

Meaningful Phonics and Phonemic Awareness Instruction

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Systematic and explicit are two words associated with phonics, the study of relationships between letters and the sounds that represent them. We have long known the importance of using phonics as an aid to word identification and that systematic phonics instruction coupled with reading connected texts and comprehension yields good readers (Snow, et al. 1998; NRP, 2001).

Instruction in phonics and phonological awareness needs to excite and stimulate language learning. Students need to experience the joy in being able to manipulate the sounds and letters of their language to create and read words. And children need instruction that helps them build meaningful associations so that they can make sense of how to best use phonics when reading.

Research-based guidelines for exemplary phonics programs (Stahl, 1992; Stahl, Duffy-Hester & Stahl, 1998) can be used as a framework to ensure the best possible phonics lessons. In short, exemplary phonics instruction . . .

- builds on what students already know about reading, such as how print functions, what stories are and how they work, and the purpose for reading.
- builds on a foundation of phonological awareness.
- is clear and direct. In other words, the explanations are meaningful to students and teachers use demonstrations to help students better understand how to apply what they are learning about phonics.
- is integrated into a total reading program. Explicit, formal instruction as well as many reading and writing opportunities to apply phonics knowledge are employed.
- focuses on reading words rather than learning rules. Students are taught how to look for patterns in words rather than memorizing an abstract set of rules.
- leads to automatic word identification. The purpose of phonics instruction is to help children acquire a large store of words so that they can read with greater ease.

Applying These Guidelines in a Reading Program

First, phonics instruction should be systematic and explicit. One way to provide systematic and explicit instruction is through a grade-level scope and sequence, which begins in kindergarten and ends in fifth grade. Right from the start, students begin to understand sounds and their visual representations. As students progress through the grades, phonics instruction becomes more sophisticated and students are taught how to use word parts to decode unknown words. A phonics scope and sequence also can be developmental when correlated to specific reading levels that comprise Small-Group Strategic Reading instruction. Students are provided with grade-level phonics skills during whole-group instruction. Then, during small-group time, they receive additional phonics instruction that is tailored specifically to their instructional reading level.

Second, phonics instruction should be integrated into other literacy experiences. For example, during Small-Group Strategic Reading instruction, children can be taught specific phonic elements and then given time to read books so that they can apply their newfound skill. They also may be expected to respond in writing to what they have read. This calls on students to apply their phonics knowledge by using it to write an understandable message.

Third, phonics lessons should be structured so that teachers first model how to use a specific skill and then gradually shift more of the responsibility for learning onto the students' shoulders. For example, when teaching children how to look for patterns in words (i.e., word families), the teacher can use letter and word family tiles to display and demonstrate how to find common elements within words. After demonstrating, the teacher then calls on children to manipulate the tiles to create and identify word patterns. Finally, the teacher helps children apply this skill to a written text—meaningful association at its best!

Fourth, phonological awareness in general and phonemic awareness in particular are a large part of instruction beginning in kindergarten. Lessons should be designed to help children develop a wide array of phonemic awareness skills such as sound matching, sound blending,

sound segmentation, and sound substitution. As with phonics instruction, meaningful association grounds all of these activities. Phonemic awareness activities should be connected to texts that children actually see, such as a poem. Students listen as the teacher reads the poem aloud and highlights selected words in order to build phonemic awareness. This helps students understand that the sounds they are exploring are related to reading itself.

Finally, in an ideal literacy program, children are constantly reading, writing, listening, and speaking. They are engaged learners who are constantly expected to apply what they are learning to new contexts. For example, after listening to a passage, they can be directed to respond either orally or in writing to a partner, a small group of individuals, or the entire class. The instructional materials should enable many different kinds of engagement.

Systematic and explicit phonics instruction is an integral part of any complete literacy program. But phonics instruction can be taken to an even higher level by helping children to build meaningful associations with text so that they are in a better position to use what they know to build comprehension—the ultimate goal of phonics instruction.

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