



## Children are best taught how to read by learning sounds of letters

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MICHIANA POINT OF VIEW

By ANITA J. HOLTEN

Dr. Seuss wrote in "Horton Hears a Who," "Don't give up! I believe in you all! A person's a person no matter how small." What a beautiful, encouraging message this is to his readers. Millions of children can't figure out the words on the pages of their books because they don't know the speech sounds of the alphabet. This is called the alphabetic code. These children feel great sadness and shame. They struggle to not give up as they come to realize their future depends on their ability to read. Reading walls seem to be towering over them and, sadly, they can't climb over them without key reading skills.

Reading illiteracy is a national crisis and a true scandal of our education system. Granted there are many social and economic forces which hinder a child's success in school. However, there are reports of students becoming successful readers in spite of those disadvantages when provided the right reading instruction, regardless of poverty and minority status. Six hours a day, 180 days per school year should be ample time to teach the 44 sounds representing the 26 letters of our English alphabet, which can enable a child to decode the written words he struggles to read.

Reader's Digest in February 2001 published a feature story recognizing outstanding "Principals of Success." One of those was Nancy Ichinaga, now on the California State Board of Education. She became principal of Bennet School near the Los Angeles International Airport in 1974 when the school was simply chaotic. Reading scores were at the third reading percentile on state tests. Teachers held low expectations for these kids, many of whom were black, Hispanic and from poor homes. Her teachers' attitudes were: What did you expect? The article went on to say that she challenged these teachers, questioning, "Either the students are all retarded, or you're not teaching them what they should learn. Now, which is it?"

She didn't give up on those students but took the charge of real leadership in resisting their being dumbed down. She and another principal brought in a core curriculum which centered on reading, writing and math, realizing reading was the critical skill needed. She and another principal faced opposition from their state capitol in Sacramento, as they pleaded their case for a structured, phonics-based language arts curriculum known nationally as Open Court, now a top-rated reading curriculum nationwide. This was 1987, when a method called whole language was popular. This taught children to memorize whole words, guessing and using picture clues as reading skills. It was endorsed by the California State Education Department. She fought for her Open Court phonics program and won a waiver to keep it. Meanwhile, California's children were largely being taught the whole language methodology. Students were failing to read due to the disastrous whole language reading quicksand. They were not taught the basic reading skills of explicit phonics. In the spring of 2000, Bennett-Kew school students scored in the 80th percentile in reading and math. That meant they did better than 80 percent of the students tested nationwide.

Teach the alphabetic code system of our English language and children will read. First teach the skills of phonemic awareness, which represents the ability to hear, identify and manipulate the phonemes (sounds). Phonemes are the smallest parts of sounds found within spoken words.

Phonemic awareness has been proven to provide an important foundation for success in reading. It is not phonics. It is an understanding that our speech language (spoken sounds) work together to create words. Students must work

to hear, identify and manipulate phonemes, discovering that by changing their position from one phoneme to another, they can change words and their meanings.

Without this ability to hear and work with the phonemes of spoken words, students will have a difficult time in applying these very phonemes to the graphemes (written letters) when later seeing them in the written words in phonics instruction. A grapheme may be just one letter or several letters combined such as "ch," "sh," "th," "ck," "ea," or "igh." Reading problems originate if these skills haven't been taught. The word "mat" for example, represents three phonemes -- "m," "a," "t." How many sounds do you hear? Three. Next, blend these three sounds together to form a word. Manipulating phonemes, such as changing the first phoneme from "m" to "c," changes the word. Exercises such as this train a child's brain to phoneme awareness.

There are tasks for assessing phonemic awareness grouping into three categories: Comparing sounds, blending phonemes into words, and segmenting words into phonemes. The easiest task is comparing sounds.

Segmenting tasks: Here the student counts the phonemes, pronounces, deletes, adds or reverses the individual phonemes in words. A phoneme can represent one or more letters. Teaching the vowel sounds reveals that some phonemes are represented (spelled) in more than one way. An example is a, as in "rain," "may," "lake," "eight."

Phonological awareness ( a subset of phonemic awareness) is the understanding to identify and manipulate the larger parts of spoken language, working with rhymes, words, and syllables. Skills include identifying and making oral rhymes, and identifying the number of spoken syllables within one-, two-, three- and four-syllable words.

Phonics instruction begins after this foundation of phonemic awareness and phonological awareness is established and assessed. The relationships between the 44 phonemes of spoken language and the 26 graphemes of written language can now be taught systematically, enabling children to read and write words. Empirical reading research, including brain research, has stated that their findings largely support that these relationships be taught in an explicit, systematic way. Reading is indeed a complex set of skills. Speaking is innate or natural. Reading isn't natural. It involves a human-created language code system which must be learned.

Theodore S. Geisel, known as Dr. Seuss, told Arizona Magazine in June of 1981, "They think I did it in 20 minutes. That ... 'Cat in the Hat' took nine months until I was satisfied. I did it for a textbook house and they sent me a word list. That was due to the Dewey Revolt in the '20s in which they threw out phonics and went to word recognition, as if you're reading a Chinese pictograph instead of blending sounds of different letters. I think killing phonics was one of the greatest causes of illiteracy in the country."

Yes, Dr. Seuss, the reading experts agree with you.

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