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The effects of phonics in reading and writing programs for young children

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Abstract

Phonics is being taught in many kindergartens and .most first grades in the nation to introduce children to reading and writing. A large number of educators believe that phonics instruction is necessary for children to learn to read and to spell, but many psycholinguists question the value of this instruction (M. Manning, G. Manning, & C. Kamii, 1988). The teaching of phonics has been a source of controversy since Rudolf Flesch's (1955) book, Why Johnny Can't Read. Chall (1967) addressed the debate in her book, Learning to Read: The Great Debate, concluding that a code-emphasis approach produced better reading achievement than a meaning-emphasis one. Since the publication of Chall's book, there has been a movement towards greater code-emphasis approaches in beginning reading until the popularity of whole language approach that has been building over the last ten years and continues today.

THE EFFECTS OF PHONICS IN READING AND WRITING PROGRAMS FOR YOUNG CHILDREN

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Phonics is being taught in many kindergartens and .most first grades in the nation to introduce children to reading and writing. A large number of educators believe that phonics instruction is necessary for children to learn to read and to spell, but many psycholinguists question the value of this instruction (M. Manning, G. Manning, & C. Kamii, 1988). The teaching of phonics has been a source of controversy since Rudolf Flesch's (1955) book, Why Johnny Can't Read. Chall (1967) addressed the debate in her book, Learning to Read: The Great Debate, concluding that a code-emphasis approach produced better reading achievement than a meaning-emphasis one. Since the publication of Chall's book, there has been a movement towards greater code-emphasis approaches in beginning reading until the popularity of whole language approach that has been building over the last ten years and continues today.

A 1988 bulletin from the U.S. Department of Education entitled "What We Know About Phonics" and the

publication entitled Becoming a Nation of Readers, What Works (R. Anderson, E. Hiebart, J. Scott, & I. Wilkinson, 1985) state that knowledge of phonics is a basic skill that should be mastered by all children during the early grades. In Becoming a Nation of Readers the authors asserted that "the issue is no longer, as it was several decades ago, whether children should be taught phonics. The issues now are specific ones of just how it should be done" (p. 36).

The bulletin from the U.S. Department of Education entitled "What We Know About Phonics" (1988) went even further to say that children who cannot master phonics need more time to learn it. The U. S. Department of Education advised: "In most cases, children should complete their study of phonics by the end of the second grade. Instruction must account for individual differences, however, and some youngsters will require more time" (p. 1). No suggestion is made in this bulletin for using methods other than phonics to help account for individual differences.

The last decade has been a time of significant growth in understanding how students develop as readers and as writers. Manning (1988) has suggested in the past that classroom teachers used some sensible

practices in teaching reading. Teachers had sound intuition, they were trusted and supported, and they acted accordingly. In addition, they learned about reading and writing instruction from several reading authorities who had remarkable insight into the nature of student learning. Manning (1988) suggested that teachers read from the following authors. Jeanette Veatch (1988), for example, made teachers aware of individualized reading and provided a number of ideas for helping students develop as readers. May Hill Arbuthnot (1969) informed and excited teachers about the wonderful world of children's books. Manning (1989) mentioned that Roach Van Allen stressed to teachers the importance of students writing their own stories, as well as being surrounded with meaningful print.

Research has shown teachers how children develop as users of written language. Ferreiro and Tebersky (1982) documented the constructive process in both reading and spelling, and their findings have been confirmed in the countries of Spain, Mexico, Israel, Venezuela and the French-speaking population of Geneva. Other authors have shown how children develop as spellers and how their errors are manifestations of their efforts to work out a personal system of rules. Psycholinguistic

research is congruent with Piaget's theory and is but one more example of constructivism, the view that children do not internalize knowledge directly from the environment, but construct it from within by going through one level after another (M. Manning, 1988). Many educators, when they become aware of developmental ideas, often reconsider their ideas about formal phonics instruction.

As the subject of phonics instruction continues to be very perplexing, the debate goes on concerning instruction for beginning readers and writers. The proponents of phonics and psycholinguistics argue in support of their respective positions. Teachers are once more being reproached for their failure to make children literate. They are urged to stop using the wrong method or to concentrate on using the right method of teaching children to read. "The controversy is as pointless today as it always has been because it is based on a total misconception of how children learn and how teachers teach" (Smith, 1992, p. 432).

In the late sixties and early seventies many teachers became committed to the skills movement. Some watched and even approved as the behaviorists chopped the act of reading into bits and pieces of isolated

skills, placing those scraps on a skills continuum (G. Manning & M. Manning, 1990). Teachers continued to observe as tests were developed to assess student mastery of the bits and pieces. When the expected proficiency was not forthcoming, additional worksheets, workbooks, and drill activities were produced to ensure student mastery of these so-called essential skills that were promised as the solution to the nation's reading problems.

After watching students struggle over digraphs, diphthongs, and other isolated skills, many teachers have become disenchanted with this view of language learning. Teachers have now recaptured their intuition about language learning, and their knowledge about student learning continues to be clarified and extended. Through sound scientific research and theory, outstanding educators have shown how students develop as readers and writers.

Despite the scientific research and theory of how children learn, American educators continue to be divided in their views regarding beginning reading instruction. The debate today is bringing into vehement opposition two views about how reading should be taught, widely known as the phonics (or "skills" or "basics")

approach and the whole language (or "naturalistic" or "emergent literacy" or "literature based") philosophy.

Many educators believe the issue should not be phonics versus no phonics, but whether or not explicit instruction in sound-symbol relationships should be the primary focus of reading and writing programs.

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to review and to analyze the literature (a) to develop a better understanding of the use of the phonics and the whole word (e.g., no phonics) approaches in today's reading and writing programs and (b) to determine how phonics and whole word approaches fit into the whole language philosophy of teaching reading and writing.

Need for the Study

There is a need for this literature review to show that phonics and whole word methods can find a position in the present day whole language philosophy of teaching reading and writing. Maybe the debating opponents can move closer together to quell their fears and to work more closely together to provide a viable program of reading and writing for young children. According to

Smith (1992), teachers need to teach children and not be overly concerned with methodologies; people who do not trust children to learn, or teachers to teach, will always expect a method to do the job.

Limitations of Research

This study was limited because most of the research for this paper was obtained from one library. This library was located on the University of Northern Iowa campus in Cedar Falls, Iowa; however, three of the magazine articles were obtained from Area Education Agency III in Cylinder, Iowa.

Definition of Terms

The terms listed in this section are used in the following ways in this review of literature:

Phonetics--That segment of linguistic science which deals with (1) speech sounds;(2) how these sounds are made vocally;(3) sound changes which develop in languages, and (4) the relation of speech sounds to the total language process.

Phonics Instruction--A facet of reading instruction which (1) leads the child to understand that printed letters in printed words represent the speech sounds

heard when words are pronounced; (2) involves the actual teaching of which sound is associated with a particular letter or combination of letters.

Phoneme--The smallest unit of sound in a language.

Grapheme--A written or printed letter-symbol used to represent a speech sound or phoneme.

Psycholinguistics--The study of the relationship between language and the cognitive or behavioral characteristics of those who use it

Constructivism--The view that children do not internalize knowledge directly from the environment but construct it from within by going through one level after another of being wrong.

Semiotics--A general theory of signs and symbolism, usually divided into the branches of pragmatics, semantics, and syntactics.

Whole Language--"Language is kept whole, not fragmented into skills; literacy skills and strategies are developed in the context of whole, authentic literacy events, while reading and writing experiences permeate the whole curriculum; and learning within the classroom is intergrated with the whole life of the child" (Weaver, 1990, p. 6).

Authentic Literacy Event--"Students daily engage in real

reading and writing with skills learned and taught in the context of these events. They read everything from labels, lists, letters, and memos to personal narratives and poetry; from various kinds of fiction to an even wider array of nonfiction, including both informative and persuasive writing - all at even the earliest grades" (Weaver, 1990, p. 39).

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The teacher is primarily responsible for children's learning. This responsibility is often influenced by the way teachers view how children learn. Teachers' classroom decisions are by no means random or accidental. Rather, whether or not a teacher is conscious of it, the practice is firmly rooted in beliefs about learning, and reflects a personal theory of what is believed to be effective teaching (Mills & Clyde, 1991). In this chapter a discussion of the appeal of the phonics approach, the no phonics approach (e.g., look-say, whole word, or sight method), and the whole language philosophy of learning to read and to write will be presented. What a teacher believes about teaching, learning, and the nature of children will expand or limit the opportunities for children to achieve their potential (Watson, Burke, & Harste, 1989).

Phonics and the Whole Word (No Phonics) Approach

The purpose of phonics instruction is to provide the reader with the ability to associate printed letters with the speech sounds that these letters represent. In

applying phonic skills to an unknown word the reader blends a series of sounds dictated by the order in which particular letters occur in the printed word. One needs this ability in order to arrive at the pronunciation of printed word symbols which are not instantly recognized (Heilman, 1981).

Phonics knowledge may be characterized as an awareness, conscious or unconscious, that there is a relationship between letters and sounds in English. To read and write English proficiently, readers need to have developed at least rudimentary phonics knowledge and an ability to use that knowledge in reading: that is, functional know-how (Weaver, 1990). When reading is seen as decoding symbols into sounds rather than unlocking meaning, children must learn phonics.

Why do so many teachers believe that at least some phonics instruction is important? The first reason must be that letters are such an obvious part of written language. Anyone who can read can recite the correspondences of letters to sounds. Therefore, it is believed that teaching these correspondences will produce readers and writers.

Proponents of phonics argue that children get off to a better start in reading if they first learn to

break the code of our language, so they can sound out unfamiliar words (Weaver, 1990). As Chall (1967) expressed it in her book, Learning to Read: The Great Debate, "...proponents of a code-emphasis approach believe that this stage in reading instruction should emphasize teaching to master a code, the alphabet code" (p. 75). In practice this most often means an early emphasis on phonics.

Children vary in how well they can manipulate and make judgments about the phonemic segments of speech. This variation in phonemic awareness affects reading and spelling skills. It makes sense to include instruction in phonemic organization in the early stages of the reading curriculum (Bryne & Fielding-Barnsley, 1991). It is the segmenting and blending of letter-sound instruction that appears facilitative to the development of reading skill (Foorman, Francis, Novy, and Liberman, 1991).

Readers need to associate the letters on the printed page with sounds of the language they already know if they are to read easily and well. Using the spelling provided by an alphabetic writing system to figure out pronunciation allows readers to get the meanings of familiar words and gives them a valuable

tool for comprehending printed texts (Devine, 1989).

According to some educators, the previously presented information is one solution to America's literacy problem. This information of more and better phonics instruction has been widely distributed since Chall's (1967) influential work, Learning to Read: The Great Debate. Carbo's (1988) review, however, suggests that many of the phonics experiments discussed in both editions of The Great Debate contain design flaws that render the results virtually uninterpretable. Futhermore, inaccuracies and omissions in the book appear to have skewed some of the research results in the direction of supporting more, rather than less, phonics instruction.

One of the most far-reaching effects of Chall's books on reading instruction in the United States was the addition of word study skills to achievement tests in 1972. After that addition, instead of being one of many possible reading methods, phonics became a reading goal for millions of American students, regardless of whether they needed phonics instruction or whether mastery of phonics was a reasonable expectation for some of them.

Reading scholars, recently, have recommended the

redesign of reading achievement tests to keep pace with advances in reading theory and research (Carbo, 1988). What is important, apparently, is not knowledge of phonics per se--but rather, the ability to read and understand connected text.

Richard Anderson (1988) who helped produce Becoming a Nation of Readers defined reading as "a process of extracting meaning from written text"(p.36). Anderson adds:

> The report cautioned that mastery learning concepts, which overemphasize students' knowledge of discrete, low-level reading skills, rest on doubtful assumptions about the process of learning to read. Students in American schools, the report contended, spend far too little time actually reading and far too much time on workbook and skill-sheet exercises. Acknowledging that achievement tests often dictate instructional practices, the members of the commission called for the development of new reading tests that would assess increasingly deeper levels of comprehension (p.37).

Until such tests are developed, the commission members advised educators to pay very little attention to other reading subtests if scores on the reading comprehension subtest are acceptable.

Since the publication of Chall's book, the amount of phonics that has been taught and tested in United States schools has increased considerably. Carbo (1988) has observed that billions of dollars have been spent on

the improvement of reading instruction; yet the number of children and adults in America who cannot read well remains unacceptably high. The United States currently ranks 49th in literacy out of 159 members of the United Nations (Larrick, 1987). According to Heilman (1981), the optimum amount of phonics instruction that children should receive is the minimum amount they need to become independent readers. To provide less instruction than children need would deny them the opportunity to master a skill that they must have in order to progress in independent reading.

It may be that more or improved phonics instruction would improve the reading ability of America's youth. That hypothesis, however, is not well-substantiated by the research reviewed in an article by Carbo (1988). It may also be that an increase in the use of other reading methods, such as the whole-language approach, would raise literacy levels in the United States significantly (Carbo, 1988).

Phonics continues to survive because, as of yet, there is no alternative method of teaching reading that is more successful. The traditional alternative to teaching reading and writing through the sounds of letters is the whole-word approach of teaching complete

words. The no phonics or whole word approach has been much maligned in mass-market magazines and elsewhere. Often referred to as "look-say" or the "sight method," it is often labeled by misinformed writers as the root of all difficulties encountered by children in early reading. According to Devine (1989), some writers have wrongly assumed that all beginning reading instruction relies on drills that force children to associate isolated words printed on cards with words known to them and that such instruction is misdirected and harmful.

The whole word approach, however, can play an important role in the early stages of reading and writing instruction, and later stages as well. Why use the whole word approach? There are four good reasons as stated by Devine (1989) in his book, Teaching Reading in the Elementary School. The first reason is that the no phonics approach provides an immediate entry into the world of reading. Most children come to school with a strong desire to read. From their observations of siblings, older playmates, and others, they know that the ability to read is not only a tool needed in the world but also a sign that an important stage in the process of growing up has been achieved. Most children sense the difference between those who can read and

those who cannot. Most important is the sense of achievement that comes to them when they can "read" some words, they now know that they can succeed.

The second reason for using the whole word approach is that it is a natural method. Most American adults who have visited a country where English is not the basic language quickly learn to read a number of words in another language. They may be unable to pronounce the words or relate letters to sounds in a systematic way, but with a little experience certain printed forms carry meaning for them. Printed words, if seen regularly in meaningful contexts, function much like logos, they represent objects or ideas. Children who will learn to recognize the printed forms of a few known words are on the way to learning to read a language.

A third reason for using this approach is that it works well for irregularly spelled words. Relating the sounds of the language to corresponding printed letters may be the most effective way of decoding print. Learning words directly gives children a feeling of confidence and is more like what learning to read and write is all about. One might wonder if there are any advantages to beginning reading instruction that does not focus on letter-sound correspondences and instead

emphasizes the meaningful contexts in which words are found. The most obvious advantage lies in the reading of many words that are exceptions to English spelling patterns (Foorman, et. al., 1991). Some researchers have argued that readers read exception words by direct visual access to their mental dictionary or lexicon (Rayner & Pollatsek, 1989). If this is the case, then instruction that treats words holistically rather than as composites of letter-sound relations might be expected to advance children's reading of exception words. By comparison, instruction that emphasizes letter-sound correspondences might delay children's ability with exception words (Perfetti, Beck, Bell & Hughes, 1987). In particular, children who are taught letter-sound correspondences may commit errors on the reading of irregular words that reflect overregularization (e.g., reading pint to rhyme with tint)(Foorman, et. al., 1991).

The fourth reason for using the whole word approach is that it promotes automaticity. To comprehend, readers need to have meanings for words in the printed text. To comprehend easily and well, they need to know these meanings immediately, while they are reading. Stopping frequently to sound out a set of letters breaks

the normal pace of comprehension. Instantaneous identification of words is important to success in comprehension. One value of a whole word approach is that it provides children with a repertoire of common words that they can immediately identify, thus freeing their minds to make sense of texts rather than puzzling out individual words (Foorman, et. al., 1991).

Given the advantages of the whole word approach, it clearly should be considered as one strand in any effective beginning literacy program. It may not be recommended as the sole approach in identifying printed words, but its value should not be neglected.

Whole Language Philosophy With Phonics

In recent years, many teachers have adopted a whole language approach in beginning reading and writing. They treat reading instruction as one component of the total language arts program, developing reading ability along with speaking, listening, and writing.

Whole language is not a practice, it is not a whole word approach with the focus on getting the words. Educators define it simply as teaching reading and writing skills in context with an emphasis on comprehension skills. It has as a major goal to help

children use, not sever, interrelationships among cueing systems of semantics, syntax, and graphophonemics. When presented together, these three systems support each other and allow readers and writers to use all they know about language to construct meaning (Mills, O'Keefe, & Stephens, 1992). A whole language framework requires that children become skilled language users not that they learn language skills.

In whole language classrooms it is essential that children learn to read by reading. Several related means facilitate reading, even among children who are not yet full-fledged readers, that is, not yet able to coordinate meaning (prior knowledge and context) with letter/sound knowledge to construct meaning from unfamiliar texts (Weaver, 1990). Within these classrooms, much of the learning is only indirectly stimulated and facilitated by the teachers. The teacher creates a learning environment in which students learn to read and write largely by reading and writing; it is a learning environment in which students learn from their peers as much as from the teacher; and it is a learning environment in which students are encouraged to take significant responsibility for their own learning.

Direct teaching frequently occurs in response to

students' demonstrated readiness and need. Other direct teaching may occur incidentally (whether preplanned or not), in the context of an authentic literacy event in which an entire group or the class is assigned. These and other kinds of direct teaching are important in whole language classrooms, but, the majority of the students' time is spent in reading, writing, discussing, and otherwise exploring concepts and ideas.

When teachers meet and talk about reading and writing, the terms phonics and whole language are often discussed. Whether the two are compatible or incompatible depends on the meanings individuals have for those terms. Most of the time the word phonics is used to mean knowledge about sound-symbol relationships in language. When phonics is defined this way, phonics and whole language are quite compatible. Phonics does not constitute a method for teaching the complicated process called reading. To keep the teaching of phonics in proper perspective, one must (1) see phonic analysis as an absolutely essential reading skill, (2) realize that phonics is one of a number of ways children may solve words not known as sight words, and (3) understand that learning to over-rely on phonics, sight words, or context clues can produce serious reading problems

(Heilman, 1981).

In all authentic reading and writing events, language is kept whole and all cue systems are accessed. This method parallels language learning outside of reading instruction. Once people understand that phonics, when defined as knowledge about sound-symbol relationships, is a critical part of learning language, questions then arise about how whole language teachers help children learn about language. In particular, people want to know how whole language teachers help children learn about sound-symbol relationships.

The first answer is that whole language teachers are very knowledgeable about language and learners and learning. Many whole language teachers have taken course work in such fields as psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics, cognitive and developmental psychology, learning theory, and semiotics. Using this knowledge base, whole language teachers set up their classrooms so that children have ample opportunities to learn about reading by reading and about writing by writing; and in the process of each, they also learn about the other. Frank Smith (1978) calls this reading like a writer and writing like a reader.

The second answer is that these informed whole

language teachers are also careful observers of children (Y. Goodman, 1985) and use their knowledge of human development to reflect on their observations of children and to make informed instructional decisions. They might ask themselves, for example, what a particular child already knows about language. The key to providing children with what they need in the way of instruction is knowledge of their weaknesses. This knowledge is acquired through diagonsis. The best diagnosis is observation and analysis of reading behavior (Heilman, 1981)

The third answer is that whole language teachers are skillful at using their understanding of language, learning, and putting this knowledge into practice. They might follow their observations of children with questions about how best to help that child, about whether to intervene or stay in the background, about what kinds of new experiences and demonstration would be helpful.

Teachers, like all professionals, have the right and the responsiblility to act on how they think children learn best. It is essential that teachers exercise professional judgment in making those decisions. Teachers who operate from a sound

understanding of how children learn create learning activities for students which strengthens their foundation. Confident and secure children, who are interested in print, develop some desired characteristics as problem solvers and decision makers. They become learners who will perform better than children who do not have such characteristics (Mills and Clyde, 1991).

CHAPTER III

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Summary

The purpose of this study was to review and to analyze the literature (a) to develop a better understanding of the use of the phonics and the whole word (e.g., no phonics) approaches in today's reading and writing programs and (b) to determine how phonics and whole word approaches fit into the whole language philosophy of teaching reading and writing.

It has been documented that phonics can have an important role in teaching young children to read and write. When phonics knowledge is characterized as an awareness, there is functional know-how for readers to read and write English proficiently. Also, it has been shown that the whole word approach has relevance for young readers and writers. The whole word approach provides an immediate entry into the world of reading. It is a natural method. It works well for irregularly spelled words. It promotes automaticity. Both approaches can find a place in the whole language philosophy.

Through continued professional growth teachers need

to receive training in a variety of approaches because they are, in the final analysis, the ones who provide the literacy environment and the instruction that make the difference between learning well and not learning well. They decide on appropriate levels of instruction and on assignments. They must collaborate with other professionals--reading specialists, psychologists, speech and language specialists, social workers, neurologists--when a child needs special help. According to Chall, Jacobs, and Baldwin (1990), the most effective reading programs incorporate adjustments to the needs of different children..."(p. 149). To know what to do from one moment to the next, teachers need to be thoroughly familiar with developmental theory and research. But teachers also need to know children's personalities, developmental histories, what motivates them and what discourages them. Knowledge about literacy and how it is most effectively developed need to be continuously provided by schools.

Because of their day-to-day observations in their own classrooms and their interpretation of research data, whole language teachers have a different concept than that expressed by some writers regarding what and how much phonics needs to be taught. They also use

different procedures for teaching phonics, both directly and indirectly. Whole language teaching practices are based upon what works most effectively to help children become efficient, independent readers and writers. "Observations indicate that a teacher's use of an approach and belief in its efficacy influence its effectiveness" (Devine, 1989, p. 68).

The need for more research is evident. More information is needed from varying perspectives and information that looks at teaching and learning in all their complexities. Research that considers the influence of context, sociolinguistic elements, and the learner's responses to instruction will help clarify issues inherent in the phonics debate. First-hand classroom accounts from teachers about phonics teaching and learning will be helpful. Studies investigating how the function, form, and code of written language are being taught and learned in a wide variety of classroom settings will provide information on young children's orchestration of knowledge about reading and writing (Freppon & Dahl, 1991).

Further research is needed on the precise effects of formal phonics instruction if we are to know what kinds of phonics instruction will assist the beginning

reader and writer. American students do not read as well as they should, considering the enormous amounts of money and human energy that have been expended over the past two decades to teach them to do so. It is equally certain that this is a critical time in America's history. What we need is well-conceived and carefully executed reading research that investigates a wide spectrum of potentially effective and practical instructional appproaches (Carbo, 1988).

Conclusions

The great debate may never end. But perhaps it never should. The most productive way to deal with fundamental educational controversies might be to take them into every school and every community where they can be dissected, discussed, and honestly argued. The endless debate over how best to facilitate the development of literacy in young children could serve to keep teachers, and the public at large, conscious of the profound importance and delicacy of the noble art of teaching (Smith, 1992).

This review of literature has provided many insights into the complexities of reading and writing and the numerous difficulties in deciding what are the

best ways for young children to learn. The following conclusions were drawn from the study:

1. It is essential to keep individual growth records in some form; each child needs to be considered individually.

2. It is essential to use the phonics and the whole word approaches in combination with the Whole Language Philosophy to help young children become better readers and writers.

3. There is no magic method that will support all children's literacy development. The most sensible classroom practice may be to combine the elements of the various approaches to develop an eclectic approach to teach reading and writing.

4. One thing is clear all children want to become competent. The teacher's task is to figure out how to use this motivation to facilitate learning of reading and writing skills.

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