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THE EFFECTIVENESS OF INTENSIVE PHONICS

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An examination of the history of reading instruction reveals that there has been a long-standing controversy over the effectiveness of the teaching of phonics. It is readily apparent from such a historical study that the enthusiasm for phonics as an effective methodology by the experts in reading instruction has waxed and waned over the years (Matthews, 1966). Only in relatively recent times, however, have carefully-controlled and analytical reviews been made of the total of the respectable research evidence that deals with this issue.

Phonics Is Important

The first of such reviews in this century was that by Chall. Chall concluded from her impressive review of the studies of the effectiveness of phonics that "the research from 1912 to 1965 indicates that a code-emphasis method—i.e., one that views beginning reading as essentially different from mature reading and emphasized learning of the printed code for the spoken language—produces better results, at least to the point where sufficient evidence seems to be available to the end of the third grade" (Chall, 1967, p. 307). Dykstra's more recent examination of the research on phonics Chall reviewed, plus that of like nature carried out since 1965, leads him to the same conclusion. Dykstra judges that this "evidence clearly demonstrates that children who receive early intensive instruction in phonics develop superior word recognition skills in the early stages of reading and tend to maintain their superiority at least through the third grade." It is clear, he concludes, that "early systematic instruction in phonics provides the child with the skills necessary to become an independent reader at an earlier age than is likely if phonics instruction is delayed and less systematic" (Walcutt, et al., 1974, p. 397).

The New Anti-Phonics

Despite the strong endorsements for phonics instruction from the comprehensive reviews of its historical effectiveness there has emerged among reading experts, since the publication of Chall's report, what has been called the "new anti-phonics movement" (Groff, 1977). These recent critics of phonics are adamant in their conviction that phonics in-

struction is, at worst, detrimental to the development of children's reading skills, or at the very least, is of no consequence one way or the other to the reading teacher. Smith, for example, finds phonics instruction "a potential and powerful method of interfering in the process of learning to read" (1973, p. 184). It is "the great fallacy" of reading instruction, he contends (1973, p. 70). Therefore, one of the "easy ways to make learning to read difficult," Smith argues, is for the teacher to "ensure that phonics skills are learned and used" (1973, p. 184). Hoskisson agrees that with phonics teaching "the child will be hindered from learning to read" (1975, p. 446). "The unfortunate child who follows too closely upon the phonics preachment may fixate at this stage and go no further," Henderson adds (1978, p. 248).

If phonics instruction is not outrightly harmful to beginning readers, at least it is of little importance to them, others of the new anti-phonics persuasion contend. Goodman, for instance, insists that "phonics in any form in reading instruction is at best a peripheral concern" for the reading teacher (1975, p. 627). Meier concurs that phonics is a "very trivial" skill in learning to read (1975, p. 32). "When it comes to phonics in reading instruction, the motto 'just a little dab will do you' seems appropriate," Lundsteen recommends (1977, p. 199). For "it is difficult to find children who over-rely upon phonics," Ammon furthermore notes (1975, p. 245). As proof of the unimportance of phonics Johnson and Pearson aver that "we know very well that some children can read well but do poorly on phonics exercises" (1975, p. 759). In any event, Artley asserts, "the symbol-sound relationship in English words are not sufficiently consistent to make it possible to use phonics generalizations with any degree of regularity" (1977, p. 122). Harris agrees that the "relationships between sound symbols and printed symbols are tenuous *at best*" (1976, p. 31). (emphasis added)

The Present Study

It is obvious that the present-day opponents of phonics find the past research as to the positive effects of phonics teaching, as this research has been reviewed by Chall and Dykstra, for example, unconvincing. Accordingly, it appears necessary, if the present controversy over phonics is to be resolved, to gather further evidence as to the relative effectiveness of intensive phonics instruction as versus that of teaching methodologies which emphasize phonics to a lesser degree. With this need in mind the present study was carried out.

For this purpose two different approaches to beginning reading were identified. The first of these, referred to hereafter as "intensive phonics" was the Lippincott *Basic Reading* program (McCracken and Walcutt, 1975). The Lippincott reading program is often cited in the literature on beginning reading instruction as a prime example of an intensive phonics approach (Aukerman, 1971).

The second reading approach identified for use in this study, referred to hereafter as "less-intensive phonics," was the *Cop-Clark Cana-*

dian Reading Development Series—Primary (MacIntosh, 1962). This reading program begins by teaching first grade children to recognize fifty to seventy-five “sight words.” Only after this goal is reached does it teach phonics, and then in an incidental manner. Beyond being delayed until a set number of “sight” words are learned by pupils, phonics is taught in this program in a less intensive, less direct, and less systematic manner than it is taught in the Lippincott Basic Reading program.

The subjects of this study were seventy-three first grade children in three classrooms who for a school year were taught intensive phonics, and seventy-four first grade children in three classrooms who during this year were taught less-intensive phonics. (Not all these pupils completed all of the three parts of the standardized test of reading that was administered (King, 1976). (See Table 1.) It was judged that the pupils in the three intensive phonics classes had the same level of intelligence as did the pupils in the three less-intensive phonics classes. This conclusion was based on observations of the socioeconomic backgrounds of the pupils involved and on the intelligence test scores of other children in the schools the subjects of the present day attended.

It was not possible to make an assessment of the respective teaching abilities of the six teachers in this study. It was arranged, however, that the three teachers in the less-intensive phonics classes were those who had had more experience teaching reading than did the three teachers in the intensive phonics classes.

Findings

As shown in Table 1, the first grade children in the intensive phonics group in the present study gained higher levels of achievement in vocabulary, word analysis, comprehension, and in the average of these three skills than did the group of pupils in the less-intensive phonics classes. As indicated by the *t* ratios given in Table 1, the differences in mean scores found between the intensive group and the less-intensive phonics group were all found to be statistically significant, beyond the .01 level of confidence.

Conclusion

The findings of the present study do not support the contentions of the recent opponents of phonics instruction that phonics teaching is detrimental to the development of children’s reading skills, and/or that it should be considered a matter of little or no concern to the reading teacher. To the contrary, the findings of the study reported here reaffirm the findings from past research on this issue. These findings have indicated that intensive phonics teaching brings on greater beginning reading achievement than do reading programs which deemphasize phonics teaching. The present study thus suggests that instruction in intensive phonics is critical to the development of beginning reading skills and therefore is to be recommended.

Nor do the present findings support an added assertion of some cur-

Table 1
 First grade reading achievement with Intensive Phonics (IP)
 and with Less Intensive Phonics (LIP)

Reading Skill	N	Grade Level			Diff.	t ratio
			Mean	Scores		
Vocabulary	73	IP	2.81	.700	.59	4.796
	74	LIP	2.22	.765		
Word Analysis	68	IP	2.45	.700	.62	5.390
	72	LIP	1.83	.660		
Comprehension	73	IP	2.90	.830	.68	4.690
	74	LIP	2.22	.950		
Average	68	IP	2.71	.665	.63	5.430
	72	LIP	2.08	.710		

rent opponents of phonics, that is, that phonics instruction may perhaps teach word analysis skills but will hamper the development of reading comprehension. It can be noted from Table 1 that the superiority in reading scores of the intensive phonics group of pupils in the present study was greater for comprehension than it was for the other reading skills that were measured.

The present study made no attempt to resolve the soundness of one other negative criticism of phonics that has been made of late. Today's negative critics of phonics have commented that the past findings, which indicated that the teaching of intensive phonics was superior to reading approaches which deemphasize phonics, are invalid because the standardized tests used to gain these findings do not truly measure reading competencies. Goodman, for example, maintains it is not true that "existing [reading] tests can be used for accurate individual assessment" in reading (Goodman, 1978, p. 4). There appears to be no empirical evidence at present, however, to substantiate his notion that standardized reading tests cannot accurately assess children's reading skills. Considering this, the authors of the present study hold that its findings do accurately reflect the reading competencies of the children involved in this investigation.

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