



The Role of Phonics in Reading and Writing - My Perspective

by Lisa Burman

In Australia, UK, and USA, there is a renewed interest in the role of phonics in reading and writing. I know this is coming from increased pressure that sites and systems are feeling in the educational landscape of high-stakes testing and accountability. It is also politically driven. I believe this accountability is narrowly defined – or more that the criteria for this accountability is narrow. It often comes from a medical-model of special education, a 'one size fits all' approach and a deficit image of the child's capacity to learn.

Recently, more teachers and school leaders have been asking me, *"But does this mean we can still teach with a Writing/Reading Workshop approach that we so believe in?"* and *"Do we need to have a commercial programme to teach phonics?"* My short answers are: "Yes" and "No".

What I firmly believe is: teachers and educational leaders need to be well-informed and knowledgeable about the role of phonics in print-literacy. We also need to be savvy and check the sources of our information, asking questions such as:

- Is there is a conflict of interest, such as making profit through selling a product.
- Is the source qualified and experienced in pedagogy?
- Does the research cited talk about causation or correlation? (There is a significant difference in what this means.)
- Does this research show transference of learning outcomes to real reading and writing, or only increased scores on an isolated test?

As an Australian educator, I go to the position statements from Australia's peak literacy professional body – ALEA (Australian Literacy Educators Association) – and researchers and pedagogues that I know directly relate to teaching in real classroom situations with groups of children. Yes, it is essential that we also have specific strategies for children with special rights and learning challenges, but often these modifications are not necessary for all children. *(NB. I also hold a Bachelor of Special Education and decades of experience in literacy intervention.)*

If educators – teachers and leaders - are not knowledgeable about the place of phonics in literacy, the risk, I believe, is the seduction of commercial programmes that promise to 'fix the problems'. (I also have a problem with such a deficit view of the child of having to be fixed, but that's another topic!).

As someone who has specialised in the learning and teaching of literacy for over 25 years (and **directly taught**, in partnerships with their families, an estimated 600+ children to read), my perspective is:

we need to intentionally teach phonic knowledge.

It is not something that is 'caught'. I think many early readers and writers use phonic knowledge more in their approximated spelling at first and so enter into the code-breaking part of literacy through writing (hence my passion for bookmaking and building a strong identity as a reader and writer).

So if we agree that phonic knowledge is to be taught, the next question is **how?**

Teaching phonics doesn't have to be an area where we forget our values, learning philosophy and our belief in a competent image of the child. Too often, I see teachers and schools who proclaim with pride how they see children as competent and capable, embrace a socio-constructivist perspective of learning and a playful-inquiry pedagogical stance...only to use a work-sheet, lock-step and one-size-fits-all approach to spelling/phonics. It doesn't make sense to me.

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As teachers of young readers and writers, we must ensure we don't unintentionally give children only one strategy as readers and spellers. Many children I work with who are 'stuck' in their reading and spelling development only have one strategy - to sound out. Their Running Records for example, show this so clearly (when we analyse miscues and not just use Running Records to find an accuracy rate and instructional level). An analysis of their spelling approximations often also reveals their reliance on one strategy to spell words.

Tessa Daffern, from the University of Canberra, also found this in her research into spelling:

"The results of Phase Two show that high-achieving spellers utilise a broad range of spelling strategies and tend to coordinate multiple linguistic processes when spelling a single word. On the other hand, low-achieving spellers heavily rely on phonological processing and some inaccurate orthographic processing."

Daffern, 2016

<https://researchoutput.csu.edu.au/ws/portalfiles/portal/9316782/84774>

"Is there a sequence we should follow to teach the alphabet?"

I turn to the research to respond this question. Firstly, my own 'everyday research': I searched various Scope & Sequences from education systems around the globe and from various commercial programmes. None agreed with each other. There was a lot of variation. Even commercial synthetic phonics programmes did not agree on the teaching order. If there was one sequence to follow, wouldn't there be greater consistency?

Academic research also points to there being **no one** perfect sequence to teach phonics (*UIC Early Reading First, Chicago, 2008; Justice et al. 2006, Piasta, Petscher & Justice, 2012*) This research also suggests not every letter requires the same instructional attention (as some are more difficult for children to learn than others) and that whole-class teaching focussed on one letter is insufficient (because some children enter school with this knowledge). Interestingly, this same body of research found that the letters in children's names are consistently the first that children learn.

I don't believe this means we should be random in our teaching or leave learning about letters and sounds to chance. Our teaching benefits from having a system. Many years ago, the "Letter of the Week" was popular. That is a systematic approach - alphabetical order. I do not believe this is an appropriate system to use - it takes too long, it doesn't acknowledge children's prior knowledge and too often the activities associated with "Letter of the Week" did not explicitly teach common sounds represented by the letter (it taught only one sound per letter). Let alone, how to use this knowledge as readers and writers. I now advocate for the **systematic recording** of the phonics knowledge that is explored and built through engaging experiences such as Shared Reading, Letter Investigations, writing for multiple purposes and daily reading. We should not leave it to chance.

Rebecca McKay and William H. Teale (2015) studied this research and concluded that there is no one ideal sequence, but "it is worthwhile to plan with an understanding of what is easier and more difficult for most students" (p.34) and that there is research to support consideration to be given to the following order:

- letters in child's name
- letters with regular letter-sound relationships
- high-frequency letters
- consonants that have the letter sound at the beginning or end of the letter name
- letters with distinctive visual features
- earlier letters of the alphabet

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How do I choose to teach phonics so my pedagogical practice aligns to my learning philosophy, values and strong image of the capacity of each child?

There are two arms to my teaching of phonics: a time to **build knowledge** in Word Study and a time to connect this to **authentic reading and writing** in Reading and Writing Workshops and other areas of learning. In a nutshell:

- Build **phonic knowledge** through rigorous inquiry into letters, sounds, words. By creating a culture where we are 'word scientists', researching the orthography, morphology, etymology **and phonology** of words. I source these words from children's names, interests, inquiry projects, high quality literature we are reading and other areas of schooling (eg: Mathematical words).
- Build **phonic knowledge** studying letters, sounds and words in the context of high quality literature. I love using Big Books and Shared Reading poems for this in the Early Years of primary schooling, but also high quality picture books.
- Develop **phonological awareness** (not strictly phonics, but tightly connected) through rich oral language experiences in the Early Years – singing, rhymes, chanting, finger plays, circle games, reading picture books with rhyme and rhythm and word games.
- Show how to **use this phonic knowledge** as one strategy for conventional spelling: by explicitly connecting to Writing Workshop with a focus on editing for real audiences who will read our writing (and so need to be able to read it easily, hence the need for conventional spelling.)
- Model and scaffold how to **use this phonic knowledge** (and other spelling strategies) through Interactive Writing for real purposes.
- Show how to **use this phonic knowledge** as one strategy readers use to problem solve, monitor and check their reading comprehension: by explicitly connecting to the intentional teaching in Reading Workshop. I find this mostly happens in 1:1 Reading Conferences, but I also teach it explicitly (along with other reading strategies, so children learn to integrate them) in Shared Reading.
- Closely **monitor children's growth** by assessing their spelling in their everyday writing samples, taken from Writing Workshop (ie: not a separate test). In Foundation, I also advocate to regularly check each child's knowledge of the alphabetic principle (ie: letter-sound correspondence with the most common sounds – not just one sound per letter). This can be done through their writing or in a quick game of letter matching. I don't need to spend a lot of time on this, but by checking their knowledge, it means I won't waste time with a letter/sound investigation of Tt if most children already know this.

Unless we are knowledgeable about where phonics fits in the big picture of literacy, the danger is we will think that phonics IS reading.



c Lisa Burman (2019)