

Why K-2?

By Laura Stewart

The beginning years of learning to read are extraordinary! Children are mastering a complex system of sounds and symbols and learning to derive meaning from print. Although it was once thought that learning to read was as natural as learning to speak, a large body of research about reading over the past three decades has provided scientific evidence on how children learn to read and what skills are important to master in beginning reading. Yet according to our latest national report card, the National Association of Educational Progress (NAEP), nearly two-thirds of our fourth graders are not reading proficiently, and the rate of reading failure in high-poverty, minority populations is much higher (NCES, 2013). If the evidence about reading instruction is readily available to us, why aren't all of our children learning to read? Putting evidence into practice is the key.

Instruction really matters

Although some children learn to read quite effortlessly, for most of us, reading is unnatural. Written language has been in existence for a short time in the grand timeline of humanity, and very few of the world's spoken languages have a written component; the brain does not have specific structures devoted to this uniquely human invention (Shaywitz, 2003; Dehaene, 2009). The truth is that few children can "intuit" how the written code works, so instruction really matters. And both the type and the timing of instruction count.

First things first

To build the neural connections necessary for reading, beginning readers first need to be taught the relationship between letters and sounds—phonics—explicitly and systematically. A large body of evidence confirms that systematic, explicit

phonics is the most critical component of beginning reading instruction (Adams, 1990; McCardle & Chhabra, 2004; Christensen & Bowey, 2005; Ehri et al., 2001; Foorman et al., 1998; Foorman et al., 2001; Moats, 1998; NICHD, 2000; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998; Rayner et al., 2001; Tunmer & Nicholson, 2011).

Phonics instruction is systematic when all of the major letter-sound correspondences are thoroughly, explicitly, and intentionally taught in a clearly defined sequence. Measures of both word-attack and comprehension skills show that children who receive *explicit, systematic phonics instruction* outperform children who receive implicit or opportunistic phonics instruction (Christenson & Bowey, 2005; Mehta et al., 2005; Foorman et al., 1998). In a comprehensive review of the research, Torgerson and colleagues concluded: "Systematic phonics instruction within a broad literacy curriculum appears to have a greater effect on children's progress in reading than whole word approaches" (2006, p. 10). Research also shows that phonics instruction has the greatest impact when taught in the early grades and when accompanied by *application to decodable text* (Jenkins et al., 2003; Cheatham & Allor, 2012; Mesmer, 2001). Finally, research findings support the conclusion that systematic phonics is most effective when it is *integrated with all the language arts*, not taught as a separate subject or add-on to an existing program (Grossen, 1997). In sum:

"A large body of research evidence shows that with appropriate, intensive instruction, all but the most severe reading disabilities can be ameliorated in the early grades and students can get on track toward academic success....The methods supported by research are those that are explicit, systematic, cumulative, and multisensory, in that they integrate listening, speaking, reading, and writing." (Moats, 2011, p. 51)

It is imperative in the primary grades that children deeply understand and learn to apply the alphabetic code so that they reach decoding automaticity, the first step in reading fluency. When children reach automaticity and fluency, their brain energy is freed from the task of conscious decoding and available for the task of deeper comprehension. In the intermediate grades, the demands for comprehension of sophisticated content, academic language, and complex text increase dramatically, especially with the advent of the Common Core State Standards. Children who enter third grade reading with automaticity and fluency can confidently tackle grade-appropriate, complex text.

The urgency of early instruction

This foundational understanding of letter-sound relationships needs to happen early on in the acquisition of reading:

“From the first day of kindergarten to the last day of first grade, most children go through an extraordinary transformation as readers. If all goes well, children at the end of first grade know the sounds of all the letters and can form them into words, know the most common sight words, and can read and comprehend simple texts. The K-1 period is distinct from other stages of reading development because during this stage, children are learning all the basic skills of turning print into meaning. From second grade on, children build fluency, comprehension, and vocabulary for reading ever more complex text in many genres, but the K-1 period is qualitatively different in its focus on basic skills.” (Slavin et al., 2009, p. 3)

Success in beginning reading is a key prerequisite for success in reading in the later years. Longitudinal studies (e.g., Juel, 1988) have shown that children with poor reading skills at the end of first grade are unlikely to catch up later on and are likely to have difficulties in reading throughout their schooling. The research is also compelling that students who do not learn to read by the end of second grade will likely struggle with reading throughout their lives (Vaughn & Linan-Thompson, 2003). One in six children who are not reading proficiently in third grade fail to graduate from high school on

time, four times the rate for children with proficient third-grade reading skills (Hernandez et al., 2012, p. 6). Research shows that students who are held back or who drop out of school are often those with poor reading skills (Feister, 2010). Conversely, “Students who are above grade level for reading in grade 3 graduate (high school) and enroll in college at higher rates than students who are at or below grade level” (Lesnick et al., 2010, p. 2).

The urgency of instruction is especially true for our most vulnerable children. “Effective beginning reading programs are important for children of all backgrounds, but for disadvantaged and minority children and for children with learning disabilities, who particularly depend on school to achieve success, effective beginning reading programs are especially important” (Slavin et al., 2009, p. 3).

Early success in reading clearly has life-long implications. Reaching high levels of reading proficiency is absolutely imperative in today’s fast-paced, high-tech world. Teaching children to read in the primary grades is our most urgent task in education.

What about intervention?

Playing “catch up” in grade three is not the answer. A recent longitudinal study by McNamara and colleagues (2011) confirms “as children progressed from kindergarten to Grade 3, those in lower ranks of reading achievement were likely to remain in the lower ranks, and furthermore, at each progressing data collection point struggling readers fell further behind their grade-level reading peers. In other words, as each year passed the variance between strong and struggling readers increased significantly. The authors hypothesized that this finding is consistent with the ‘Matthew effect’—the rich were getting richer while the poor were getting poorer” (p. 421). In fact: “Third grade is an important pivot point in a child’s education, the time when students shift from learning to read and begin reading to learn. Interventions for struggling readers after third grade are seldom as effective as those in the early years” (Hernandez, 2012, p.6).

The real, long-term solution is not remediation and intervention in the intermediate grades. The answer lies in prevention, effectively teaching the fundamentals of reading and writing in the primary grades. The evidence is clear that with research-based instruction, the percentage of first-graders

below the 30th percentile can be reduced to 4-6% (Foorman et al., 1998; Mathes et al., 2005; Vellutino, 2007; Torgesen, 2002). It is critical to choose the best instructional materials and methods to get it right the first time.

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