Explainer:
Phonics is not a method of reading, it is a method of learning how to read

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In a previous explainer about phonics instruction, we discussed the different varieties of phonics instruction that are practised in schools (*Nomanis* Aug 2017, p10), one of which (synthetic phonics) is more effective than the other types more commonly practiced. Specifically, we explained that the term synthetic phonics was not referring to anything artificial, in the sense of the overt teaching of non-words (or pseudowords), but rather referred to the process of synthesizing letter sounds through the word to 'lift the words off the page', i.e. to achieve decoding of the word. In this follow-up article we explain what the real purpose of phonics is.

A common response to the suggestion that there is a need for more explicit, systematic, synthetic phonics instruction in our schools is that phonics is alive and well in Australian early years classrooms. However, in reality, different varieties of phonics instruction are practised in schools, and these are not equally effective for beginning readers. We will focus here on synthetic phonics and the reasons that this is more effective for beginning readers than the other types more commonly practised.

As we have indicated before, synthetic phonics suffers from a bit of an image problem. Part of this relates to the word 'synthetic', which is sometimes interpreted to mean 'fake'. This association has also become confused with the use of non-words (or pseudowords), which are sometimes used to assess children's decoding skills.

The term synthetic phonics does not refer to anything artificial, but rather refers to the process of *synthesizing* the 44 sounds derived from the 26 letters in the English alphabet to decode words. Systematic synthetic phonics, in turn, is a teaching approach in which sound and letter correspondences are introduced early and their associations are explicitly taught, using techniques such as blending, segmenting, deleting and inserting sounds.

But perhaps the most serious and common misapprehension about systematic synthetic phonics teaching (or indeed any phonics teaching) hinges on the fundamental purpose of teaching phonics. Plainly put, phonics is not a method of reading per se. Rather, phonics is a means of learning how to sound out words a sufficient number of times so that words are learned and automatically recognised as wholes.

After a number of repetitions of phonic decoding of a word, the word is learned as a whole and becomes automatically accessible as such. As our banks of words develop, we only need to sound out the words we may not already know; such as 'peripatetic' or 'conquistador', for example. This is as true for adults as it is for children.

If we had to sound out every word phonically every time we encountered it, it would indeed be a laborious and time-consuming business that would hinder our reading fluency and hence our reading comprehension. This is why it is important to

understand the difference between learning to read and the act of reading.

All well and good, you might think, but why then do some children find this a more difficult task than others? Frankly, we do not yet know precisely why this is the case but we do know that there is considerable variation in the ease with which children learn to read words and in turn understand their meaning.

Some children barely seem to need much help. They encounter a word a couple of times and they have it locked down for immediate access going forward. Others might need, say, half a dozen experiences of sounding out the word to get it fixed in their reading lexicon.

And then there is a minority of children who, for whatever reason, seem to need many, many more adult-supported repetitions of phonic decoding strategies before they will become competent readers. Some parents, teachers and professionals choose to call such children dyslexic. Whatever descriptor we employ, we are referring to children who need to exercise their phonic decoding skills on a word far more frequently than is typical before they commit it to their memory word bank. Notably, it is difficult to 'back-fill' essential decoding skills for children who do not have these after three years of formal schooling.

So, if some children need relatively little help to learn to decode words, why should we include systematic synthetic phonics as a critical element in our initial teaching strategy for all children? The answer is that we simply do not know ahead of time just which children will need extra instruction and support and will need many more repetitions to learn words than is typical.

There is an additional benefit from systematic synthetic phonics teaching for the children who appear to learn reading easily, because phonics-knowledge is also the bedrock of spelling. Not all children who learn to read easily necessarily become avid readers and, if they do not have a solid grounding in phonics, they will not be able to rely on sight word memory and could struggle with spelling, despite being competent readers.

To make sure that no children fall through the cracks, therefore, it makes sense to offer explicit systematic synthetic phonics instruction to all children, to get them off to a successful start towards independent reading.

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