) practice using phonics to read words, although the NRP reported that the de-

gree of the decodability of the text designated for practice was not specified.

## Our understandings of explicit, systematic phonics instruction

The term *systematic* contains two important connotations: scope and sequence. Scope includes the content of the phonics instruction, the range of letter–sound correspondences (e.g., /t/, /ar/, /a/) covered. Sequence defines an order for teaching letter–sound correspondences. First one sound or group of sounds will be taught and then another, and

so on. If we wanted to determine if systematic instruction were taking place, a single observation in a classroom would not suffice. A systematic feature would extend across a period of time (e.g., weeks, months, grade levels). To determine whether systematic instruction was taking place, we would have to talk to teachers about the sequence of their phonics instruction. We could also consult the scope and sequence in a reading program or observe the content of the lessons over time.

The term *explicit* refers to lesson delivery. If a lesson is explicit, then the teacher tells children directly what she or he is trying to teach. For example, a teacher might say, “These two letters, *ch*, make the sound /ch/.” In contrast, a less explicit approach might sound like this, “Look at these words, *church*, *chew*, *chick*, *chunk*. What sounds do you hear at the beginning of these words? What letters do you see at the beginning of these words?” The learner must identify the two letters at the beginning of each word, analyze the sound at the beginning of the word, and then make the connection between the letters and the sound. The teacher does not make the connection for the learner directly. If we wanted to make a determination about whether or not a teacher was using explicit approaches, we could observe one lesson. Explicitness, then, is a feature of the teaching strategy being used and not the sequence of lessons. Strategies and techniques tend to be more or less explicit. Programs and curricula tend to be more or less systematic. Because the words *explicit* and *systematic* have been used together so much, people forget that they are not synonymous.

## Our inquiry

We decided to do a survey in order to obtain an answer to the following question: What are teachers’ perceptions about practices that are explicit and systematic?

### Method

After having researched the term *explicit*, *systematic phonics* and come to our own understandings about its instruction, we were very interested in how experienced reading teachers perceived explicit, systematic phonics instruction. Specifically, we wanted to move away from theoretical ques-

tions to very practical ones. We wanted to understand the kinds of methods that teachers believe to be explicit and systematic. We had two questions:

- What are teachers’ basic opinions about how phonics should be taught?
- Which phonics teaching practices, if any, do teachers judge to be more explicit and systematic?

We surveyed primary teachers instructing children in grades K–3. We designed a questionnaire and sent it out to 1,000 randomly selected members of the International Reading Association. Surveys were returned by 382 respondents, a response rate of 38.2%. The return rate was in line with other U.S. surveys (Baumann, Hoffman, Duffy-Hester, & Ro, 2000; Commeyras & DeGross, 1998; Fresch, 2003). Of the surveys returned, 362 were usable (i.e., the teachers responded to the questions above and responses were clear).

Only a few of the items in the survey related to our questions here. (The entire survey had 38 items.) Table 3 contains the two survey items reported in this article. We asked respondents to report personal orientations toward phonics using an item that had been used in a previously administered survey (Baumann et al., 2000). This item requested that they select a choice that best matched their own opinion about phonics instruction. We also asked questions about number of years of experience and other demographic information. In a Likert-type question we required teachers to rate various practices as *highly*, *somewhat*, or *not at all* systematic and explicit. Respondents were also offered *unsure* as a choice because we realized that they might not know some methods.

We identified six phonics teaching methods that we have seen commonly in schools or that we have found to be integral to popular curriculum packages or teacher resource books: (1) songs, (2) word sorts, (3) making words, (4) scripted teacher directions, (5) worksheets, and (6) games. As we defined it, explicit, systematic phonics instruction has multiple features, and yet we embedded the words *systematic* and *explicit* together in our first survey item. (See Table 3.) We did this because we wanted to contrast the impressions of teachers with the labeling practices of publishers. We have seen the “explicit, systematic phonics instruction” label

**TABLE 3**  
**Survey items related to systematic and explicit phonics practices**

1. In your opinion which of the following phonics activities are *systematic and explicit*?

Activity	Highly systematic and explicit	Somewhat systematic and explicit	Not at all systematic and explicit	Unsure
Songs	Highly	Somewhat	Not at all	Unsure
Word sorts	Highly	Somewhat	Not at all	Unsure
Making words	Highly	Somewhat	Not at all	Unsure
Scripted teacher directions	Highly	Somewhat	Not at all	Unsure
Worksheets	Highly	Somewhat	Not at all	Unsure
Games	Highly	Somewhat	Not at all	Unsure

2. Which of the following statements best describes your preferred method for teaching phonics? *Fill in one.*

- Synthetic phonics (systematic instruction in which students are taught letter-sound correspondences first and then are taught how to decode words)
- Analytic phonics word sorts and word study (systematic instruction in which students are taught some sight words first and then phonics generalization from these words)
- Instruction in phonics by way of word families or phonograms (e.g., *-all, -ain, -ake* words)
- Only as needed (not systematic instruction—students are taught phonics analysis skills as the need arises)
- In the context of literature (phonics skills are presented and taught through trade books or literature anthologies)
- In the context of writing and spelling (phonics skills are presented and taught through children's writing)

applied to all of the aforementioned methods lists by publishers, but we wanted to see if teachers would apply it to certain methods more than others. In that survey question, we purposely did not define the terms *systematic* and *explicit* because we wanted to gather respondents' perceptions of them, not an application of our own perceptions.

## Findings

### **Opinions about phonics instruction**

Demographically, the sample represented a very experienced set of teachers from all of the major regions of the United States. Over 70% of the sample had more than 11 years of experience. In addition, over 40% had greater than 20 years of experience. Forty-seven percent of the sample taught one grade (K–3). About 8% taught in a multigrade, special education, or other setting, and 43% of the sample classified themselves as reading

teachers (including Title I teachers in the federally funded compensatory education program and reading specialists). All teachers taught students daily.

Tables 4 and 5 show the results of the survey. Table 4 communicates respondents' approaches to phonics instruction (survey item 2). Teachers were asked to describe their opinions about phonics instruction using only one of the following descriptors: synthetic, analytic, word families, only as needed, in the context of literature, and in the context of writing and spelling. Over 50% of respondents chose synthetic or analytic. These options both contained the word *systematic* in the description. Two other choices were selected at a rate greater than 20%: word families and in the context of writing and spelling. The option only as needed was chosen by less than 5% of the sample. That option reflects an incidental approach to phonics instruction and included the words *not systematic* in the description. By choosing other options, at least 95% of the teachers showed a preference for phonics instruction that was not incidental. Thus, we can judge from these

**TABLE 4**  
**Best description of approaches to phonics instruction (survey item 2)**

Approach	Frequency of choice	Percentage of respondents
Analytic phonics/ word sorts	97	26.79
Synthetic phonics	94	25.96
Word families/ phonograms	82	22.65
Writing and spelling	75	20.72
Context of literature	52	14.36
Only as needed	15	4.14

Note. Although this was a forced choice item, some respondents made two selections. Thus the total percentage equals 114.62.

responses that many teachers believed in a systematic approach to phonics instruction.

### **Practices judged to be explicit and systematic**

Table 5 shows how teachers applied the term *explicit, systematic phonics instruction* (survey item 1). Keep in mind that we were interested in teachers' *perceptions* about how the term could be applied, not in teachers' definitions of certain methods or programs as more, or less, systematic and explicit.

The findings showed several trends. First, we noted the percentage of persons using the choice *unsure*. This ranged from 6% to 14% depending on the activity. In addition, we noted the percentage of respondents who chose not to rank particular activities within the question (i.e., respondents who did respond to at least one method in the question but did not respond to others). Together, the choices *not at all* and *unsure* accounted for 10% to 20% of respondents on any question. This seemed to be a high percentage. It could mean that many respondents were as unclear about the term *systematic and explicit* when applied to phonics as we were. However, it might also mean that they needed more information to address the question in the first item of our survey. Some respondents wrote comments beside this question, including, "What's your defi-

inition of systematic, explicit phonics?" and "It depends on how they are used." Both these unsolicited comments and the quantitative data supported the premise of this article; more information is needed.

Figure 1 compares ratings given to various practices. Making words and word sorts were judged to be *highly* systematic and explicit by the majority of respondents (over 50%). Only a small percentage of teachers judged these two activities to be not systematic and explicit. The majority of respondents perceived games and songs to be *somewhat* explicit and systematic. About 50% applied the *somewhat* rating to songs, and over 50% applied it to games. Ironically, two practices that we expected to be judged as *highly* systematic and explicit were not rated that way at all. We expected most respondents to rate worksheets and scripted teacher directions *highly* because both specify the language, topic, and word examples to be used in the instruction. Scripts give teachers the language for their phonics lessons, and worksheets specify the nature of the child practice activities. The methods themselves are very explicit. However, the majority of the respondents used the *somewhat* rating for worksheets, followed by *not at all*. Scripted teacher directions were judged to be systematic and explicit almost equally in the categories *highly* and *somewhat*.

### **Discussion**

The inquiries led us to some unpredicted insights about the term *explicit, systematic phonics instruction*. In short, the survey data highlighted the multifaceted nature of systematic and explicit instruction. Teachers responded in complex ways that emphasized features of phonics instruction that we had overlooked in our original examination of explicit and systematic instruction. The responses helped us to tease out some of the unexplored nuances in this term.

**Characteristics of strategies judged to be highly systematic and explicit.** We were initially surprised by our findings, but they led us to make three discoveries about explicit, systematic phonics instruction. First, the two strategies identified as *highly* explicit and systematic require teacher-student interaction. In a making-words lesson, for example, a teacher must be actively conducting and

**TABLE 5**  
**Percentage of teachers responding in each category (survey item 1)**

Activity	Rating				
	Highly	Somewhat	Not at all	Unsure	Missing
Songs	14.09	47.24	19.06	12.98	6.63
Word sorts	50.55	35.08	3.31	6.63	4.43
Making words	54.69	27.07	2.26	11.32	4.71
Scripted teacher directions	32.59	30.11	16.02	14.64	6.64
Worksheets	15.74	37.57	29.83	9.94	6.92
Games	14.09	56.63	13.26	9.67	6.35

monitoring it. This active teaching involves calling words, circulating, verifying student responses, and asking students to report spellings. In contrast, worksheets usually involve a teacher reviewing the requirements of the worksheet and the students completing the worksheet individually. In this scenario, students receive feedback sometime after they complete the worksheets. This procedure seemed less active to us than making words or word sorts. Both word sorts and making-word lessons require more planning and forethought than worksheets or scripts. A teacher must, at a minimum, select words to be sorted, whereas worksheets and scripts are premade. Making words does not allow a teacher to sit at a desk and monitor a class; it requires active instruction.

Second, word sorts and making words require students to be actively engaged at the individual level. The key to both of these strategies seems to be that few in the class can simply “coast.” Each child has his or her own set of manipulatives and must participate. Being actively engaged in sorting your own set of words, for example, is much more powerful than singing along to words with an entire class. Furthermore, because each of these strategies incorporates manipulatives, learning is concrete. That’s an important component for young children.

Third, these strategies require individual accountability and involvement. For example, students must individually spell words during a making-words lesson. Likewise, with word sorting, students sort, re-sort, and record words. Thus, *highly* systematic and explicit approaches were

characterized by direct teaching, high-level student engagement, and individual accountability.

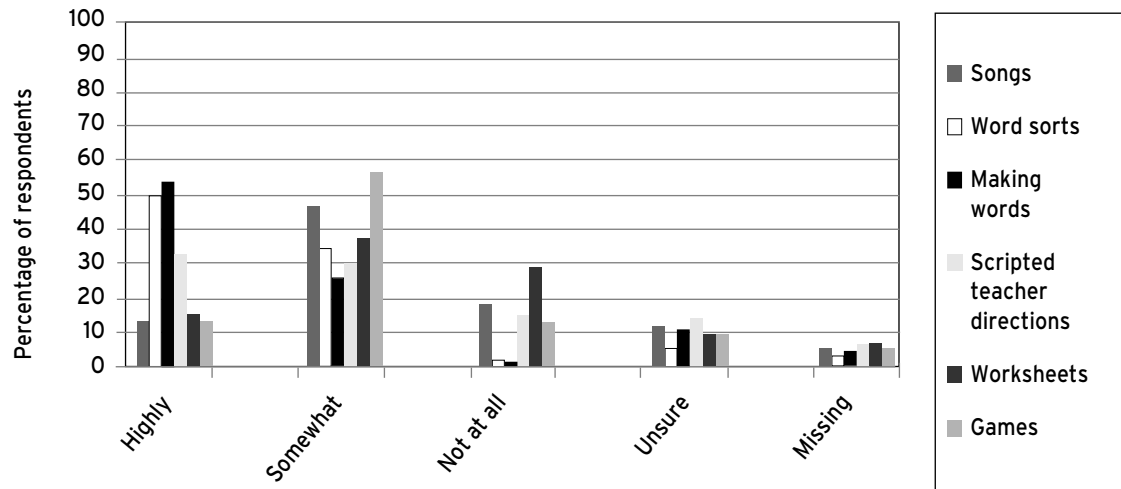
**Predominant approaches to phonics instruction.**

The results of the questions about predominant approaches to phonics instruction indicated that teachers favored approaches that were explicit and systematic. Over 50% selected statements that included the words *systematic instruction* in the descriptor. We found the results of the approach and practice items, juxtaposed one with the other, to be very interesting. (See Tables 4 and 5.) Word sorting is characterized by an analytic approach, and yet respondents did not select the *analytic phonics* statement (26.79%) at the same rate that they judged word sorts to be *highly* systematic and explicit (50.55%). Making words relies on children spelling words, yet the percentage of teachers judging it to be *highly* systematic and explicit (54.69%) did not intersect exactly with those choosing writing and spelling (20.72%).

Findings like this forced us to think more carefully about practices and opinions. We realized that a range of philosophical orientations could be subsumed under explicit and systematic phonics instruction. Clearly, certain philosophical orientations like teaching phonics only as needed do not represent a systematic approach. However, synthetic, analytic, analogy-based, and spelling-based philosophies could all be considered systematic. The NRP’s finding that many different approaches could be considered explicit and systematic supports this notion.



**FIGURE 1**  
Comparison of ratings by practice



**Comparison of findings with historical interpretations.** Historically, explicit, systematic phonics instruction can be characterized as a deductive approach. Children are taught letter–sound relationships and blending to sound out words. They learn sound–symbol relationships by being told the sounds are represented by different letters, rather than being guided to discover these relationships by analyzing known words. Emphasis appears to have been placed on representing the sound structures of words encountered in print, rather than on studying spelling patterns that occur across words. Clearly, a dichotomy between explicit and systematic and other forms of word study was portrayed in the literature we surveyed. Yet in our study teachers rated as systematic and explicit two activities that, by definition, are more inductive than deductive and focus on spelling patterns. Thus, our findings suggest a different definition for explicit, systematic phonics instruction. The following definition arises from practices reported by teachers and our own survey of literature.

Explicit, systematic phonics instruction is instruction matched to students' developmental levels. It incorporates a scope and sequence for content delivery and a

variety of word study activities. Such instruction promotes student engagement and accountability through direct teaching.

**Explicit instruction can be combined with other approaches.** Although it was historically the case, explicit instruction should no longer be contrasted with inductive approaches. Although it is always important to be systematic, explicit and inductive approaches can be blended in skillful teaching. At times, teachers might want to be explicit and explain directly, but *before* explaining, they might want students to try to figure something out on their own. They might want students to observe a phenomenon and generalize a principle. For instance, in conducting a word sort, a teacher might want a child to examine a set of words and make a discovery about them. This kind of learning is extremely powerful. A student might discover, “Look these words all have *ar*, and these all have *er*.” However, to clarify the goal of the sort, the teacher would conclude the lesson with more explicit instruction by saying,

Yes, you have noticed that *car*, *bar*, *tart*, *cart*, and *darn* all have the /ar/ sound, which is spelled with *ar*. *Her*, *term*, *jerk*, and *Bert* all have the /er/ sound, which is

spelled with *er*. Let's underline the *ar* and the *er* in each of these words.

This direct clarification is important for two reasons. First, not all children will understand exactly what we are trying to teach them. Some will only partially construct the content. Others might need help with the entire content. To illustrate, the important pattern in this sort is *ar* and *er*, but a child might notice only the *a* and the *e*. By indicating that the pattern includes *r*, the teacher is being clear and explicit. Second, the children who struggle will often not make the connections that we expect. If the teacher ends the lesson without making some explanation, it will not reach everyone no matter how powerful the inductive techniques are.

We have described a lesson that began with an inductive approach and moved to explicit instruction. Phonics instruction can also begin with explicit instruction and then challenge students with inductive approaches. Making words is an example of a lesson strategy in which instruction moves from explicit to inductive. The heart of a making-words lesson is very explicit. Children are asked to spell words and are told if their answers are correct. However, toward the end of a making-words lesson, students are asked to use all of their letters to form a “secret word.” This component is based on methods that are more inductive because children are asked to figure something out. In both of these examples, teachers might use approaches that are less explicit in order to engage students and build on their curiosity. However, they should not assume that all students would make connections in the lesson. Explicit teaching should be used to clarify the lesson's exact goals.

### **Limitations**

We believe that our study has one limitation. Although in our survey item we embedded the words *systematic* and *explicit* together, we believe them to have distinct and separate meanings. Embedding them fit our purpose, which was to investigate whether or not teachers applied them differently to different instructional practices. However, the item does not enable separate judgments to be made about systematic methods versus explicit methods. If asked to rate systematic and explicit features separately, teachers might have indicated that certain methods were highly

systematic but not highly explicit. The survey results might have also been just the same.

We thought that constructing the survey item with separate categories for systematic and explicit ratings would require defining these terms, and we did not want to bias respondents to our definitions. We wanted them to apply their own. We believe that providing definitions might have changed the results and obscured the insights that the data yielded.

### **Conclusions**

After seeing the phrase *explicit, systematic phonics instruction* attached to a great many instructional products, used in policy documents, and argued over by researchers, we decided to examine how practicing teachers deciphered it. We set out to sample teachers' opinions about explicit, systematic phonics instruction. The majority of teachers actually showed a preference for systematic approaches to phonics instruction by selecting choices such as synthetic, analytic, or analogy-based to describe their predominant teaching strategy. They connected *systematic and explicit* most often to two practices, making words and word sorting, and least often to worksheets. In so doing, our surveyed teachers indicated some important features of explicit, systematic instruction. Essentially, they chose strategies that required planning, direct teaching, high-level student engagement, developmental insight, and individual student accountability. In their choices, teachers seemed to demonstrate that explicit, systematic phonics instruction should be engaging and responsive. Although such instruction has historically been characterized rather narrowly as a deductive process in which children are directly taught letter–sound relationships, results from our study indicate that teachers interpret it in a broader way.

Explicit phonics instruction is important, but good teaching should not exclude inductive approaches entirely. At times, inductive approaches can be combined with more direct teaching. Explicit and systematic *teaching* is also important, but only as it relates to *learning*. Teaching may be explicit and systematic without the desired results. For this reason, good phonics instruction must be linked with ongoing assessment. In order to make sure that phonics instruction is having the desired effect, teachers must assess students and use data to shape their instruction.

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