

## 'The Secret Life' of Phonics

Increased political scrutiny and pressure to 'get kids up to standard' is faced every day by many dedicated and hard working educators across the globe. Here in Australia, we have, unfortunately, followed a similar journey to United Kingdom and United States. High stakes testing did not improve learning outcomes for children there, and actually increased much of the negative impact such as low teacher morale, narrow and rote learning and the decline of play, the Arts and creativity. Still, Australia follows.

The "Phonics Battles" are not new to education, but they have been given new life in the current high stakes political agenda to get higher reading scores on standardised tests. In the highly commercial and competitive marketplace, publishers have supported a rush of packaged programmes and books that promise to solve all reading problems by rote teaching phonics. If only it was that simple.



This newsletter does not give adequate room to explore the role of phonics in literacy, but I will endeavour to share my main concerns about teaching phonics solely using a packaged programme.

It is important to state clearly that I believe phonics is a critically important part of learning to be literate. I usually see children use their phonic knowledge more in their emergent writing before using it when reading, but of course they are intricately

related. I do believe, however, that phonics is not a pre-requisite for reading. Most children will begin to read (ie: make meaning from symbol including in their imaginative play, and when playing with the alphabet and graphic symbols) well before they have mastered complete phonic knowledge.

This is not to say I believe we should not teach phonics. On the contrary, I believe it is important to teach phonic knowledge as one of the tools we use to read; just not at the expense of comprehension and joyful reading experiences. I have met many children who can decode almost any text given to them, but are unable to talk about what they have read. It is like when I read German – after five years of learning German many many years ago I can decode the text and make a pretty good job of pronouncing the words, but I have very little idea of what it all means. These children have learnt that "reading is saying words" or "sounding out words", not what I want them to learn: "reading is thinking and making sense of the text" and "something I enjoy doing".

My concerns with many packaged phonics programmes can be summarised as:

- They often promote a "worksheet pedagogy" that I believe undervalues and underestimates the capacity of children to learn. It is more about the ease of the teaching than the rigor of the learning.

- The scope and sequence of teaching individual sounds and letters can be either too slow or too fast for many children. If you were to follow the suggested sequence there is little room for differentiation.
- Mnemonics that are taught to help children to remember letters and sounds can be very confusing: they often don't follow a logical pattern so the mnemonic for one letter might be linked to its shape; the next mnemonic is linked to one of the sounds the letter can represent at the beginning of a word; and the next mnemonic might be connected to an animal that makes that sound but the name of the letter is a different beginning sound to the letter the child is trying to remember. For many children, and I would suggest, for many children with learning difficulties, this adds an extra layer of complexity that is simply not needed. (Many thanks to Robyn Kentwell, speech pathologist, for this insight).
- Some programmes suggest to children that each letter represents only one sound. While I can see that it can be helpful to learn the most common sounds, I again think it underestimates what children are capable of. And what if you are taught that c says /c/ like in cat, but your name is Celeste or /ch/ is like a train sound but your name is Michele and when you try to write train like *chan* it is wrong. I believe in exploring these variations honestly with children and have successfully taught five and six year olds to explore all the various sounds a /c/ or any other letter pattern can make through an inquiry approach. Children understand this when the pedagogy supports them to construct their own understandings, plus gives them many opportunities to read, write, draw and play each day.
- It is important for children to learn phonic knowledge. They need, however, to understand why they are learning it: not just to complete a worksheet or join in a song, but to use it when they write and read. It is essential for teachers to explicitly connect the learning of phonics to reading and writing experiences during the day and not keep it separate in a "Phonics Time". This is true for any phonics programme, whether commercially produced or teacher-designed. I worry though that many commercial programmes recommend so much direct instruction and worksheet pedagogy that there leaves little time for authentic reading and writing during a busy school week. I remember Diane Snowball stressing that real reading and writing needs to be the majority of learning time, and phonics (or spelling) should be a small part of the total literacy programme.

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