

Surprise! Study Shows Phonics Best for Teaching Reading

WASHINGTON, DC - Following a landmark two-year study, the National Reading Panel (NRP) has announced what many reading experts have known all along: that, to be effective, reading instruction must include phonics. The study is being called "the largest, most comprehensive evidence-based review ever conducted of research on how children learn reading." Its conclusions?

That children should be taught:

- Phonemic awareness - the smallest units composing spoken language;
- Phonics - how to use letter-sound relationships to read or spell words;
- Fluency - reading orally with speed, accuracy, and proper expression;
- Comprehension - strategies for understanding what is read.

The panel found that the research conducted to date is "clear cut" and "strongly supports" teaching children to "manipulate phonemes" to "significantly improve" reading and spelling abilities. It also concluded that the research "provides solid evidence that phonics instruction produces significant benefits for children from kindergarten through 6th grade and for children having difficulties learning to read." In fact, the panel found that "the greatest improvements in reading were seen from systematic phonics instruction."

The NRP was mandated by Congress in 1997 and established by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD). Members included leading scientists in reading research, educators, administrators, teachers and parents. They reviewed more than 30 years of research on how children learn to read.

The NRP developed rigorous scientific standards for evaluating the research on the effectiveness of different reading instruction methods. The panel based its conclusions on clinical trials in which reading methods were compared - the same method used to evaluate drugs and medical treatments. Public input was allowed at all its meetings.

Some experts say the data from the panel's report clearly demonstrate why educators don't already know how to teach reading. "Small wonder that reading education is in such a serious mess when most of the education school crowd involved with developing and furthering the art and science of teaching know so little about how to do good research," says Richard Innes, an education researcher and expert on Kentucky's education reform initiatives. He adds: "The NRP seems to have done a highly credible job of sifting wheat from chaff in the face of an avalanche of worthless 'research' on how kids are best taught to read. The panel's work appears well done and of great value."

Though many experts are lauding the study, it has already come under attack from the teachers colleges. According to *USA Today* (5-17-00): "Wed to the child-centered education theories of the 1980s, these deans and professors believe teaching is more art than science, and they view phonics as something to be taught only superficially, if at all." The article notes that "these professors continue to support 'whole language' instruction, in which children are expected to pick up literacy skills naturally through reading."

Brenda Overturf, a reading specialist in Jefferson County, Kentucky, told the *Louisville Courier Journal* that, while the NRP's report is important, it comes up short because it doesn't reflect the impact of sociological issues, such as whether a child's parents are literate and read to the child and whether there

are books available at home. "We have studies that show that the number of books a child has access to has a direct correlation to reading achievement."

Overturf sent a copy of the NRP's report to all elementary school principals in her district, noting that it also "failed to address the benefits of teaching reading and writing as interrelated tasks; the impact of teaching reading through signs, directions, newspapers and other texts that people read every day; and the role of discussion and group work."

"When children interact together, it brings out ideas that they haven't thought of before," Overturf said.

Phonics proponents counter that the availability of books and the fostering of student interaction do little good if children can't decode and comprehend written words.

Apparently, the NICHD anticipated the mixed reaction to the NRP report. In a press release dated April 13, NICHD vowed to "undertake an aggressive effort to distribute the report and its findings to policymakers, educators and parents." *School Reform News* (June 2000) quoted NICHD Director Dr. Duane Alexander as including "administrators" and "schools of education" in the target group.