

Phonics: How do you spell that sound?

We recently discussed Phonological Awareness, the ability to identify and manipulate the *sounds* in words. When children have strong Phonological Awareness skills, it is easier for them to connect the sounds in words to the letters that represent those sounds. The 26 letters of the alphabet are a code for the 44 unique sounds in the English language. The process of learning that code and connecting the *sounds (phonemes)* to the *letters (graphemes)* is called Phonics. In order to read and spell, children have to be able to quickly and accurately apply their knowledge of sound-letter relationships.

Most people over about the age of 45 were taught these sound-letter relationships through *explicit, systematic*, phonics instruction. *Explicit* instruction is when a skill is clearly modeled for students and then students are given a variety of opportunities to practice that skill, with support as needed, until they master it. *Systematic* instruction means that there is a clear order in which skills are taught and that smaller skills build up to larger ones.

Explicit, systematic phonics instruction helps all children read words quickly and accurately. It is critical for children with dyslexia and for other at-risk students. If children struggle to read words, their comprehension suffers because their attention is so focused on trying to read the words that they lose track of what they are reading. In an upcoming article we will discuss the importance of vocabulary instruction and building background knowledge. But no amount of instruction in vocabulary, background knowledge or comprehension strategies will help the child comprehend if they can't read the words on the page.

Conversely, *implicit* reading instruction, sometimes referred to as *analytic phonics* or *whole word* reading relies on children taking clues from the whole word, the context, the pictures, and the initial

sound to try to figure out what word makes sense. This very complex guessing strategy may appear to work until about 3rd grade because many of the words in K-2 books may be easily memorized. It is estimated that about 35% of children will learn to read despite how they are taught. But what about the 65% of children who need explicit, systematic phonics instruction to become proficient readers? In about 3rd or 4th grade, when the text increases in complexity, the words are longer, and the pictures go away, these kids hit a reading wall that impacts all subjects.

Although our focus is literacy, we can clearly illustrate the benefits of explicit, systematic instruction through Mathematics. Would we ever expect children to use clues to guess how many of something a number represents? Of course not. We directly teach children that a number represents a specific set of something. These representations are taught in a specific order that build in complexity. In other words, we explicitly and systematically teach cumulative math skills. Do some students bring more math background knowledge to Kindergarten and “get it” more quickly, therefore needing less practice than other students? Sure. And anyone who went to grade school in the 70’s and early 80’s will remember having different math and reading groups in their regular classrooms. We don’t stop teaching things explicitly and systematically because some kids learn things more quickly than others do.

We sometimes hear grumblings that not all kids needs phonics or that someone’s child is bored by phonics. Here’s the thing: all children benefit from phonics instruction. The kids who don’t need intensive phonics can read independently or do advanced word study, which is what builds vocabulary and background knowledge. The kids who need more, get more.

According to the 2018- 2019 WY-TOPP scores, only 55% of WY 3rd graders and 53% of WY 10th graders read proficiently. According to the 2019 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), only 40% of Wyoming's 4th graders and 34% of Wyoming’s 8th graders read proficiently. The percentage of students reading proficiently *does not increase* between 3rd and 10th grades.

If a student memorizes their way through the end of second grade and is identified as needing reading help in 3rd grade, the student has three years of gaps to fill! How can we possibly expect our elementary reading interventionists to fix this? And then our secondary special education teachers end up with 15 students in a class who cannot read the words on the page.

When they are explicitly and systematically taught what letters combinations make what sounds, they are empowered with the skills needed to read, rather than guess, unfamiliar words.

Systematically and explicitly teaching phonics is the science, teachers' creativity is the art. Let's empower teachers with more science so they can do more art.

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