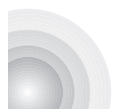


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Introduction

PHONICS AND A BALANCED READING PROGRAM

Although this is a book about phonics, a “phonics only” approach to teaching reading is not advocated within its pages. It would be a struggle, in fact, to find an education professor or other teaching professional who would recommend the exclusive use of phonics. Even the claims of sizable reading improvement (or your money back) made by popular commercial programs such as “Hooked on Phonics” and “The Phonics Game” are viewed with great skepticism by the author. Reading should be taught in such a way that students need less and less phonics as they go along, not more. The objective of reading instruction is ultimately to get all students “unhooked from phonics.”

Recent research suggests that phonemic awareness and other word analysis skills are best taught in a balanced reading program (Baumann et al. 1998; Burns 1999). Indications are that phonics works best when integrated with programs that promote sustained silent reading, miscue analysis, whole language instruction, linguistics, and word recognition.

A teacher should be like a general practitioner to the extent that not all patients get the same medicine. Some may need an aspirin. Others may need rest. A few may need surgery. When the patient (student) is healthy (can read independently), teachers should stop the medication. A teacher, like the old-fashioned country doctor, should carry around a bagful of remedies. Phonics ought to be one of the many remedies.

ABOUT THIS BOOK

While it’s true that a well-balanced approach to reading that emphasizes and uses the good points of different systems is the recommended method of teaching reading, *Teaching Phonics for Balanced Reading* presents only material that emphasizes the phonological and structural analysis aspects of reading. The focus here is on providing the teacher with a solid

grounding in phonics and guidance on teaching phonics as part of a balanced reading program.

The goal of this book is to balance the content and ideas in such a way that they can be easily understood by those who have little information about how phonics might be used in the classroom, yet are technical enough for readers with more advanced understanding. *Teaching Phonics for Balanced Reading* is intended as a reference book, not as a textbook to be read once and then set aside. It is hoped that teachers will want to keep this book in their classroom—to be used in making lesson plans or for informational purposes.

Each topic in *Teaching Phonics for Balanced Reading* is presented in such a way as to be general enough to cover the entire field, yet specific enough to be of practical value. Principles of phonics are explicitly laid out. Rules and generalizations are enumerated and explained. In the section on blends and digraphs, for example, the reader will be exposed to all or almost all the blends and digraphs, and so on. And when standards are discussed, specific examples will be given. All rules and examples are integrated into practical guidance on teaching phonics. The goal is for the reader to not only gain specific knowledge and examples of each topic, but also see the day-to-day application of that knowledge in the classroom.

Chapter One opens the book with a historical perspective on the debate regarding the best way to teach reading, followed by a discussion of current research on balanced reading programs and elements of effective phonics instruction. Some perspective on the phonics vs. whole word controversy is introduced by citing recent research, defining terms, and applying certain principles that most authorities would agree with.

Chapter Two tackles some of the concerns teachers have about teaching phonics, the problems involved in teaching letter-sound relationships, and the good news about phonics. This chapter should give teachers a better understanding of the order and sequencing of phonics instruction as well as insights into how it may be integrated in the classroom.

Chapter Three discusses the need to learn to identify, sound out, and reproduce the letters of the alphabet and the difficulties involved in this learning. At the end of the chapter, readers will find several activities that can be beneficial in augmenting the learning of the alphabet and its sounds. For many teachers, this is the most important chapter in the book, as so many reading problems have their origin at the very beginning stages of learning to read, specifically, learning the alphabet.

Chapters Four through Six contain material about consonants, vowels, and syllabication. Each chapter starts with ideas and concepts that are easy to understand or less complex, and then proceeds to the more complicated ideas. The structure of each chapter represents the ascending order by which a teacher generally tries to introduce material to students. Rules and generalizations are presented in order to help teachers determine which ones are worth teaching or explaining to students, and which ones have little or no value. It is generally conceded that rote memorization of most of these generalizations is a waste of time and serves little or no educational purpose. On the other hand, it is helpful for teachers to be aware of them as part of their knowledge and understanding of English orthography. Plenty of occasions will arise when this knowledge can be put to good use. Suggested classroom activities are interspersed throughout throughout these chapters, placed near the discussion of relevant phonics topics.

Chapter Seven contains a discussion of educational standards for kindergarten through fifth graders as they relate to reading and phonics. The history of the current movement toward standards and the current state of standards across the country are touched on. By way of example, the chapter includes excerpts from the reading standards of the state of Texas and the Continuum of Children's Development in Early Reading and Writing created by the International Reading Association and the National Association for the Education of Young Children. These standards were developed by teachers and can serve as a guide for student instruction at each grade level.

The last chapter is comprised of informal tests teachers can use to evaluate certain segments of phonemic awareness and word analysis skills. These tests are specifically designed so that the teacher can quickly evaluate whether or not the child has mastered a particular skill. Using them for diagnostic or informal assessment purposes, the teacher can take note of each student's level of understanding and plan accordingly.

It must be pointed out that the manner in which the material is presented in each chapter does not necessarily reflect the exact order in which the material should be presented or learned in the classroom. The content of each chapter generally begins with the simpler concepts and proceeds from there to more complicated or harder to understand ones. The examples given for each lesson also proceed from simpler to more complex, and generally contain familiar sounds or words that students use in their active vocabulary. The particular order in which teachers may use these examples, however, will differ as the teachers' needs differ. Instead of trying to use everything in this book in the exact order presented here, it is hoped that

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the reader will pick and choose whatever material or ideas she finds helpful and use them as the need occurs.

In conclusion, it is worth emphasizing that there are no miracle cures when it comes to teaching reading. No one type of program or method by itself will automatically lead all children to be successful in reading. The most important factor for the success or failure of any program is the attitude of the teacher. When a teacher has knowledge of a particular method, sees the application of the method for her students, and believes the method will work, there's a good chance even a poorly researched program will be successful. When a teacher lacks knowledge of, or does not believe in, a particular method, even the best-conceived program is destined for failure.

This book was written with the hope and expectation that teachers will gain additional knowledge of phonics, see its value and application for their classroom, and come to believe in the techniques enough so that the information provided here will make them better teachers.