



Teaching phonics ‘first’ is not new

May 2021

Those who are not reading and writing teachers or researchers, or those who have not studied the history of teaching reading and writing could be excused for thinking that the teaching of phonics, and in particular teaching it ‘first and fast’ and in isolation of meaningful texts, is a new development in the field. It may seem to those new to the field that early childhood teachers in past decades have not taught phonics as part of their reading programs. This is a misrepresentation, and it is the topic of this Foundation for Learning and Literacy Fact Check.

The current emphasis on synthetic phonics in policy and public debate suggests that teaching phonics is a recent phenomenon in early childhood classrooms. It also suggests that teaching phonics ‘first’ is the most successful approach to teaching young learners how to read. Advocates for synthetic phonics argue that initial reading instruction must first concentrate on grapheme-phoneme correspondences using a synthetic phonics approach because English is an alphabetic system in which letters represent sounds (see for example, Rastle, & Taylor, 2018). According to these ideas, learners must start with the smallest units and then learn to blend and synthesise the sounds to form words with consonant-vowel-consonant patterns, before learning to combine words into sentences and sentences into longer texts. This approach sees meaning-making as inconsequential in the initial stages of learning to read, and only important once children have mastered letter- sound correspondence.

Yet this approach to teaching reading is not new. Over the last century, there have been many programs developed that advocate that the teaching of phonics should happen first in the reading process.

An interesting research study that focused particularly on reading in Australia, *Teaching Reading in Australia*, undertaken by Professors Bill Green, Phil Cormack and Annette Patterson (2009-10) investigated how children in Australia have been taught to read during the time period from the beginning of early white settlement of Australia through to 1939. They found many examples of approaches to teaching reading being introduced and later abandoned, and argued that successful learning to read should always involve much more than skills acquisition. They also argued that the context, the relationship between the teacher and the child, and the reading material are also central to successful learning to read.

As one example of a phonics first approach, the Ellis method (Reid, 2006) was described in 1922, and encouraged beginning with drilling elements of language in isolation despite the fact that they were meaningless to children. In this approach, over time these elements were supposed to be combined into words. However, Archibald (cited in Reid & Green, 2004) notes, that by the time this happened both learners and their teachers were observed to have already lost interest in the process of learning to read.

Over the years many commercial programs have been developed based on the premise that intensive phonics taught first is the key to helping all children learn to read. These include programs such as Hay Wingo, Open Court, Jolly Phonics, Ants in the Apple, Words in Colour, Mini-Lit and Multi-Lit to name just a few. Yet the *In Teachers Hands* research undertaken with 2000 children in the first two years of schooling across Australia (Louden, Rohl, Barrett Pugh, Brown, Cairney, Elderfield, House, Meiers, Rivalland and Rowe, 2006) demonstrated that, while phonics was taught in all classes involved in their study, the more effective teachers “were usually observed teaching word level skills and knowledge within a wider context, such as a theme or topic being studied, a shared book, a writing lesson or a spelling lesson, so that the purpose of learning phonics was made clear and relevant ” (p. vii).

Accompanying books in these commercial programs, often called ‘decodable readers,’ have been contrived to concentrate on the letter-sound relationships that have been introduced at a particular level of the program. Phonics first advocates argue that students will be able to read such texts accurately after their phonics lessons, and that repeated successful readings of these will lead to automatic decoding, word recognition and reading fluency.

Given the absolute necessity of foundational word reading skills, it might be tempting to think that these skills can be taught prior to building reading comprehension. However, much research supports a simultaneous, rather than sequential, model of reading instruction (Kinnunen, Vauras, & Niemi, 1998). What this means is that as young learners begin to read texts, comprehension instruction alongside of phonics and other foundational skills instruction has an important place in quality reading programs. For example, Duke, Ward and Pearson (2021) recently reiterated that comprehension monitoring provides a form of feedback to readers about whether they have read a word accurately, and as such teaching comprehension is an important part of any reading program

The most recent iteration of a phonics-first approach to teaching reading can be seen in policy directives in both England and Australia. These directives insist that all children must, or at least should, be taught synthetic phonics first. As part of these most recent arguments for synthetic phonics, many of those who privilege these approaches also argue that all 6-year-old children should sit a synthetic phonics ‘check’ consisting of 40 words (20 of which are pseudo or made up words) to be read in order to check their ability

to synthesise sounds out of context. To be successful in these 'checks', children must show they are not relying on word meaning or prior experience with the word in order to successfully recode it. This is how the inclusion of pseudo-words is justified. This process has proven to be confusing for those children who can already read as they automatically try to make sense of the words and consequently read the pseudo-words incorrectly. Those children who are learning English as an additional language also find the check very difficult. In the United Kingdom, where the phonics check has been undertaken since 2012, research shows there has been no improvement in reading levels of young children (for example, Clark, 2017; Darnell, Solity & Wall, 2017).

In summary, we need to focus on meeting the needs of individual children in helping them learn to read rather than teaching 'a method of reading' (Reid, 2006, p.16). No one method can be the 'right' method for all children – quality teachers will draw on a diverse range of strategies and approaches to teach to the diverse needs of the children in their classrooms.

References

- Clark, M.M. (2017). Synthetic phonics and baseline assessment under the searchlight in 2017: Are they value for money in a time of cuts? *Education Journal*, 299, 16-19.
- Darnell, C., Solity, J. & Wall, H. (2017). Decoding the phonics screening check. *British Educational Research Journal* 43(3), 24-25.
- Duke, N., Ward, A., & Pearson, P.D. (2021 in press). The Science of Reading Comprehension Instruction. *The Reading Teacher*.
- Green, B., Cormack, P., & Patterson, A. (2009). Re-reading the reading lesson: episodes in the history of reading pedagogy. *Oxford Review of Education*, 39(3), 329-344.
- Kinnunen, R., Vauras, M., & Niemi, P. (1998). Comprehension monitoring in beginning readers. *Scientific Studies of Reading*, 2(4), 353–375.
- Louden, W., Rohl, M., Barrett Pugh, C., Brown, C., Cairney, T., Elderfield, J., House, H., Meiers, M., Rivalland, J., & Rowe, K. (2005). *In Teachers Hands. Effective Literacy Teaching Practices in the Early Years of Schooling*. Edith Cowan University.
- Rastle, K. & Taylor, J. (2018). Print-sound regularities are more important than print-meaning regularities in the initial stages of learning to read: Response to Bowers & Bowers (2018). *Quarterly Journal of Experimental Psychology*, 17(7), 1501-1505.
- Reid, J. (2006). Reading stories. Understanding our professional history as teachers. In R. Ewing (Ed.). *Beyond the reading wars. A balanced approach to helping children learn to read*. PETAA.
- Reid, J., & Green, B. (2004). Displacing method(s)? Historical perspective in the teaching of reading. *Journal of Language and Literacy*. 27(1), 12-26.

Related Touchstones 5, 6 and 10