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PHONICS AND POLITICS:  
"SOUNDING OUT"  
THE CONSEQUENCES

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**B**ILLS HAVE BEEN INTRODUCED INTO THE LEGISLATURE OF SEVERAL STATES recently requesting that intensive, systematic phonics be the primary mode of instruction in the primary grades of all public schools. In North Carolina, such a law was passed in the House (NC HB917, 1995) and resulted in strong language favoring systematic phonics in an omnibus education bill that passed both houses (NC Chapter 716, SB1139). In Ohio, legislation has put more teeth into an existing bill. Legislation similar to the North Carolina Bill has also been introduced in several other states with mixed results. In some states, a revision of state school standards is being used to bring a stronger emphasis to phonics in the early grades.

The response of educators to these initiatives has varied widely. The majority seem to view these efforts with some concern but have not voiced their reservations. Only a few have offered strong vocal opposition or support. In general, however, most educators have tended to treat these events rather lightly. They assume that reasonable legislators know enough about education to defeat such bills or they assume that professional organizations and lobbyists will carry the responsibility of responding to these proposals.

The tendency to dismiss or overlook these legislative proposals is both misguided and dangerous for at least three reasons. First, although these political initiatives may not have the support of the majority of parents and teachers, they seem to emanate from a vigorous, organized, politically astute minority. To ignore or dismiss these efforts is dangerous because the advocates are probably much better at politics than educators, either individually or collectively.

A second reason that we need to pay attention to these proposals is that their acceptance by so many legislators and lay persons suggests some rather widespread dissatisfaction among the public with the state of literacy education in the public schools. If this dissatisfaction is not adequately addressed, external initiatives to change and/or control the schools will find fertile soil. If schools are producing students who cannot read and write at acceptable levels, then it is our professional responsibility to make strong efforts to improve. Dissatisfaction is also an indication that teaching practices may be in conflict with traditional beliefs and values about teaching and learning. If so, schools need to educate the public and in doing so present a different image and attitude to foster understanding, cooperation, and trust. Many schools or classrooms are doing an excellent job in stimulating and developing literacy. The public needs to be made more aware of the good work being done in today's schools.

A third, very important reason to be concerned about these legislative mandates on phonics is that these bills will have serious negative effects on educational outcomes. State legislators are motivated by a desire to improve literacy education; no one disputes their intentions to improve our schools. However, the solution they propose (intensive phonics) could produce unexpected harmful and costly consequences. This last point will be a major focus of this paper. Educators, legislators, parents, and taxpayers need a clear understanding of the damage that can result from mandating a particular method of teaching, specifically intensive systematic phonics, as the primary method of literacy instruction in the early years of schooling.

The specific provisions usually contained in the proposals would require teachers in the primary grades (K-3) to spend the majority of their language arts and reading time in direct instruction on letter names, sound-letter associations, syllabication, phonetic analysis, conventional spelling, and traditional grammar. The specific language of the bill that was passed by the North Carolina House reads as follows:

Instruction in the language arts component of communication skills in kindergarten through third grade shall include as the primary method the use of early and direct intensive systematic phonics. 'Early and direct intensive systematic phonics' is a method of teaching beginners to read, pronounce, and spell words by learning the letter-sound associations of individual letters, letter groups, and especially syllables, as well as the principles governing these associations.' [NC House Bill 917. The language of this bill was later somewhat softened and qualified in the Senate and through House/Senate negotiation.]

This proposal sounds reasonable enough to many people. Readers of texts written in the English language must be responsive to the alphabetic principle. There is even an impressive body of research indicating that an important distinction between good readers and poor readers of almost any age is the degree to which they know sound-symbol relations and the speed in which they respond to letters and letter patterns (Adams, 1990; Just & Carpenter, 1987; Rayner & Pollatsek, 1989; Stanovich, 1981, 1991). But there is also a mass of evidence suggesting that the difference between children who are good and poor readers can be accounted for by (a) differences in language and literacy learning before school entrance and (b) the amount of time children spend reading books and stories in meaningful situations. (Adams, 1990; Allington, 1983, 1993; Clay, 1991; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988).

This paper will not argue that phonics knowledge is undesirable or that students should not develop automatic rapid response to letters and letter patterns. However, legislative proposals which would mandate intensive phonics as the method to teach beginning reading are based upon some unwarranted assumptions. These proposals assume that:

*Phonics knowledge is a prerequisite for reading and that strong doses of phonics early are the best guarantees of literacy success;*

*Phonics knowledge is sufficient to establish "the basics" in reading; therefore, training in sound-symbol associations and phonics rules should be the methods of beginning reading instruction, and that over-teaching provides a necessary safeguard; and*

Rather than *building on strengths*, a diagnostic-prescriptive approach is recommended, teaching those elements that a child does not know or is not yet able to use.

These beliefs about how phonics knowledge develops often lead to the mistaken conclusion that any approach that emphasizes meaning is an attempt to avoid the use of sound-symbol cues while reading. This paper will present arguments to counter these commonplace assumptions about the role of phonics in learning to read. In addition, this paper will explain the *costs and consequences of these legislative proposals* which, as written, are potentially very harmful to many children in their efforts to become literate. The paper will close with a few observations about *the obligations of schools and educators* toward the development of true literacy.

## **The Illusion of Phonics as a Prerequisite for Reading**

The notion that phonics knowledge is the determiner of skilled reading performance is only partially true; it is largely an illusion. Knowledge of letter-sound associations is a necessary condition for reading skill to develop beyond the beginning stages. Children do not acquire sight recognition of a large number of words unless they have

established a tacit understanding of sound associations for consonants and most common letter combinations. Research studies show a very strong relationship between reading ability and a number of aspects of what might be called phonics knowledge, such as phonemic awareness, ability to read pseudo words, and ability to write letters to represent sounds (Adams, 1990; Juel, Griffith, & Gough, 1986; Tunmer & Nesdale, 1985).

Research also shows tremendous differences among children in their understandings of other literacy-related concepts, such as directionality, acquaintance with the visual aspects of print, and the meaning of such concepts as *letter*, *word*, *story*, *first*, and *last* (Clay, 1982, 1991, 1993; Goodman, 1982; Sulzby & Teal, 1991). Other significant differences exist in children's acquaintance with narrative language, with the structure of stories, and with the literate language of books (Cazden, 1992). These differences are related to reading ability and the ability to acquire what is traditionally called phonics knowledge. Research shows that limited experience in these areas in the preschool years not need stand in the way of reading and writing development if a child enters a rich literate classroom environment and receives skillful contingent teaching. Children can develop skill and automaticity in processing print if they are allowed to use and shown how to use their meaning-making and language abilities along with their beginning knowledge of print and letter-sound relationships as they learn how to engage in the complex process of reading (Clay, 1993; Hiebert & Taylor, 1994).

Perhaps the illusion of phonics knowledge as the determiner of reading ability can best be seen by envisioning two contrasting students, Myrna who is advanced for her age and Verle who is struggling with reading and lagging well behind his age-mates. Before entering school, Myrna had acquired a broad constellation of concepts and abilities that put her well on the way to reading and writing before she entered formal instruction. She understood at an early age that print represents spoken language messages and she had become familiar with the specialized language of books and stories. She had learned to use language as a tool for reasoning through many extended conversations with adults. She had learned the names and forms of many letters and had learned the directional conventions of books and print. Myrna had developed good awareness of the sounds of language and could manipulate rhyme and alliteration. She had seen her parents reading and writing in many situations and enjoyed trying out her own written messages, inventing ways to write down what she wanted to convey.

School phonics lessons have been easy for Myrna and for children like her. These lessons allow her to call up what she already knows and to use that knowledge in different ways. She may enjoy the manipulation of words and sounds and take pride in high grades on her worksheets. But there is a good possibility she will be bored by a steady diet of this work and that she will need opportunities to read and write in pursuit of her own interests in order to maintain her enthusiasm for reading. A curriculum emphasizing drill on phonics elements will tend to pull Myrna's reading abilities back toward the mean of the class and greatly reduce opportunities to develop her full potential as a critical, creative reader and writer with wide-ranging interests.

The low-progress reader, Verle, is a stark contrast. He has made little progress in learning to read; therefore, the teacher may think he is unintelligent or learning disabled. But a closer look at his learning history shows that he has had stories read to him only two or three times before entering school. He has had very limited opportunity to

engage in conversations with adults and consequently does not use language very effectively to communicate outside his family. Verle may not have learned the directional conventions of books and print. He is quite confused about the meaning of terms like *word*, *letter*, *line*, *page*, *sound*, *same*, and *different*. He has had little experience with writing and does not seem to understand that letters like *s*, *r*, and *e* must always be formed with the same spatial orientation. He knows that print carries the message of stories, but he seldom is looking where the teacher would like to have him look because of his numerous confusions. When the teacher asks Verle to tell what letter a word starts with, he makes random guesses. Although he seems to learn letters and words during phonics lessons, he retains them poorly.

These examples illustrate that phonics knowledge as a prerequisite for literacy is too simplistic a view. Phonics knowledge arises after or in conjunction with a host of early concepts about print and about language. Phonics lessons are easy for many children like Myrna because they have already developed a facility with language that includes linguistic awareness; because they have already learned a number of literacy conventions and concepts and because they are acquainted with the purposes of reading and writing, and even literate styles. Although it appears these children learn phonics early, it is really a fairly late accomplishment for them because their literacy learning began three or four years ago in a conducive home and community environment.

An early school focus on letters and sounds seems appropriate for high progress children because they can be successful, but for many low progress children, such as Verle, it is often a disaster. They lack many of the prerequisite concepts for this abstract kind of learning. They have limited or confused knowledge of the conventions of books and print. And they usually lack linguistic awareness—the ability to focus their attention on language and be aware of the *sounds* the teacher is asking them to relate to letters. For these reasons, they fail on phonics tasks and feel inadequate and stupid. Because their experience with books and narrative stories is very limited, they see little reason for attempting to learn to read, and they see even less reason to try to learn those strange symbols and sounds the teacher believes are so important. A curriculum of systematic, intensive phonics for all children raises the learning threshold for many children to an almost impossible level. Far from enabling all children to learn to read, this proposal would result in failed learning experiences for a significant percentage of children.

### Phonics Knowledge is Not Sufficient

Research concerning the reading process shows that phonics knowledge, although needed, is not enough. For the adult reader, and especially for the beginning reader, letter-sound cues are only one of several sources of information that must be used. The use of meaning plays a vital role for readers of any age. It is the goal of reading—if the text does not make sense and if the reader does not want to find out what it says, reading stops. Meaning potentials are an important aid in figuring out new words; i.e., the meaning of the sentence or story up to a point may significantly reduce the alternatives from which a reader may choose and make word identification faster and easier. Meaning also supplies confirmation that the reader is on target or it may signal that something has gone wrong.

The flow of language (syntax) also plays a very important role in reading at all levels. Readers construct sentences or language units in their heads while reading. These language units aid word identification by establishing expectations and narrowing the range of alternatives. Grammatical units provide a means of constructing and retaining meaning until it can be stored in longer-term memory. If the syntactic structure or the flow of the sentence does not come out right, readers often reread or stop reading.

Phonics knowledge and word knowledge are the other important elements in reading ability. For skilled readers, printed words signal almost immediate identification and meaning association. Mature readers tend to bring into their visual focus most of the words on the page and usually notice quickly any misprints or spelling irregularities (Just & Carpenter, 1987; Rayner & Pollatsek, 1989). However, phonics and word knowledge are only one of the important cuing systems that all readers depend upon as they read.

The argument for teaching phonics first is often justified by evidence of the success of children in school programs which teach letters, sounds, and some words before students read connected sentences or stories. The prior learning that allows many children (such as Myrna) to succeed in such an approach has been discussed above. Learning letters, sounds, and words first may work even for some children who do not come from home environments that fostered early literacy. But for a significant percentage of children (estimated at 10 to 30 percent, depending upon region and context) this learning approach will prove extremely difficult, delaying the time that they learn to read and producing a high rate of failure (Allington, 1993; Clay, 1991; McGill-Franzen & Allington, 1991).

Many children who seem to be successful in the item learning required by these programs (i.e., learning letters and sounds) still cannot read. They find the memorization of associations easy and this becomes their habit of learning. Reading, on the other hand, is complex problem-solving. It requires subliminal (without conscious attention) processing of several kinds of information simultaneously. Learning how to read is different from learning phonics. It requires practice in reading real texts to obtain meaning. One of the most consistent conclusions of reading theorists is that children learn to read by reading (Adams, 1990; Bussis & Chittenden, 1987; Clay, 1979, 1991; Gibson & Levin, 1995; Just & Carpenter, 1987; Smith, 1994). Research seems to converge upon the notion that the complex mental processing and the integration of information from a variety of sources can only be acquired through the process of engaging in reading and writing activity during which the mind is focused on the meaning of the text. The comparison to learning to drive is quite apt; a person cannot learn just by practicing isolated skills, such as turning the steering wheel or manipulating the brake and clutch pedals. You have to learn to do those things while making the car move in some direction and while keeping a watchful eye on what is around you.

### **Building on Strengths or Teaching to Weakness**

The proposal to focus beginning reading on intensive, systematic phonics is a proposal to teach to children's weaknesses. It assumes that the way to teach is to test, find out what the person does not know, drill on those items, then retest. Many learning theorists now reject this approach, especially for learning complex processes like reading. They urge teaching to a child's strengths, which means beginning with what he or she knows and using that knowledge to develop new learnings. These

experts also advise that we begin with the largest units the student can attend to, and that we make sure a child can distinguish a difference before we ask him to learn a name for those units (Clay, 1991, 1993; Smith, 1994).

This advice translates into the recommendation that phonics knowledge should not be the beginning point of literacy for children. For children like Myrna, phonics knowledge was not the beginning point. These children have been read to and have talked about books and stories with adults for several years before entering school. Gradually, after learning much about how books work, they became aware of word units on the page and began to make connections between letters and sounds. Their phonics knowledge grew largely out of their own efforts to make sense of books, using what they already knew. A curriculum that begins with phonics deprives the lower-progress students of the same opportunities to build an understanding of how books and stories work and then use what they know in order to learn new things.

A heavy emphasis on intensive, systematic phonics in beginning reading is dysfunctional for two reasons: (a) for many children it is too abstract and advanced in relation to newly developing concepts about print and awareness of language and sounds; and (b) for all children, it focuses attention on one aspect of reading (letters, words, and sounds) at the expense of meaning and language structure; information that is essential for reading at any level.

Unfortunately, many teachers have not been trained to teach to children's strengths. Their training should develop the observational skills to know what children are able to do and to determine what they are ready to learn next. Teachers should be taught how to *scaffold* instruction so that children are encouraged to do independently what they can and be assisted in doing what they cannot yet do alone; meanwhile teaching through demonstration and assisted performance those things that the child is now ready to learn. There is a clear need to improve teachers' abilities to help all children learn to read and write, but mandating a method will not produce the desired results. Mandating intensive, systematic phonics will drastically limit the tools and the decisions teachers can make.

## How Useful Phonics Knowledge Develops

**S**killful, automatic recognition of words and a sensitivity to letter-sound associations are characteristics of good readers. Lack of skill in these areas, on the other hand, is usually a characteristic of poor readers (though not always: some people who are rather weak in these skills may qualify as good readers, even by the definitions given by cognitive reading psychologists). To understand the role of phonics knowledge in reading, we need to ask: (a) why these differences arise, and (b) how skill in these areas develops.

It has been suggested earlier that many children fail to develop fluent phonics knowledge because the teaching has begun at too high a level. These children have been asked to try to learn and use initial letter sounds in reading when they are not aware of phonemes (sounds), when they still cannot identify many letters, and when they have had little exposure to the meaningful purposes of reading. Such inappropriate instruction can explain why many children fail and perhaps explain some of the differences in achievement.

A second explanation of difference may be found in the quantity of literacy experiences children have. There are huge differences between children in the number

of books they have been exposed to before they enter school (Taylor, 1989) and there are huge differences in the amount of reading that children do after they enter school (Allington, 1983). We know that the associations of sound patterns with letter patterns are built up largely through practice (Adams, 1990) and that the most productive practice involves reading books and stories for meaning (Clay, 1991). Massive amounts of practice develop fluency and flexibility in word recognition, skill in the visual analysis of word elements, and rapid association of sound patterns with quickly identified letter combinations. A heavy focus on phonics instruction may become an impediment to reading development by drastically reducing the amount of time available for extensive, meaningful reading that will develop their abilities further.

A third explanation may be that many students take a very passive, rather indifferent approach to phonics learning. Because they are asked to follow adult-determined sequences of instruction, and because they are asked to practice skills in isolation, these children see little purpose for learning about letter and sound patterns. Unlike children like Myrna, they do not readily see relationships between letter patterns and words that look alike and sound alike. And they do not transfer what they have learned from phonics lessons into the act of reading real texts.

It could also be that there are differences among learners in their predilections for learning about phonics. Some people may find it harder to focus on orthographic features of words or they may simply prefer to pay no attention to detail that is not absolutely necessary, preferring instead to rely on the redundancy of cues available during reading. Individual characteristics, however, probably play a much smaller role in explaining difference than quantity and quality of learning opportunities and a passive approach to learning.

Many people develop a high degree of implicit knowledge of phonics through their literacy experiences. Explicit teaching of phonics is another way that phonics knowledge can be developed. Just as there are dangers of creating an imbalance in reading programs by an overemphasis on phonics, there is also danger that a reading program may be imbalanced in the opposite direction. Some children may need more guidance than they might receive in a program that relies exclusively on the reading and writing of whole text. Phonics instruction is most useful when it is tailored to the individual child, when it builds upon current knowledge, when it is integrated with writing experiences, and when it allows children to learn to integrate their phonics knowledge into the reading and writing of meaningful text. Group lessons that are short, lively, and exploratory can be useful, but there is no guarantee that children will transfer knowledge from isolated phonics sessions into their reading repertoires. It is misguided to believe that children will learn to read by learning and then applying phonics rules. Readers learn to respond automatically to specific letter combinations. We become conditioned through reading experience to respond to words like *lath*, *rasp*, *stack* with the short *a* vowel sound, but we respond to most words beginning with *wa* (e.g., *wattle*, *waffle*, and *want*) with a different sound of *a* and to *hold*, *both*, and *host* with a long *o* sound. Conscious rules seem to have nothing to do with this; in fact most of us were never taught any rules to cover these cases.

Readers must learn to respond quickly and automatically to letter patterns in short words and quickly perceive divisions in longer words. For example, they need to see quickly that *accommodate* breaks into *ac-com-mo-date* and they need to have a strategy to attack the first two syllables either as *AC-com*, or *ac-COM* (capitals indicate stress). Advocates of systematic phonics assume that children have to learn the associations



first and then they apply them to the task of reading for meaning. What seems more reasonable, based upon the research evidence and extensive experience and observation, is that children learn the associations and many more strategies and associations than phonics teachers are even aware of, in the act of problem-solving words in meaningful reading situations that present just the right amount of new learning (Adams, 1990; Rayner & Pollatsek, 1989; Smith, 1994). But they have to be able to do so while they are carrying in their heads the meaning of the story, the syntax of the word group they are processing, and even the syllabic stress patterns of individual words.

## **The Costs of Direct Instruction and a Curriculum of Control**

**R**eading is more than a skill; it is an attitude, a habit of mind. Many high school (and college) graduates who are quite skilled in literacy have an aversion to reading and writing. The conditions that foster the habits of reading and writing certainly do not include coercion. The conditions which foster lifelong engagement in literacy include opportunities to read or write about topics of personal interest, opportunities to choose what to read or write about, and opportunities to share ideas through reading and writing and discussions of texts.

Many teachers and educators have demonstrated that it is possible to develop solid understandings of phonics, spelling, and writing conventions without sacrificing the conditions that foster a love of reading and writing and a literate mind. Yet far too many students enter college with negative attitudes toward reading and writing and little confidence in their own literate abilities. Analysis of these students' reports reveals that they came from schools with a curricular focus on phonics knowledge and language conventions and instructional practices which centered on teaching to weakness.

Public concern about literacy levels is understandable and probably warranted. Although there is strong evidence that schools are actually doing better today than ever before (National Assessment of Educational Progress, 1991), it is also clear that the demands for literacy are higher in two directions: (a) there is no longer any productive work for those who cannot read and (b) the level of literacy and critical thinking required of all citizens is higher than has ever been expected before. Previously, a few people reached these heights because of inherent abilities combined with rich opportunities within their own homes and communities. We now expect all students to reach high levels, yet we are a long way from reaching that goal. Phonics knowledge is only one aspect of reading ability. We must be just as concerned about the development of critical comprehension skills, the desire to read, the ability to learn through reading, and the appreciation of reading as we are about the ability to pronounce words accurately and the literal recall of printed messages.

## **The Obligation of Schools Toward the Development of Literacy**

**A** number of other lines of argument might be taken in discussing the consequences of initiatives that press for intensive phonics as the basis of beginning reading education. What has been offered here is incomplete partly because of my own limitations as a writer, but partly because collective knowledge of these topics is incomplete. Despite the mass of research and writing about phonics and reading, we still do not completely understand or agree concerning: (a) the relationships between

language and print, (b) the physical and mental processes involved in reading, and (c) the processes of learning to read and write. Many phonics advocates are distrustful of educators and researchers; they probably know less about these topics than the professionals, but seem to be quite sure that they know more. The suspicion and distrust that surround these arguments are counterproductive, but perhaps the blame for these attitudes must be shared by both sides. These thoughts lead to some closing remarks, some of which add emphasis, others of which are postscripts. I believe all worthy of notice.

Educators and reading experts must not ignore or dismiss the complaints or the arguments from phonics advocates. They need to take seriously their responsibility to make sure that children learn to read and write adequately and feel confident of their abilities.

Teachers need to learn to observe more closely and pay serious attention to what their students know and can do, and the level at which they can learn most effectively. We cannot let students become bored because school is too easy or fail because it is too hard or inappropriate. We know how to teach almost every child to read, so we have an obligation to structure our schools and conduct our educational practices to be sure that we put that knowledge to use.

Whatever method is used to teach children to read and write, the conditions of schooling should foster enjoyment of reading and writing and should promote literacy in its fullest sense. They must foster and encourage the acquisition of conventions without letting this concern hinder appropriate developmental considerations, the provision of helpful scaffolding during instruction, and the acceptance of approximations during learning.

Educators must realize that new approaches may challenge traditional values and learn to step lightly in talking to other teachers and to parents and lay persons. They must acknowledge concerns while providing convincing evidence that the approach they advocate really works. Lay persons must recognize the professional competence of teachers and educators, but continually ask that schools and teachers be accountable for results.

The knowledge and practices needed to improve literacy instruction do exist, but they are not widely accepted and applied in school practice. If we truly wish to make our schools productive for all citizens we must observe closely what happens with real learners in real schools, and we must continue to engage in discussions that extend knowledge and reexamine unproductive and unwarranted assumptions. If battles over control are thrust upon us, we must defend and express our expertise and work to avert attacks on our schools and our children.

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