

Systematic Approach to Phonics in Balanced Reading Programs

Question:

1. I am looking for research into the impact of a systematic approach to phonics as part of a balanced reading program.

Report:

Following an established REL-NEI Reference Desk research protocol, we conducted a search for research reports as well as descriptive and policy-oriented briefs and articles in this area. The sources included federally funded organizations, additional research institutions, several educational research databases, and a general Internet search using Google and other search engines. We also searched for appropriate organizations that may act as resources on this issue. We have not done an evaluation of these organizations or the resources themselves, but offer these resources to you for your information only.

Our researchers found several resources related to the impact of systematic approaches to phonics as part of balanced reading programs. For example, one study found that “Systematic phonics instruction within a broad literacy curriculum appears to have a greater effect on children’s progress in reading than whole language or whole word approaches” (Torgerson, 2006; see resource below). Another study found that “Any phonics program should be carefully paced and sequenced to appropriately challenge children, but should be only one (albeit very important) part of a balanced literacy approach which involves work on exploring and understanding a range of texts, writing, spelling” (Savage, 2008; see resource below). Furthermore, another study’s “Findings provided solid support for the conclusion that systematic phonics instruction makes a more significant contribution to children’s growth in reading than do alternative programs providing unsystematic or no phonics instruction” (NRP, 2000; see resource below).

We focused on identifying resources that specifically addressed the impact of systematic approaches to phonics as part of balanced reading programs. To supplement the research findings that directly address the question, we have also found reports on specific phonic programs such as Headsprout Early Reading (WWC Intervention Report, 2009; see resource below) and Lexia Reading (WWC Intervention Report, 2009; see resource below).

In addition to the resources provided above, we have also included a list of organizations relating to the more general topics of phonics and balanced reading programs.

Question:

1. I am looking for research into the impact of a systematic approach to phonics as part of a balanced reading program.

1.1. A Systematic Review of the Research Literature on the Use of Phonics in the Teaching of Reading and Spelling. 2006; *Torgerson, C. J., Brooks, G., and Hall, J.; Department for Education and Skills; 82 pages.*

Source: General Internet search using Google Scholar

(<http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.123.315&rep=rep1&type=pdf>)

From the executive summary: "Systematic phonics instruction within a broad literacy curriculum appears to have a greater effect on children's progress in reading than whole language or whole word approaches. The effect size is moderate but still important. However, there is still uncertainty in the RCT evidence as to which phonics approach (synthetic or analytic) is most effective" (p. 10).

It should be noted that "The Department for Education and Skills (DfES) commissioned the Universities of York and Sheffield to conduct a systematic review of experimental research on the use of phonics instruction in the teaching of reading and spelling" (p. 8); however, "The review identified a total of 20 RCTs, of which only one was UK-based (Johnston and Watson, 2004, experiment 2). All were concerned with the initial teaching of reading (and, in a few cases, spelling); the children studied were mostly between five and seven years of age, but four of the trials included children up to age 11" (p. 10).

1.2. Effective Beginning Reading Programs: A Best-Evidence Synthesis. 2009; *Slavin, R. E., Lake, C., Chambers, B., Cheung, A., and Davis, S.; Best Evidence Encyclopedia; Center for Data-Driven Reform in Education; 55 pages.*

Source: Center for Data-Driven Reform in Education

(http://www.bestevidence.org/word/begin_read_Jan_26_2009.pdf)

From the abstract: "This article systematically reviews research on the achievement outcomes of four types of approaches to improving the beginning reading success of children in kindergarten and first grade: Reading curricula, instructional technology, instructional process programs, and combinations of curricula and instructional process.... A total of 62 studies met these criteria. The review concludes that instructional process programs designed to change daily teaching practices have substantially greater research support than programs that focus on curriculum or technology alone. In particular, positive achievement effects were found for Success for All, PALS, phonological awareness training, and other programs focused on professional development."

From the conclusion: "All of the programs found to be effective or promising in qualifying experiments have a strong focus on teaching phonics and phonemic awareness. This is particularly true of Success for All, PALS, Reading Reels, phonological awareness training, Open Court Phonics Kits, Scholastic Phonics Readers with Literacy Place, Reading and Integrated Literacy Strategies (RAILS), Direct Instruction, Phonics-Based Reading, and Sing, Spell, Read, and Write. It is important to note that studies of all of these programs found positive effects on comprehension and/or total reading measures, not just decoding measures that would appear more slanted toward phonetic approaches. However, an emphasis on phonics did not guarantee positive effects. Phonetic curricular approaches and computer-assisted instruction models, in particular, had minimal impacts on student outcomes. It clearly matters a great deal how reading is taught, and an emphasis on phonics may be necessary but it is not sufficient to ensure meaningful reading gains" (p. 44).

1.3. Word Reading Instruction Methods: The Evidence Concerning Phonics. 2008; *Savage, R.; Encyclopedia of Language and Literacy Development; London, ON; Canadian Language and Literacy Research Network; 7 pages.*

Source: General Internet search using Google Scholar

(http://literacyencyclopedia.ca/pdfs/Word_Reading_Instruction_Methods_The_Evidence_Concerning_Phonics.pdf)

From the introduction: "The primary goal of this short entry is to explore some issues concerning the teaching of word reading skills to young children, as well as the best evidence on the most effective reading instruction methods. This entry will thus consider controversies regarding the use of phonics, and will discuss statistical meta-analytic studies and systematic and critical evidence-based reviews from Canada, the US, the UK, and The Netherlands (analyzing English)... The reviewed research suggests that the explicit teaching of phonics is an important part of effective early literacy programs. The relative effectiveness of various phonics programs will also be considered" (p. 7).

From the conclusion: "Teaching a few skills such as segmenting and blending sounds in words is very important, and is best taught alongside the explicit teaching of letter sounds. Children should practice their phonics skills to mastery and use them in reading 'real books' not just in isolated phonics exercises. Any phonics program should be carefully paced and sequenced to appropriately challenge children, but should be only one (albeit very important) part of a balanced literacy approach which involves work on exploring and understanding a range of texts, writing, spelling. Such approaches can, if well-delivered be fun, enjoyable, and motivating" (p. 5).

1.4. Report of the National Reading Panel: Teaching Children to Read: An Evidence-Based Assessment of the Scientific Research Literature on Reading and Its Implications for Reading Instruction. 2000; *National Reading Panel; National Institute of Child Health and Human Development; NIH Pub. No. 00-4769; Pages not available.*

Source: National Institute of Child Health and Human Development
(<http://www.nichd.nih.gov/publications/nrp/upload/report.pdf>)

From the phonics instruction executive summary: "Finally, it is important to emphasize that systematic phonics instruction should be integrated with other reading instruction to create a balanced reading program. Phonics instruction is never a total reading program. In 1st grade, teachers can provide controlled vocabulary texts that allow students to practice decoding, and they can also read quality literature to students to build a sense of story and to develop vocabulary and comprehension. Phonics should not become the dominant component in a reading program, neither in the amount of time devoted to it nor in the significance attached. It is important to evaluate children's reading competence in many ways, not only by their phonics skills but also by their interest in books and their ability to understand information that is read to them. By emphasizing all of the processes that contribute to growth in reading, teachers will have the best chance of making every child a reader" (Chapter 2, p. 97).

From the conclusion: "Findings provided solid support for the conclusion that systematic phonics instruction makes a more significant contribution to children's growth in reading than do alternative programs providing unsystematic or no phonics instruction... The conclusion supported by these findings is that various types of systematic phonics approaches are more effective than non-phonics approaches in promoting substantial growth in reading" (Chapter 2, p. 132).

1.5. Teaching Phonics for Balanced Reading, Second Edition. 2006; *Starrett, E. V.; Corwin Press, Thousand Oaks, CA.; 208 pages; ERIC Document #ED495588.*

Source: ERIC

Full-Text Book available for purchase from Corwin Press
(<http://www.corwin.com/booksProdDesc.nav?prodId=Book229215&>)

From the ERIC abstract: "The Report of the National Reading Panel (2000) explains that phonemic awareness instruction and phonics instruction are highly beneficial for students learning to read. In the updated second edition, Edmund V. Starrett provides educators with guidance on teaching phonics as part of a well-planned reading program. This reference book presents the content and ideas of phonics instruction in an accessible format that appeals to both new and experienced teachers. Coverage of each topic begins with a broad general overview and then offers specific, practical tips and strategies. Thorough and in-depth, this beneficial guide: (1) Discusses specific principles of phonics in teacher-friendly terms; (2) Presents and explains the most useful phonics rules and generalizations; (3) Provides practical guidance for sequencing phonics instruction; (4) Includes informal assessments and checklists; and (5) Offers a generous collection of instructional strategies and activities. 'Teaching Phonics for Balanced Reading' offers

all teachers a comprehensive guide for planning phonics instruction that helps students become better readers and better learners!”

Additional Organizations to Consult

- **The National Right to Read Foundation**

(<http://www.nrrf.org/>)

According to the Mission Statement: “It is our purpose to provide up-to-date information on this site to inform the American public about progress towards the goals of NRRF, to suggest ways that parents can become involved in this essential effort, and to encourage teachers to use reading instructional materials and diagnostic assessments that will enable them to teach most children to read by the end of first grade, and to ensure that all children are proficient readers by the end of third grade at the latest.” This organization website includes links to phonics related resources as well as articles such as “The Reading Wars: Understanding the Debate over How Best to Teach Children to Read,” which can be found here:

(http://www.nrrf.org/article_anderson6-18-00.htm)

- **National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE)**

(<http://www.ncte.org/>)

According to the Mission statement: “The Council promotes the development of literacy, the use of language to construct personal and public worlds and to achieve full participation in society, through the learning and teaching of English and the related arts and sciences of language.”

From the “Consulting Network” webpage: “NCTE offers consultants and services on balanced literacy instruction that when used together, provide extended learning opportunities for teachers and makes a positive impact on learning. These opportunities include the Pathways Program, Web Seminars, and books for study groups,” which can be found here:

(<http://www.ncte.org/consultants/balancedlit>)

- **National Institute for Literacy**

(<http://www.nifl.gov/>)

According to NIFL’s “About Us” webpage, “Our mission is to develop literacy as a national asset, using knowledge, research, and practice, and working in collaboration with the Secretaries of Education, Labor, and Health and Human Services, and with other partners. The Institute is also authorized under the No Child Left Behind law to help children, youth, and adults learn to read by supporting and disseminating evidence-based reading research.”

This resource includes “some of the highlights from the evidence-based research on phonics instruction” such as “systematic and explicit phonics instruction is more effective than non-systematic or no phonics instruction...” and “phonics instruction is not an entire reading program for beginning readers...” and others that can be found here:

(<http://www.nifl.gov/childhood/phonicsIns.html>)

Resources on Phonics Curricula in General

- **Headsprout Early Reading**. 2009; *WWC Intervention Report*; Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education; 5 pages.

Source: Institute of Education Sciences

(http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/pdf/wwc_headsprout_102709.pdf)

From the IES abstract: “*Headsprout Early Reading* is an internet-based supplemental early literacy curriculum consisting of forty 20-minute animated episodes that are designed to teach phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. The Clearinghouse’s review of the research on the effectiveness of *Headsprout Early Reading* found this literacy curriculum to have potentially positive effects on oral language and print knowledge.”

- **Lexia Reading.** 2009; *WWC Intervention Report; Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education; 5 pages.*
Source: Institute of Education Sciences
(http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/pdf/wwc_lexia_063009.pdf)
From the IES abstract: “*Lexia Reading* is a computerized reading program that provides phonics instruction and gives students independent practice in basic reading skills. *Lexia Reading* is designed to supplement regular classroom instruction. It is designed to support skill development in the five areas of reading instruction identified by the National Reading Panel.”

From the “Research” summary: “Based on these three studies, the WWC considers the extent of evidence for Lexia Reading to be small for alphabets, fluency, comprehension, and general reading achievement” (p. 1).

- **Reading Recovery.** 2007; *WWC Intervention Report; Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education; 12 pages.*
Source: Institute of Education Sciences
(http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/pdf/WWC_Reading_Recovery_031907.pdf)
From the program description: “Reading Recovery® is a short-term tutoring intervention program intended to serve the lowest achieving (bottom 20%) first-grade students. According to the Reading Recovery® web site, lessons incorporate the program’s ten principles: phonological awareness, visual perception of letters, word recognition, phonics/decoding skills, phonics/structural analysis, fluency/automaticity, comprehension, a balanced literacy approach, early intervention, and individual tutoring” (p.1).

From the “Effectiveness” summary: “Reading Recovery® was found to have positive effects on students’ alphabets skills and general reading achievement outcomes. The program was found to have potentially positive effects on comprehension and fluency” (p. 1).

Key words and search strings used in the search:

Phonics OR phonics AND approach OR phonics AND systematic AND approach OR phonics AND systematic AND approach AND reading AND program OR phonics AND reading AND program OR phonics AND balanced AND reading AND programs OR phonics AND balanced AND reading OR balanced literacy OR balanced reading OR balanced reading AND programs OR balanced reading AND impacts OR balanced reading AND effects

Search databases and websites:

Institute of Education Science Resources (IES): Regional Educational Laboratory Program (REL); IES Practice Guides; What Works Clearinghouse (WWC); Doing What Works (DWW); Institute of Education Sciences (IES); National Center for Education Research (NCER); National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance (NCEE); National Center for Special Education (NCSE); National Center for Education Statistics (NCES)

IES-NCES Resources: National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP); National Assessments of Adult Literacy (NAAL); Early Childhood Longitudinal Study (ECLS); Common Core of Data (CCD); Education Longitudinal Study of 2002 (ELS); Fast Response Survey System (FRSS); High School and Beyond (HS& B); High School Longitudinal Study of 2009 (HSL S:09); High School Transcript Study (HST); National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988 (NELS S:88); National Longitudinal Study of the H.S. Class of 1972 (N:S-72); State Education Reforms (SER); Adult Literacy and Life Skills (ALL); Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS); Annual Reports Program (Annual); K-12 Practitioners’ Circle (K-12); National Forum on Education Statistics (NFES); National Postsecondary Education Cooperative (NPEC); Statistical Standards Program (SSP); Data Analysis System (DAS)

Other Federally Funded Resources: The Center on Innovation and Improvement; The Center on Instruction; Access Center for Improving Outcomes for All Students K-8; Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement; Center for Data-Driven Reform in Education; Education Commission of

the States; National Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards, and Student Testing; National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities; National Research Center on Rural Education Support; National Reading First Technical Assistance Center; Small Learning Communities Centers; Special Education Technical Assistance for Charter Schools Project; Regional Comprehensive Centers; Equity Centers; Regional Resource Centers; National Institute of Child Health and Human Development

Additional Resources: Education Development Center; WestEd; American Institutes of Research;; Center on Education Policy (CEP); Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO); The Education Trust; GreatSchools; Just for Kids; Kids Count; National Association of State Boards of Education (NASBE); National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL); PSK12; School Matters; SRI International; American Educational Research Association (AERA)

Search Engines and Databases: EBSCO Databases; ERIC; Google, Google Scholar; General Internet Search

Criteria for inclusion:

When Reference Desk Researchers review resources, they consider, among other things, four factors:

1. **Date of the publication:** The most current information is included unless in the case of nationally known seminal resources
2. **Source and funder of the report/study/brief/article:** Priority is given to IES, nationally funded, and certain other vetted sources known for strict attention to research protocols);
3. **Methodology:** i.e. Random control trial studies, surveys, self-assessments, literature reviews, policy briefs, etc. Priority for inclusion is given generally to random control trial study findings; however, the reader should note at least the following factors when basing decisions on these resources: Numbers of participants (just a few? Thousands?); Selection (did the participants volunteer in the study, or were they chosen?); Representation (were findings generalized from a homogeneous or a diverse pool of participants? Was the study sample representative of the population as a whole?)
4. **Existing knowledge base:** Although we strive to include vetted resources, there are times when the research base is slim or non-existent. In these cases we have included the best resources we could find, which may include newspaper articles, interviews with content specialists, organization websites, etc.

REL Northeast and Islands

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