

Illusory phonics: Balanced magic

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Illusory phonics – simply sprinkle a little phonics into your literature-based program and poof! – your program is balanced.

We know from a strong consensus of research that effective programs include phonics (among other components), so it is tempting to conclude that simply adding some phonics to a list of activities in an existing program will supply some vital catalysing ingredient, strengthening the existing program, and thereby make it research-based. However, program effectiveness is not ensured solely by the presence of a portion of this vital program element. It also depends on the proportions in the final curriculum mix, in the quantity and quality of the elements, and when and how the curriculum is taught.

The proper role of phonics in a literacy program can be compared to a building's foundation. We understand that stable buildings invariably have foundations. However, foundations may be weak or strong or in-between. It is not the mere presence of a foundation that provides the fundamental strength and stability of a building. It derives from the presence of the correct foundation. The differences between a strong and weak foundation lie in the details of the former's make-up, such as appropriate concrete composition and the correct grade of reinforcing mesh – evenly laid through the site. A foundation's preparation is equally critical. Trenches are meticulously prepared to ensure that the poured foundation is correctly sited to support the walls, and of adequate breadth and depth. Also, formwork or scaffolding is employed to provide initial support to any exposed or potential weak points, and to avoid any risk of slump.

The concrete of phonics requires the additional strength of reinforcing mesh if it is to avoid cracking under pressure. Thus, those approaches ensuring that students have or develop sensitivity to the sound structure of spoken words at the time that letter-sound correspondences are presented – have an increased likelihood that the phonics teaching will evoke in students appreciation of the alphabetic principle. Gradually, it will produce a generative strategy to handle the eventual heavy load presented by previously unseen words.

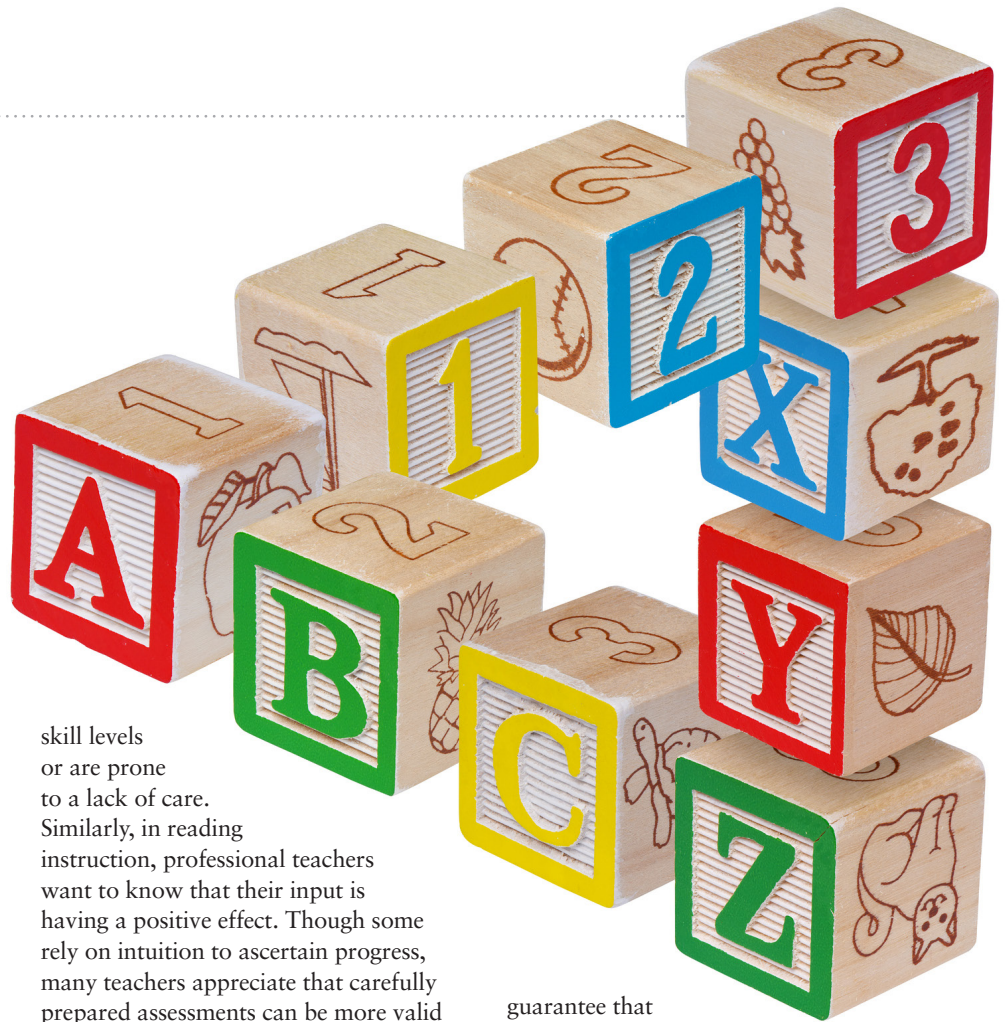
The foundation for a building is formed and poured before any other task, because all the construction that follows is reliant on the integrity of this initial base. If a fundamental element of the foundation is missing, then the structure is inevitably compromised. The building will be unable to attain its anticipated integrity and performance. Indeed it may fail, catastrophically or sequentially, either initially or later in its lifespan.

This foundation is allowed curing time to ensure it sets hard (thereby providing strength) before it is expected to carry a load. If this load is applied too early, the foundation will be weakened or deformed, and the building may not have the strength to handle its own weight much less the additional load of the building's superstructure itself. So, in explicit phonics students are taught the foundations of spoken and written word structure before attempting to carry the cognitive load of reading increasingly sophisticated texts. They are provided

with carefully planned, rather than incidental, instructional sequences.

During the curing time in effective synthetic phonics programs, students are supplied with decodable text that does not weigh too heavily upon their fragile load-bearing capacity. However, once they have developed an ability to manage the decodable text comfortably, the new challenges of a variety of text forms and a rapidly escalating number of new words do not threaten their ability to thrive as readers. If young readers are presented with an avalanche of inconsiderate text, they may discontinue the decoding strategy in favour of attractive, short-term, but ultimately catastrophic strategies. These include prediction (guessing) from context, pictures, and initial letters. Unfortunately, students are often encouraged by their teachers to make use of such guesses. Apart from hindering the development of early literacy, these strategies will jeopardise the proper development of lexical skills so necessary to manage the decoding demands of the huge increase in print vocabulary that occurs from mid primary school. Not for nothing is this delayed phenomenon known as the fourth grade slump. Just as the construction of a building's foundation proceeds according to a standard sequence, so too a systematic phonics approach will attend to the details of instruction as well as to the content – incorporating such techniques as error correction procedures, adequate massed and spaced practice, and daily, short intensive sessions.

In each stage of building, an inspection is carried out to ensure that each element of the critical processes has in fact faithfully been carried out. Though builders grumble about this requirement – after all, they are professionals who know the relevant building regulations – they have learned to accept this requirement. Clients of these builders know that the regulatory scrutiny of building surveyors is necessary to avoid poor workmanship. Exemplary builders, too, accept the need for inspections – as they do not wish their reputations to be sullied by those in an industry who have unacceptably low



skill levels or are prone to a lack of care. Similarly, in reading instruction, professional teachers want to know that their input is having a positive effect. Though some rely on intuition to ascertain progress, many teachers appreciate that carefully prepared assessments can be more valid and reliable. These tools help to increase confidence that their teaching is indeed effective as demonstrated by objective instruments. The proposed phonics check is one such tool that provides early information about the success of phonics teaching. This helps preclude the worrying difficulty in intervening effectively at a later date when a lack of student success has produced additional hurdles to catch-up.

Once the foundations have set, a house may be constructed with the confidence that it will be able to handle the exceptional loads the environment places upon it over a long period of time. When students have a firm foundation in reading, they have been freed from the limitations on vocabulary development offered by conversation and television. When they can read fluently, recognising effortlessly most of the words, and applying decoding skills only when necessary on particularly complex text, they have reached the point at which self-teaching occurs. They are now able to accelerate their vocabulary development, depending now upon the amount of reading they choose to do, rather than on the limited number of words able to be taught in school.

Of course, there's much more to building a house than constructing a firm foundation. A strong foundation does not

guarantee that the subsequent house will be habitable and safe. Other components, such as walls and roof also play an important role; however, these other components cannot compensate for an inadequate foundation, and indeed the whole above-ground structure may be rendered unsafe because of this initial failure. So, too, in reading development – a grasp of the alphabetic principle alone does not guarantee success. Other components such as phonemic awareness, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension have been shown to be important.

When builders attempt to shore up faulty foundations, the task is difficult, takes a great deal of time, and is compromised at best. When literature-based programs belatedly sprinkle some phonics teaching, the effects are similar to those that eventuate when attempts are made to provide foundations after a home is finished.

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