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In support of early explicit phonics teaching

Human speech has long been present in every culture, and our brains have evolved specialized features to enable its rapid development when we are exposed to the speech of others. Reading however is a relatively recent skill, and we have no such dedicated reading module to guarantee success. Fortunately, our brains are able to adapt to the task, although there is considerable variation in the assistance learners require to achieve it.

Humans have produced numerous writing systems in their attempts to create a concrete form of communication, and those languages employing an alphabet have provided the most powerful means of achieving this goal.

The invention of the alphabet was one of the greatest of human achievements. It required the appreciation that the spoken word can be split into its component sound parts, and that each part can be assigned a symbol or letter. All that is additionally required to have an amazingly productive writing system is for the learner to be able to identify the sound for each letter, and blend the sounds together to recreate the spoken word. This is known as the alphabetic principle, and allows us to write any word we can say. Our written language is thus a code, and phonics is simply the key to unlocking the code.

Should we explain to our students through phonics teaching how our speech is codified into English writing? It sounds obvious that we should; indeed, that not to do so would be cruel. But some believe there is a better way. English is after all a complicated language, having absorbed so many words from other languages with differing spelling patterns. But, no, it turns out from years of research that there is a significant advantage in demonstrating from the beginning how the alphabetic principle works. This benefit is particularly evident in the 30% or so of our students who struggle with learning to read. It also has become clear that demonstrating this principle systematically is more effective than merely sprinkling a few clues here and there as a story is read with or to a student.

If we do not introduce this principle early, there is a risk of students developing less productive strategies in their efforts to make sense of print. Some of these strategies have a surface appeal because they provide a veneer of reading progress, but become self-limiting over time. Despite a lack of evidence for its worth, many teachers believe that skilled reading involves making use of multiple cues in identifying words. They believe that words can be predicted (guessed),

based on cues other than their structure – picture cues, meaning cues, grammar cues, and hints from the first letter.

However, routinely using pictures to determine word identity draws student attention away from print, thereby diminishing the central importance of the alphabetic principle. Asking students to *remember* words as a primary strategy gives the unhelpful message that reading involves the visual memory of shapes, of letter landscapes devoid of alphabetic significance. Stressing the integrated use of multiple cues (picture, grammar, and meaning cues) leaves students with too many ill-defined options, and produces marked variability in the preferred approach of students. Of course, many of the better students will develop an understanding that phonics is a foundation anyway; however, those less fortunate will be left to scour their memories for word shapes or attempt to predict upcoming words based on sentence/passage meaning or on the sound of initial letters. Syntactic cues to word identification tend to be less employed among this group as their skills in grammar are likely to be under-developed also.

The problem is often not identified until about the fourth grade; hence, the term *fourth grade slump*. In truth, the problem was there from the beginning, and had an instructional source, but was unrecognised because of some teachers' misunderstanding of reading development.

What happens to these apparently progressing students? As text becomes more complex, prediction becomes less and less accurate. Many sentences now include difficult-to-decode words that carry non-redundant information, and hence become more difficult targets for prediction. There are now increasing numbers of such words. For the memorisers, the number of words that must be recalled from visual memory outgrows students' visual memory capacity.

These moribund strategies collapse, but in the absence of a productive course of action, students often hold on to them, resisting a return to decoding as a first option as too hard or too babyish. Resolution of the problems of these older readers is very difficult for both teacher and student. Better not to create this situation in the first place.

Even when the value of early phonics teaching is recognised by educators, students vary significantly in the ease with which they develop from their initial painstaking attempts at decoding through to effortless fluent orthographic-dominant reading. Our challenge as educators is to be truly sensitive to every reader's progress through careful monitoring, and to ensure the intensity and duration of instruction is appropriate to their needs. Once they are on their way, future progress becomes a self-teaching issue, driven largely by how much they choose to read. However, until reading is effortless, we cannot expect children to

choose books over the many alternative communication modes available to them today.