

Sound *Systems*

Explicit,
Systematic
Phonics in
Early Literacy
Contexts

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Research on Phonics

Chapter 1

Some Clues from Research to Guide Phonics Curriculum, Assessment, and Instruction

The effects of systematic early phonics instruction were significant and substantial in kindergarten and the 1st grade, indicating that systematic phonics programs should be implemented at those age and grade levels.

(NICHD 2000a, p. 10)

As we walk into Ms. Chandler's kindergarten classroom, we hear the class participating in a shared book reading session enthusiastically chanting:

Run, run,
As fast as you can.
You can't catch me.
I'm the Gingerbread Man!

The children eagerly follow Ms. Chandler's pointer with their eyes as character after character in *The Gingerbread Man* (Parkes and Smith 1986) is taunted by the refrain. A shared reading session is under way, and every child in the class is engaged in the rereading of this long-time favorite book.

Explicit, Systematic Teaching of Letters, Sounds, and Words

After the book has been read and enjoyed, Ms. Chandler says, “We’re going to look for words in the story that begin with the letter *m*. Whose name begins with *m*?” Several hands in the group shoot up—Manuel’s, Melissa’s, and Tammy’s. “Let’s see, we have Manuel and Melissa. Let’s listen to the *M* sound at the beginning of their names.” Ms. Chandler and the class say the names slowly several times. “And you are right, Tammy, you have *m*’s in the middle of your name.” Ms. Chandler ignores the fact that she asked for names beginning with *m*, and uses this opportunity to extend the learning to *m* sounds in the middle of words. “Let’s say Tammy’s name slowly and listen for those *m*’s in the middle.”

Ms. Chandler asks Manuel, Melissa, and Tammy to point to their names on the name chart, a large chart with all children’s first names arranged in rows under large letters. (See Chapter 7 for an example of a name chart.) Ms. Chandler directs the children’s attention to the *M/m*’s in the names with her pointer. Next, Ms. Chandler uses her pointer to direct the children’s attention to the uppercase and lowercase *m* at the top of the *M* row and instructs the children to find all the uppercase and lowercase *m*’s in the Gingerbread Man story. The children search eagerly and highlight *M/ms* with green highlighter tape. Then, Ms. Chandler reaches for her pointer and again invites the children to read the story with her, pausing to emphasize the highlighted *m* sounds in some words.

As the last chorus finishes, Ms. Chandler quickly reaches for a small white board and demonstrates how to write *M, m*, describing how her pen moves as she does so. She has the children practice writing *M, m* in the air and on each other’s backs. In this brief and engaging lesson, Ms. Chandler is using explicit, systematic instruction to help the kindergartners learn about letters, sounds, and words (phonics!) in the context of big book reading.

The Differences Among Phonological Awareness, Phonemic Awareness, and Phonics

Many educational publishers have been swept up in the phonics and phonemic awareness wave. The terms *phonological awareness*, *phonemic awareness*, and *systematic phonics* turn up in a confusing array of journal articles and titles of commercial programs. However, it is important to understand that these three instructional areas are not the same at all.

And they should be taught in different ways, depending on the learners' varying levels of literacy experience.

Phonological Awareness

Phonological awareness involves an appreciation of the sounds, as well as the meanings, of spoken words. Note that phonological awareness has nothing to do with letters; it is all about sounds. Ms. Chandler could teach phonological awareness during a shared reading of *The Gingerbread Man* (Parkes and Smith 1986) in several ways. Children could listen for the rhyming words, such as *man* and *can*. During a subsequent reading, the children might divide the words by syllables or smaller clusters (*m/an* and *c/an*), and put them back together again. At another time, Ms. Chandler and the children might notice groups of words that have the same beginning (*can't/catch*) or ending (*catch/watch*).

Phonemic Awareness

Phonemic awareness involves teaching children to focus on and manipulate phonemes in spoken syllables and words. Phonemic awareness is a more advanced form of phonological awareness; it involves the understanding that speech can be broken into small units of sound. Children with phonemic awareness can isolate the individual sounds in words. For example, in the word *came*, they can say *c/a/m* as separate sounds, or they can say *cat* without the */c/*. Again, phonemic awareness is about sounds, not letters. However, phonemic awareness is important to reading because phonemes are represented by letters. Even three- and four-year-olds can be taught to listen for phonemes in words. Ms. Chandler will find many opportunities to foster phonemic awareness using a variety of quality big books and shared reading experiences. However, phonemic awareness instruction does not constitute a complete reading program, and phonemic awareness instruction is seldom appropriate beyond the first half of kindergarten for typically progressing students. To be useful in reading and writing, phonemic awareness must transition into phonics instruction.

Phonics

The primary focus of phonics instruction is to help beginning readers understand how letters are linked to sounds (phonemes) to form letter-sound correspondences and spelling patterns for use in their reading and writing. Note that you can be sure phonics instruction is going on if

letters, not just sounds, are involved in the activity. In the kindergarten example at the beginning of the chapter, Ms. Chandler was providing phonics instruction; she was teaching children to match a sound (phoneme at the beginning of *Manuel* and *Melissa* and the phoneme in the middle of *Tammy*) to the letter *m*.

What the Research Says

Children who are likely to meet success in learning to read in the early grades are those who begin school with knowledge of letters, phonological sensitivity, familiarity with the basic purposes and mechanisms of reading, and language ability (Snow, Burns, and Griffin 1998). The experts agree that, once they are in school, children who receive instruction in phonics, along with a complete reading program including instruction in comprehension and fluency, are more likely to succeed in learning to read and write (Adams 1990; Burns, Griffin, and Snow 1999; Cunningham 1995; Fox 2000; Fountas and Pinnell 1996; Moustafa 1997; NICHD 2000a and b; Snow, Burns, and Griffin 1998).

But Phonics Is Not So Simple

Researchers in the 1960s established that very few letters in English can be mapped reliably to just one sound (Bailey 1967; Burmeister 1968; Clymer 1963; Emans 1967). For example, even the fairly predictable letter *d* is pronounced /d/ in *leaned* but /t/ in *laughed*. Another fairly predictable letter, *s*, is pronounced /s/ in *list* but /z/ in *says*. Vowels are enormously unpredictable. The letter *a* is represented by a different sound in each of these words: *ant*, *want*, *again*, and *cake*. Just the long /a/ sound itself can be written at least three ways as in *tame*, *rain*, and *weigh*. In one of the early phonics studies Horn (1929) found that there are eighteen sounds associated with the letter *a* in materials that a typical first grader might read!

Berdiansky, Cronnell, and Koehler (1969) examined more than six thousand one- and two-syllable words in the comprehension vocabularies of children ages six to nine. They discovered that sixty-nine letters and digraphs (pairs of letters that make one sound, such as /ch/ or /ew/) were used to represent thirty-eight sounds in 211 different ways. For example, they found that *oe* was used to represent the different sounds in *shoe*, *does* (the verb), and *doe* (the deer). Those are a lot of different and conflicting sound-symbol relationships for students to learn! How do they do it?