

ERIC/RCS Update: The Phonics Wars

Compiled by

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The role of phonics in reading instruction is one of the most enduring conflicts in education. The response of the National Academy of Education's prestigious Commission on Reading (*Becoming a Nation of Readers*; Richard Anderson, et al., annotated below) took a balanced position on the phonics issue—and on other questions in which research is inconclusive and scholarly disagreements are tinged with ideology. Specifically, the commission endorsed phonics instruction "both in isolation and in words" but held that phonics instruction must be "well designed"; "kept simple"; applied immediately in "meaningful selections"; extended through wide application to known words; and typically "completed by the end of second grade."

This update gives samples of recent materials on phonics instruction found in the ERIC database. The annotations give some evidence of the variety of viewpoints in the profession. Clearly, one writer's myth is another's reality. But as Lewis Thomas has noted, scholarship has always thrived on continuing dialectic, with the bulk of evidence ultimately reaching a critical mass that provides the most useful—though not necessarily the "final"—answer to our questions.

ANNOTATIONS

Two Approaches to Reading: Whole-Language and Skills. Dorothy J. Watson, and others. International Reading Association, Atlanta, GA, May 6-10, 1984. 42p.

This study describes two reading instruction procedures stemming from two different theoretical influences. Two teachers, one skills-oriented and one whole language-oriented, were selected on the basis of peer and administrator recommendation. Their stated theoretical orientations were measured using the Theoretical Orientation to Reading Profile. Data were collected from video tapes and from teacher journals. The results analyzed questions such as these: On what unit of our language and linguistic system did the teacher focus the children's attention? What aspects of reading were emphasized? Was the reading material contingent on the student or teacher? What attitude toward reading specific texts did the teacher encourage? In every category of observable data, the teachers adhered closely to their theoretical models. In diametric

opposition to the instructional position of the skills teacher, the whole-language teacher focused children's attention on the largest unit of language suitable for the situation. Consistent with language experience approaches to instruction, she encouraged the children to construct meaning sensible to them and their lives, permitted deviations from texts in allowing miscues, involved children in planning, used library books and other texts, and encouraged children to "think about and feel" what they read. (ED 247 546; MF01, PC02 plus postage.)

Myths of Reading Instruction. Revised Edition. Patrick Groff. 1985 300p.

This book analyzes selected teaching practices that have been supported by many reading experts but not by research findings. In the first 12 chapters, Groff describes the following as "myths" of reading: (1) phonics hinders comprehension; (2) unpredictable spelling invalidates phonics; (3) children learning to read should first be taught whole, or sight, words; (4) reading is best taught in sentences; (5) context clues are all-important to beginning readers; (6) word length makes no difference in beginning reading instruction; (7) learning modalities and instruction should be matched for children to learn best; (8) letter names are unimportant; (9) children need to be taught dictionary syllabication to help them acquire reading skills; (10) reading tests should be replaced with oral reading miscue analysis; (11) subvocalization is bad; and (12) oral reading is dangerous. The rest of the book discusses why the myths prevail and how they can be dispelled, and present an annotated bibliography of reviews of research in phonics. (ED 254 831; MF01, PC012 plus postage.)

A Whole-Language, Comprehension-Centered Reading Program. Program in Language and Literacy Occasional Paper Number 1. Kenneth S. and Yetta M. Goodman. 1981. 27p.

Intended for reading teachers and school administrators, this paper proposes a whole language, comprehension-based approach to reading instruction that is rooted in the humanistic acceptance of the learner as problem solver and that builds on strengths and minimizes preoccupation with reading deficiency and remediation. Following an introduction and rationale for this holistic approach, the authors outline the key principles of the approach relating to the reading process, teaching and learning, and instructional materials. They then examine the myths of reading readiness, controlled vocabulary, phonics, and mastery learning. They go on to describe the essentials of an in-school program that draws on the learning taking place outside school, exploring preschool learning and progressing through initial reading instruction and developmental reading. (ED 210 630; MF01, PC02 plus postage.)

Phonics Revisited: Toward an Integrated Methodology. Morton Botel and JoAnn T. Seaver. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Keystone State Reading Association, Hershey, PA, November 11-14, 1984. 18p.

In the context of whole language learning, the teaching of phonics can be approached in two different ways. In one situation, the teacher engages children in composing with a purpose and for an audience, during which time the children become aware of graphophonic relationships through their need to spell words. In the other situation, the teacher engages the children in choral reading and language play that proceeds from a carefully chosen or specially constructed folk rhyme to sentence investigation, to phonic investigation, and, finally, to mastery of the CVC (consonant, vowel, consonant) syllable pattern in single and multisyllabic words.

In both of these whole language learning situations, the complex tasks of writing and reading are taught by first engaging children in the task itself and then having them differentiate language into component parts. In the reading task, the differentiation proceeds from the teacher presenting a chant or folk rhyme which includes words containing repetition of certain graphophonic patterns. In the writing task, the differentiation proceeds from children writing purposefully for an audience to becoming more aware of the graphophonic system as they solve the problem of how to spell correctly. In either situation, the instruction integrates things usually taught separately—phonics, spelling, and the study of sentences. This integrated approach makes appropriate use of phonics and allows more time to be devoted to purposeful reading, writing, and dialoguing in all subject areas. (ED 252 819; MF01; PC02, plus postage.)

Becoming a Nation of Readers: The Report of the Commission on Reading. Richard C. Anderson, and others. Urbana: IL University of Illinois, Center for the Study of Reading; Washington: DC National Academy of Education. 1985. 155p.

Fulfilling a need for careful synthesis of an extensive body of findings on reading, this report presents experts' interpretations of both current knowledge of reading and the state of the art of reading instruction. The introduction contains two claims: (1) the knowledge is now available to make worthwhile improvements in reading throughout the United States, and (2) if the practices seen in the classrooms of the best teachers in the best schools could be introduced everywhere, reading improvement would be dramatic. The first chapter stresses reading as the process of constructing meaning from written texts, a complex skill requiring coordination of interrelated sources of information. The second chapter, on emerging literacy, argues that reading must be seen as part of a child's general language development and not as a discrete skill isolated from listening, speaking, and writing. The third chapter, on

extending literacy, stresses that as proficiency develops, reading should not be thought of as a separate subject but as integral to learning in all content areas. The fourth chapter concerns the teacher and the classroom and notes that an indisputable conclusion of research is that the quality of teaching makes a difference in children's learning. The next two chapters note that standardized reading tests do not measure everything, and that teaching is a complex profession. The last chapter contains seventeen recommendations for conditions likely to produce citizens who would read with high levels of skill and do so frequently and with satisfaction. In the afterword, Jeanne Chall comments on the history of the report, and three appendixes contain 260 references and notes, plus lists of project consultants. (ED 253 865; MF01, PC07 plus postage. Also available from the University of Illinois, *Becoming a Nation of Readers*, P.O. Box 2774, Station A, Champaign, IL 61820-8774; \$4.50 each, including postage; overseas orders, add \$1.00.)

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