Reading: Breaking Through the Barriers

A Discussion Guide

By Catherine Abraham and Joyce Gram

Reading: Breaking Through the Barriers
A Discussion Guide

Acknowledgements

The authors sincerely thank Dr. Linda Siegel, John Wilson, Larry Johnson, Heather Maahs, Barb Lund, Kelly Dvorak and Sharlene Drohomereski for their assistance and encouragement in the writing of this guide.

About the Authors

The authors have been involved in parent education in British Columbia for over twenty years. Catherine Abraham has written extensively for parents in the areas of special education, parent support, and policy development. Joyce Gram has written for parents in all areas through newsletters and websites. Both have held numerous executive and advocate positions on school and district parent advisory councils and have worked at the provincial level.

The authors can be reached at **parenteducation@hotmail.com**.

Other guides for parents in this series, available electronically from the authors:

Student Assessment in B.C.'s Public Schools: A Guide for Parents

Building Student Success in B.C.'s Public Schools: A Guide for Parents

Aboriginal Education: A Discussion Guide

Contents

Reading: Breaking Through the Barriers

Reading is a fundamental skill for children and adults alike. Like speech itself, it is the key to knowledge and opens up worlds. But 48% of Canadian adults cannot read well enough to cope in modern society,[1] and 25% of English-speaking kindergarten students are at risk for failing to learn to read.[2]

This is a major problem. Researchers have studied reading intensively for many years—some groundbreaking research dates back to the 1980s and earlier. The problem is not "what do we know?" It is "what do we do?"

Parents are often reminded that reading to their children is important, but they are seldom told why. What does a bedtime story teach a child? Why is reading to a child important after the child reaches kindergarten?

Many children seem to learn to read easily—indeed, some are reading even before they start school. Others struggle and fall behind. If parents and schools are to help all children learn this basic skill, we need to understand the many steps that go into learning to read.

Parents of struggling readers are sometimes told to "wait and see." But research clearly shows that early intervention is far more effective than remediation in later grades. Children who struggle to read can fall further and further behind their peers, jeopardizing their chances for success in school and beyond.

We hope this guide will help you understand the processes and issues that surround learning to read. Every child deserves to read well. Together, parents and schools can make that happen.

[1] Canadian Council on Learning, *Reading the Future: Planning to Meet Canada's Future Literacy Needs*

[2] The percentage is about double (approximately 50%) among kindergarten students for whom English is a second language.

> Few children learn to read books by themselves. Someone has to lure them into the wonderful world of the written word; someone has to show them the way.
>
> —Orville Prescott, *A Father Reads to His Children*

Phonological Awareness

Background

Phonological awareness is the ability to hear the individual sounds that make up words in spoken language. It is the bridge that allows us to "see" spoken language as a collection of words and sounds. This includes

- hearing the sounds that make up words (for example, the sounds *d-o-g* in *dog*)
- recognizing words that rhyme (for example, *ball*, *fall*, *call*)
- deciding whether words begin with the same sounds (for example, *bat*, *bell*, *boy*)

When children learn songs and rhymes, they are beginning to recognize patterning. From there they progress to understanding that sentences are made up of separate words, and finally to seeing that words themselves can be separated into sounds.

What the Research Tells Us

Before they can begin to read or spell, children must understand that written words are made up of sounds. Testing for this phonological awareness is the best predictor of reading failure. All children benefit from explicit phonological instruction in the classroom, but for at-risk children this instruction is critical to learning to read. Pullout programs have not been found to be sufficient—instruction needs to be part of classroom activities.

Research also tells us that instruction in phonological awareness should begin in preschool and kindergarten so that children can learn that written words represent spoken sounds. Once their ears "hear" those sounds, children are prepared to learn to read.

Joseph Torgesen said in 1998, "The most common cause of difficulties acquiring early word reading skills is weakness in the ability to process the phonological features of language. This is perhaps the most important discovery about reading difficulties in the last twenty years."

Are children in your school or district tested in kindergarten for phonological awareness?

Decoding

Background

Once children have acquired some phonological awareness, they are ready to decode words.

"Decoding" means breaking down a word into its separate sounds. The word *cat*, for example, breaks down into three sounds: *c-a-t*. Children must be able to hear and identify those sounds in order to decode the word. Each sound is called a "phoneme," and the ability to distinguish phonemes is called "phonemic awareness."

Children must then learn that every printed word is made up of phonemes and that phonemes are represented by letters of the alphabet.

What the Research Tells Us

Phonological awareness is necessary for building decoding skills. Studies of kindergarten students show that when a reading program incorporates decoding with the continuous teaching of phonemic awareness, students perform better.

In order to decode, children need to be explicitly taught how to sound out words into phonemes. This skill requires a great deal of practice to avoid reliance on pictures or context to guess at words.

Although children learn to recognize and remember some words by rote—rather than having to decode them—their ability to do so is limited by memory. Rote recognition doesn't give a child the necessary tools to decode new words.

The better a child is able to decode, the better she is able to learn to read.

> The logic of all alphabetic languages, including English, is built on the understanding that every word is made up of a sequence of elementary speech or phonemes, for it is the phonemes that are represented by the letters. A failure to notice that spoken words can be broken into phonemes is a major cause of profound reading disability.
>
> *—Early Literacy: A compilation of research, strategies, and resources for teachers and parents*

How explicitly is decoding taught in your school or district?

The Alphabetic Principle and Phonics

Background

The alphabetic principle is the understanding that words are made up of letters that represent sounds.

Phonics is founded on this alphabetic principle. In phonics instruction we teach children the relationship between letters and phonemes and the sounds they make. Children learn to apply their phonological awareness and decoding skills to written words.

Children usually begin learning phonics by learning the sounds of consonants and vowels, vowel combinations, letter combinations and common word parts.

What the Research Tells Us

Children benefit most when phonics instruction begins in kindergarten or grade 1. This instruction needs to be explicit and done in sequence.

Regardless of their socio-economic status, children benefit from explicit phonics instruction. Children who are having difficulty learning to read benefit the most.

Phonics instruction helps children with word recognition, spelling and reading. As children become more fluent at decoding and reading words, they are able to focus on building their comprehension.

> In the initial stages of reading development, learning phoneme awareness and phonics skills and practicing these skills with texts is critical. Children must also acquire fluency and automaticity in decoding and word recognition. Consider that a reader has only so much attention and memory capacity.
>
> —G. Reid Lyon, *Why Reading is Not a Natural Process*

What emphasis does your school or district place on phonics instruction?

Building Fluency and Comprehension

Background

The ultimate goal in teaching reading is to have students comprehend the ideas in a piece of text as they read.

Fluency comes when a student recognizes more and more words on sight and stores them in memory. Vocabulary naturally increases. The more times a child sees a word in text, the more likely she is to recognize the word by sight and avoid making a reading error.

Comprehension means understanding what is read. It does not develop automatically with fluency, and some children benefit from direct instruction in comprehension strategies.

What the Research Tells Us

Learning to read is difficult—reading is not a "natural" behaviour. Some experts have described the processes of learning to read as "finite." By that they mean that a student can only do so many reading processes at a time. Like a tabletop, there is only a limited amount of space for the skills required, and if a student is struggling with decoding, or if she does not have good phonological skills, fluency and comprehension will suffer. A struggling reader may be able to move slowly through text, but she will not be able to absorb what she is reading.

As students progress through each grade level, the demands upon them to read well increase. Students who do not read fluently fall behind. Because they struggle to decode words, they cannot attend to meaning.

Researchers also note that reading materials must be at the right level for students and should be able to hold their interest.

> Competence is reinforcing; those who can read are more likely to read. Those who do read are more likely to be educated. And therein lies our responsibility: to teach with knowledge, skill, and artistry the alphabetic invention that makes all this possible.
>
> —Louisa C. Moats, "Teaching Decoding"

How does your school or district select its reading resources?

The Great Divide on Reading

Background

Many of us recall the "Dick and Jane" readers that formed the basis for reading instruction many years ago. Published in the 1930s, they taught children to read based on a "look and say" method. They replaced phonics programs that had emphasized rote learning of phonics rules.

The importance of making reading creative and interesting led to a new approach to reading called "whole language," which became the preferred method of teaching reading in the 1990s. Phonics was either a small part of whole language teaching or entirely absent.

Whole language was as much a way of thinking about reading as a method of teaching it. It emphasized motivating students by exposing them to reading in real-life settings. Students were encouraged to guess at words by looking at the beginning and ending letters and by using pictures and other clues. The theory was that if students were exposed to an ever-increasing number of whole words, they would be motivated to read them and would learn to remember them.

What the Research Tells Us

There is an overwhelming body of research to support a phonological approach to reading. While many children have learned to read using whole language, research has shown conclusively that this approach is devastating for children at risk for reading difficulties. It is acknowledged, however, that as children learn to read, they must be exposed to materials that are relevant and hold their interest.

Researchers now understand much better the role that phonological awareness and decoding play in learning to read. Reading materials must be carefully chosen so as to be at the right reading level. Phonics instruction cannot stand alone.

Which method of teaching reading is used in your school or district?

The Great Divide and Phonics

Background

Phonics are the tool we use to build the relationship between letters and the sounds they represent. All school districts use phonics to help teach children to read. However, there are many ways phonics can be taught, and these different ways have a profound impact on children's reading development.

When phonics are taught *explicitly*, they are called "explicit" or "synthetic" phonics. Children learn to read by blending the sounds—or phonemes—in a word. For example, a child reads the word *cat* by blending the sounds *c-a-t*. In addition to vowel and consonant sounds, students are explicitly taught the sounds of groups of letters that make a single sound (e.g., *sh*, *ough*, *th*, or *ow*). Explicit phonics do not rely on sight vocabulary.

"Implicit" or "analytic" phonics look at the whole word first. To read a word, students are expected to use their knowledge of similar words, or to look at its context or accompanying pictures. For example, if a student already knows the words *sat* and *bat*, he would learn the word *cat* by recognizing the sound of *at* (called the "rime") and using clues to identify the sound of the letter *c* (called the "onset"). In other words, the student learns to read by dissecting the word into its known parts, then using clues to fill in the gaps.

What the Research Tells Us

Research shows that implicit phonics work for some students. However, this method relies on a student's ever-increasing memory base to learn new words. It also has shortcomings in helping students to read longer, more complex words, and it does not give at-risk students the foundation they need to learn to read.

Explicit phonics work for all students but are particularly helpful for students at risk for reading difficulty. When teachers are properly trained and explicit phonics are directly taught, reading levels are higher for all students.

Research emphasizes that explicit phonics need to be directly taught in the classroom. Classroom instruction can be supplemented by individual or small-group work for students who are at risk.

Research also shows that supplementing implicit phonics with pullout programs for at-risk students does not give these students the skills they need to learn to read. These students tend to fall further and further behind their peers.

How does your school or district track reading levels of students? Are the results linked to methods of teaching reading?

Ongoing Issues

Background

Some issues are consistently mentioned by researchers as problematic despite evidence that might help to resolve them. The most common problems identified in research are

- teacher-training
- early identification of children at risk for reading failure
- intervention

What the Research Tells Us

A great deal of research is not finding its way into teaching practice.

University teacher-training programs do not emphasize the skills necessary to teach children to read, and there is no consistency among programs from one university to another. Behind the scenes, wars still rage among academics over whole language versus phonological instruction.

In many school districts, children at risk are still not identified until grade 3, rather than kindergarten or grade 1. Thus, programs to help these children are remedial rather than preventative—and the success rate for remedial programs is very low. Keith Stanovich described the problem as the "Matthew Effects"—the rich get richer and the poor get poorer—meaning good readers read more and improve their reading skills, while poor readers fall further behind.

Researchers note that intervention often takes place outside the classroom. But research shows that classroom-based intervention is necessary for children to acquire basic skills. Children at risk for reading failure must be taught more skills directly by the teacher.

For a small percentage of students, reading difficulties persist despite intensive intervention. Researchers acknowledge that, for this group, more research is needed on how they can best be helped. These students are more likely to drop out of school, less likely to be employed, and have a higher percentage of mental health issues.

How does your school or district address these issues?

Looking at Children "At Risk"

Background

The literature on reading often refers to children who are "at risk" for reading problems. What is meant by "at risk," and how can research tell us which children are "at risk"?

We know that reading can be affected by socio-economic status and cultural and linguistic background. Testing shows that students from low socio-economic backgrounds and cultural and linguistic heritage other than English may be at higher risk for problems learning to read.

Some children are diagnosed with dyslexia, a neurological condition that affects their ability to read. Dyslexia can range from mild to severe but is not related to intelligence.

What the Research Tells Us

The problems a child experiences learning to read are often not related to the child's ability to learn but to his phonological awareness, ability to "hear" the English language and exposure to the English alphabet.

Children who have not been read to before they enter school may not have experience listening to rhythms and sounds. They may also not have developed an interest in reading—and we know that motivation is key to learning to read.

A number of tools have been developed to assess children at risk for reading difficulties. Researchers note that there are problems with over-predicting and under-predicting, but they agree that assessment should be done as early as possible, preferably in kindergarten.

For children with dyslexia, exposure to reading before school entry may increase their vocabulary, but it will not give them the ability to learn to read without intensive intervention at school.

> We now understand that specific systems in the brain recover sounds from spoken words, and just as in learning any skill, children understand phoneme awareness with different aptitudes and experiences.
>
> —G. Reid Lyon, *Why Reading is Not a Natural Process*

Does your school or district assess for children at risk in kindergarten?

English as a Second Language (ESL) Students

Background

Research tells us that ESL[1] students can be at high risk for reading difficulties. A recent study by Linda Siegel and Nonie Lesaux tracked 1,000 students in the North Vancouver School District from kindergarten through to grade 6. The group included students from diverse socio-economic, cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

The students were tested in kindergarten for phonological awareness, and language and memory skills. The testing showed that 25% of those whose first language was English and about 50% of those whose first language was not English were at risk for reading problems.

Teachers received extensive training and professional development in classroom-based intervention. All students were given explicit instruction in phonological awareness and decoding. At-risk students received more focused intervention in small groups, and student progress was constantly monitored and assessed.

What the Research Tells Us

After appropriate intervention, only 5% of both groups had reading difficulties at the end of grade 1. By grade 6, only 1.5% continued to have difficulties. Lesaux said, "What decreased over time was the number of kids who had to go down to the resource centre in the later years. It's pay now or pay later."

Siegel and Lesaux affirmed that the development of phonological awareness skills is particularly important for ESL students, and that this will require more intensive instruction. New vocabulary must be intentionally taught and incorporated into classroom activities.

Especially surprising was the finding that bilingualism is not necessarily an impediment if teachers are well trained in providing a balanced literacy program. ESL students in this study performed at or above grade level by grade 2.

[1] Also referred to as English Language Learners or ELL.

> But why, by second grade, were some students who spoke no English in kindergarten achieving higher reading skills than their native English-speaking peers? Lesaux credits what she calls a metalinguistic awareness of the bilingual kids that exists precisely because they are learning English as a second language. "They're much more tuned into language than the other kids," she says. "In many ways, they were doing a lot more work around language than the monolinguals, for whom language is much more unconscious."
>
> —Beth Potier, "Research on ESL children has surprising results"

How does your school or district teach reading to English Second Language students?

What Can Parents Do?

Background

We know that reading is a complex skill, one that improves as a number of specific sub-skills are acquired. Researchers have compared this to climbing a set of stairs—to reach the top, each step must be climbed.

In the introduction to this guide, we said that parents are often reminded that reading to their children is important, but they are seldom told why. What does a bedtime story teach a child? How does reading to a one-year-old relate to the child's learning to read at school?

What the Research Tells Us

The more a child is exposed to reading, the more likely the child is to acquire the prerequisite skills for reading. Children must learn that words on a page have meaning and that reading is done from left to right and from top to bottom. Rhyming words and repeating lines help a child develop an "ear" for language—she begins to appreciate the sounds of words. Parents can also start teaching their children the letters of the alphabet and the sounds they make

Reading helps children expand their thinking skills, learn to concentrate and enlarge their vocabulary. Children who have been read to in childhood are more motivated to learn to read, and they appreciate that reading is a gateway to new ideas.

Even children without this background, and children who are dyslexic, can be taught to read, but the instruction must be much more intensive to develop phonological awareness. These children are at higher risk of failure. If the instruction does not give them all the tools they need, if every step is not covered, they may never experience the joy of reading.

The more you read, the more things you will know.
The more that you learn, the more places you'll go.
—Dr. Seuss, *I Can Read With My Eyes Shut!*

References and Resources

Armbruster, Bonnie B., Fran Lehr and Jean Osborn. *A Child Becomes a Reader: Proven Ideas From Research for Parents (Birth Through Preschool)*. National Institute for Literacy, 2006. http://www.nifl.gov/partnershipforreading/publications/pdf/low_res_child_reader_B-K.pdf

Canadian Council on Learning. *Reading the Future: Planning to Meet Canada's Future Literacy Needs*. 2008. http://www.ccl-cca.ca/CCL/Reports/ReadingFuture/

ETA Cuisenaire. *Comprehensive Literacy Resource for Kindergarten Teachers*. http://www.etacuisenaire.com/pdf/kindergarten/chapter_2.pdf

Jenkins, Joe and Randi O'Connor. *Early Identification and Intervention for Young Children with Reading/Learning Disabilities*, 2001. http://eric.ed.gov/ERICDocs/data/ericdocs2sql/content_storage_01/0000019b/80/19/6d/1e.pdf

Juel, Connie. *Keys to Early Reading Success: Word Recognition and Meaning Vocabulary*. Pearson Education, Inc. http://www.pearsonschool.com/live/assets/200747/ReaAutMon0505560ReadJuel_4006_1.pdf

Lyon, G. Reid. *Why Johnny Can't Decode*. LD Online, 1997. http://www.ldonline.org/article/6395?theme=print

Lyon, G. Reid. *Why Reading is Not a Natural Process*, LD Online, 2000. http://www.ldonline.org/article/6396

Moats, Louisa. *Whole-Language High Jinks: How to Tell When Scientifically-Based Reading Instruction Isn't*. Thomas B. Fordham Institute, 2007. http://www.edexcellence.net/doc/Moats2007.pdf

Moats, Louisa C. "Teaching Decoding." *American Educator*, Spring/Summer 1998. http://www.aft.org/pubs-reports/american_educator/spring_sum98/moats.pdf

Moats, Louisa C. *Teaching Reading* Is *Rocket Science: What Expert Teachers of Reading Should Know and Be Able To Do*. American Federation of Teachers, 1999. http://www.aft.org/pubs-reports/downloads/teachers/rocketsci.pdf

Potier, Beth. "Research on ESL children has surprising results." *Harvard University Gazette*, November 13, 2003. http://www.news.harvard.edu:80/gazette/2003/11.13/03-lesaux.html

Prescott, Orville. *A Father Reads to His Children: An Anthology of Prose and Poetry*. New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., c1965.

Siegel, Linda. Summary of research, University of British Columbia, 2001. http://www.research-works.ca/PDFfiles/Words-Siegel.pdf

Spear-Swerling, Louise and Robert Sternberg. *What Science Offers Teachers of Reading*. LD Online, 2001. http://www.ldonline.org/article/9941?theme=print

Torgesen, Joseph K. "Catch Them Before They Fall: Identification and Assessment to Prevent Reading Failure in Young Children." *American Educator*, Spring/Summer 1998. http://www.aft.org/pubs-reports/american_educator/spring_sum98/torgesen.pdf

Torgesen, Joseph K. "Preventing Early Reading Failure and Its Devastating Downward Spiral." *American Educator*, Fall 2004. http://www.aft.org/pubs-reports/american_educator/issues/fall04/reading.htm