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Decoding Skill and Successful Beginning Reading in Different Instructional Settings

Ellen McIntyre

The debate over whether to include phonics in early literacy instruction has been one of the hottest topics in the field of reading. Researchers and teachers agree that children must be able to use graphophonic knowledge in order to learn to read. That is, children must understand that written symbols correspond to sounds which make up written words, and they must be able to decode new words. Yet there is still debate over whether phonics instruction is necessary for children to learn these concepts and skills.

On one side of the debate, researchers with a traditional, or conventional, view of reading acquisition argue that children first learn phonemic awareness, after which they are able to decode words, and finally they can read text. These educators argue that phonemic awareness and sound/symbol relations are *prerequisites* to reading (Adams, 1990; Chall, 1967). Studies have shown children who have had training in phonemic awareness outperform those who have not on a number of early literacy tasks, including reading (Adams, 1990; Juel, Griffith and Gough, 1986). These studies lead to the conclusion that children who are taught to segment phonemes will be better able to read. Many educators agree

that there is little harm and much value in explicit phonics instruction (Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, and Wilkinson, 1985).

Researchers from an emergent literacy or whole language perspective usually do not argue the importance of graphophonic understanding and skill for beginning readers. They do, however, often argue that the focus of beginning reading ought to be on meaning rather than sounds and symbols. After all, reading is comprehending (Smith, 1986). Clearly, some educators suggest that decoding instruction gets in the way of children's sense-making as they read and write, because children's focus turns from meaning to individual letters and sounds (Goodman, Smith, Meredith and Goodman, 1987; Smith, 1988). Further, when meaning is at the forefront of their reading and writing, some researchers have found that children can and do learn how to decode through reading literature (Freppon, 1991; Freppon and Dahl, 1991; McIntyre, 1990) or while writing meaningful texts (Gunderson and Shapiro, 1988). Indeed, some children appear to learn how to decode print in environments where phonics is never explicitly taught.

The conventional view and the whole language view are extremely different stances "which do not take into account differences in children — which are enormous" (Beck, 1990). Some children do not observe patterns or clues which allow them to discover the graphophonic system without direct, explicit intervention (Barr, 1991; Beck, 1990). In both traditional and whole language classrooms, there is likely to be a subset of children who do not learn the graphophonic system and who fail to learn to decode (Beck, 1990; McIntyre, 1992b; Winsor, 1990). It seems some children can benefit from instructional contexts that others find difficult or confusing. To understand these individual differences in children, it is necessary to examine carefully the nature of the instruction

received by children who succeed in learning to read. In this article, I will discuss three children who successfully learned phonics in three very different instructional settings, and then I will draw conclusions about appropriate instruction for such children.

Early reading success in a conventional first grade

Audrey came from a working class family of Appalachian descent. I observed her twice weekly in school from the beginning of kindergarten through the end of her first grade year (McIntyre, 1992a). I tape-recorded all she and her teacher said with a remote, wireless microphone. I visited her home twice to talk to her parents and observe her literacy environment, and I administered several written language tasks in early kindergarten and late first grade to assess written language knowledge. I also interviewed Audrey and her teacher regularly during the first grade year.

Audrey was rarely read to at home, but often liked to play school with her sister, and she attended her sister's home tutoring sessions prior to kindergarten. Audrey attended a poor urban school characterized by traditional instruction. Literacy instruction was basal-driven with an emphasis on the sequential mastery of discrete skills and it had a high degree of teacher directed instruction. Upon entering first grade, Audrey had learned the alphabet, a set of sight words, and most of Clay's (1979) Concepts of Print, such as intentionality, directionality, and wordness. Audrey had also "caught on" to the alphabetic principle, though she did not know many sound/symbol correspondences nor was she able to decode words. She could not yet read conventionally, but was reading pictures or short basal sentences comprised of known sight words.

Audrey's first-grade teacher used the Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich basal reading series. She conducted whole-class and ability-grouped reading lessons daily. Children read one or two stories a week after vocabulary and word attack skills were introduced through the teacher's guide. Phonics instruction was an integral part of this program. Audrey's teacher believed in the importance of understanding the phonemic nature of language, learning the letters and their sounds, and decoding as a strategy for ascertaining unknown words. She often worked with one child at a time when reading aloud, helping that child to decode words as the rest of the class observed. She spent considerable time teaching sound/symbol relations in isolation from reading and she implicitly taught about the phonemic nature of language by slowly sounding out words for children such as when she would say *m/an* for *man*. The teacher read aloud one storybook daily and the children were provided 5-15 minutes each day for sustained reading of books of their choice.

Audrey was a successful learner within this conventional first grade. She was clearly good at "doing school" (Dyson, 1984) as she usually did exactly what the teacher expected — no more and no less. Audrey came to first grade understanding many concepts of print. When instruction focused on the graphophonic aspects of print, Audrey easily memorized sounds and symbols and eventually could use sound/symbol relations to decode words. But mid-first grade Audrey's teacher began allowing her to write. Although the teacher insisted on accuracy, the few invented spellings which Audrey did use showed evidence of her graphophonic knowledge. For example, in January, she wrote "I eight nathing for brafis (breakfast). I eight tos (toast) for lunch." At this time, Audrey began reading *I Can Read* books fairly fluently, using decoding as a strategy for figuring out unknown words. Audrey also chose to read during her free time and

she appeared to enjoy it, showing promise that she will continue to grow as a literate individual.

Early reading success in a whole language classroom

Maria is a middle-class child who often took books home from school to read. She attended a "progressive" public school, viewed as one of the best in the area. Her first grade teacher was considered a whole language teacher and was a leader in the TAWL (Teachers Applying Whole Language) movement in her city. Maria's first-grade literacy instruction included book demonstrations (Holdaway, 1979), specific teaching of comprehension and writing strategies, extended time to read, write, and share, and collaborative reading and writing activities. The children were given approximately 60 minutes daily to either read or write texts of their choice. There was almost no phonics instruction, except when it took place incidentally, such as when the teacher mentioned "Do you notice how 'cheese' and 'chili' begin the same way? They both begin with the 'ch' sound."

I began to follow Maria from the first day of the first grade through February. I observed and tape recorded her reading twice a week. Maria started school interested and motivated to read. She seemed to love stories and enthusiastically read and wrote every day for the 60 minute work time. She often sat alone in a rocking chair and chanted the words to *Brown Bear* or *Mrs. Wishy Washy* as she flipped through the pages or studied the illustrations.

In November of first grade Maria was reading the highly predictable books from memory. Maria's teacher regularly taught children in heterogeneous groups and read with the children one-on-one. When she sat with Maria, she read to her, pointing to the words. She led Maria in echo reading, one sentence at a time. She listened as Maria read aloud to

her, encouraging her to ascertain words from the contexts of the sentences.

By December Maria became more focused on the print. She was observed for a few weeks in December and January reading "aspectually" (Sulzby, 1985) by focusing only on words she knew automatically or focusing on the sounds that she knew, even though the classroom instruction remained meaning-focused. For example, when reading the poem "His head will have to have a hat, his hat is on, just look at that" Maria read, "He... head... wi- have to have a hat, he hat is on, just like at that." Also at that time she began to use invented spelling in her writing, showing some graphophonic knowledge, such as when she wrote "The book aubout storese by (name). To her hol famey and Amy." By spring Maria read most of the books she chose conventionally. Maria followed developmental patterns described in emergent literacy literature (Dyson, 1991; Ferriero and Teberosky, 1982; Sulzby, 1985) without having had phonics instruction.

Early reading success in a tutoring setting

I met Tamara while serving as her tutor in a university literacy center which serves children who have reading and writing problems. Instruction at the center was based on whole language theory. Most children were assigned to work one-on-one with a teacher twice weekly for an hour. Teachers were graduate students in the reading specialist program. As students, we studied whole language theory, research, and practice, specifically that espoused by Goodman, Smith, Meredith and Goodman (1987), Goodman, Watson and Burke (1987), and Clay (1979). The components of the one-to-one literacy program followed those outlined by Reading Recovery (Pinnell, Fried and Estice, 1990; Clay, 1979), except that we met with students only twice a week for an hour rather than daily for 30 minutes.

Tamara came to the university's literacy center because her parents were concerned about her progress in reading, noting that "reading just hadn't clicked for Tamara." Tamara came from a middle class family and was read to approximately twice a week and enjoyed it. Tamara attended a "conventional" school, much like Audrey's, where she was largely unsuccessful.

Tamara was a premature baby who had a history of seizures of unknown causes. She did not talk until she was four. Tamara had obvious motor problems and was frequently called clumsy and uncoordinated. She often fell asleep in school, and although she attempted to fall asleep in the literacy center, we usually did not let her. The center's director and Tamara's teachers suggested that Tamara probably had some neurological problems which would make learning to read and write a lengthier process than for other children, but that it should not block learning.

Tamara entered the center in the spring of her first year of first grade. I took over teaching Tamara the following fall when she was repeating first grade. Although she was a happy, lovable child while in the Center, she was simply not interested in reading or writing. Thus, teaching and learning were difficult and painstaking.

One of the instructional goals of her tutorial program was to spend half the hour reading and half the hour writing. During the reading time, I read to Tamara and attempted to get her to discuss the readings. I read many highly predictable books as well as award-winning children's literature. Tamara also listened to stories on tape (while I encouraged her to follow along with the print), but she often lost her place and became confused. I spent time listening to Tamara. As she

"read," I tried to get her to focus on print, predict words from the contexts of sentences and pictures, and to notice grapho-phonetic patterns in words. She often looked up, wiggled, dropped the book, and generally moved in and out of reading and physically rearranging herself. Tamara primarily read from memory by glancing at the pictures. I felt as though I had to push her to focus on the print. She seemed to be making little progress and she very naturally and simply chose to focus on pictures and chant words from memory. Although I knew this was part of reading development, I wanted her to move in her development, so I continued to coax her to point to words and decode those she could while reading. I began explicitly teaching sound-symbol relations in the context of storybook reading. For example, as we read the short, predictable book *Mrs. Wishy Washy*, I pointed out that wishy and washy sounded alike (exaggerating the sounds) and they both began with a *w*. I also told her to use this new knowledge when she came across other words which began with *w*.

Yet, most often when I insisted Tamara focus on print, she moved away from the text and read "globally" by glancing at a few words and reading only for the gist of what was printed. When told to point to words, the reading became so slow that Tamara seemed to forget about the meaning of what she had read. For the entire year, Tamara could not seem to focus on print and read for meaning simultaneously. It was either/or. She could not quite "orchestrate" (Dyson, 1991) both meaning and grapho-phonetic cueing systems. I felt frustrated and anxious about her progress.

During the writing period, I tried to get Tamara to write from her experiences. I wanted her to achieve fluency as well as to use sound/symbol relations to spell. I felt as though I had to force her to focus on print. In fact, on every occasion when Tamara was permitted to choose materials and

activities within the print-rich literacy environment, she always chose non-print activities (such as looking at pictures in books), and often chose non-literacy activities, such as chatting with me, playing on the rug, or taking a walk through the university. Thus, I did not often permit her to choose. I had to constantly nudge (Freppon and Dahl, 1991) her toward a focus on print with friendly but persistent one-on-one instruction.

On the occasions when Tamara did write, the task was slow and laborious (1-3 sentences in about 20 minutes) and she needed constant assistance. The sessions were highly scaffolded. I supported her every move, elaborately sounding out words for her and pointing out patterns. Her products often contained only key words rather than full sentences, as in the following story: "I lik kinIn (Kings Island). The br krs (bumper cars). I lik to rd kncbrb (ride the King Cobra)." Tamara read her piece as "I like to go to Kings Island. I like the bumper carss. I like to ride the King Cobra." Clearly, Tamara was still unable to completely "orchestrate" both meaning and the code as she wrote. That is, she experienced the tension between her intended meaning and the symbols she used to convey that meaning (Dyson, 1991).

Tamara entered second grade in her public school the following fall and was placed in the same multi-grade classroom with the same teacher. Her teacher reported that she was "hanging on by her fingernails," that her inattentiveness and difficulty in completing independent work were factors hindering her progress.

Tamara also remained a student at the literacy center. Another graduate student resumed the teaching, but I remained keenly aware of her development. Through talks with her tutor, one observation of Tamara, and examination

of her progress reports, I learned Tamara spent the fall of that year in virtually the same kind of instruction and activities. Her tutor, Barb, wrote that Tamara preferred to read the predictable books, avoiding books she felt were too long. She continued to read from memory or by focusing solely on decoding rather than orchestrating meaning and graphophonic systems simultaneously. By December, Tamara more consistently focused on the print rather than the pictures. Her tutor wrote, "although Tamara attends to the print rather than the pictures when she reads, she often demonstrates difficulty maintaining her place in the text, and will skip words and even lines."

By spring, Tamara consistently focused on graphophonics. Her Reading Miscue Inventory (Goodman, Watson and Burke, 1987) revealed that Tamara corrected miscues 11 percent of the time. When miscues occurred, loss in meaning construction frequently resulted, but graphophonic relationships were maintained. Her retelling of what she read also indicated that, although she was now regularly focusing on print, she clearly was not reading for meaning. Other reports during that period indicated that Tamara did not avoid literacy activities and seemed to enjoy reading and writing. A spelling test given in February showed evidence of extensive knowledge of sound/symbol relations. Tamara was slowly progressing.

By April efforts were made to encourage Tamara to read more of the *I Can Read* books in addition to the highly patterned predictable books. Tamara was also encouraged to read slightly longer texts in order to improve her ability to attend to tasks for a longer period of time. Tamara responded well to these efforts. With support, she was able to read many of the *I Can Read* books. Her tutor wrote "at present, alternate reading of pages by Tamara and the tutor seem to work best.

Using a finger to point helps Tamara attend to the print and reduces her tendency to skip lines of text. While reading, Tamara is able to make appropriate predictions about the story and overall seems to be developing a sense of story structure." Tamara had gradually begun to read; she was more and more able to use decoding as a skill while maintaining a sense of purpose in order to comprehend print.

By June of her second full year at the Center, Tamara had begun to read fluently in the Center, using both meaning (as shown by comprehension measures and her tendency to self-correct) and decoding as strategies for figuring out unknown words. She had moved from reading strictly from memory to reading books like *Corduroy* and *Clifford, the Big Red Dog* as well as many *I Can Read* books. Although she still had difficulty with attention and physical organization, she had come to comprehend text better, both her own and others.

Tamara also made a good deal of progress as she wrote. She revised and kept her audience in mind. Importantly, she had begun to perceive herself as a reader and writer. Although she still said reading and writing were not her favorite activities, she had moved to successful (functional and fluent) reading and writing. At the end of her second year we "graduated" her from the Center.

Individuals and successful reading

What can we learn from these three children in these three different instructional settings? First, all three children learned to read and all three learned the graphophonic system (as shown by their invented spellings). Although they came from different instructional settings, they all developed in similar ways, yet at different rates. All three generally moved through the stages and principles of beginning reading and writing which is repeatedly documented in the literature

(Dyson, 1991; Ferriero and Teberosky, 1982; Sulzby, 1985; Sulzby and Teale, 1991). That is, they generally moved from unconventional, yet functional, uses of print to read and write, to a specific focus on graphophonics, and finally to an orchestration of both meaning and other cueing systems.

Second, all three teachers provided the individual instruction which nudged the learner toward literacy development, providing the necessary scaffold. Audrey's traditional instruction was appropriate, considering her incoming knowledge of print, her ability to make sense of the instruction, and her opportunities (albeit brief) for independent reading and writing. The explicit teaching of phonics, even in isolation, seemed to serve Audrey well as she was developmentally ready to understand and, to some extent, transfer these skills and knowledge to her independent reading and writing contexts. Maria came to school knowing many concepts about print and having a love of books. She progressed in her meaning-centered classroom and became graphophonically aware quite naturally through reading and writing. During the year I taught Tamara at the literacy center, she seemed to be stuck in a stage of development in which she could not bring her cueing systems together as she read or wrote. My hunch at the time was to keep pressing her to focus on the graphophonic system while reading familiar texts, rather than back off. I felt much as her classroom teacher probably felt — worried about Tamara and frustrated with my teaching. In retrospect, I think teaching her sounds and symbols in this context was the right move for her as shown by her later leaps in growth in both reading and writing.

Finally, for all three children, writing was part of their curriculum. The importance of writing in the early grades for the development of graphophonic knowledge is well documented (Bissex, 1980; Clay, 1975; Gunderson and Shapiro,

1988). It is often not until children are encouraged or need to write do they learn the functional uses of sound/symbol relations.

It appears that some children may need more guidance, hand holding, forcing almost, as in the case of Tamara, in order to learn graphophonic relations necessary for decoding that leads to independent reading. Other children, such as Maria, need only to be put in a literate environment where they can ask questions of their teacher and fellow students and view others' ways of reading and writing in order to continue their literacy development. The art in teaching is knowing when to push and when to back off and with whom. If the teacher is unsure, I advocate erring on the side of pushing a little, within an environment which is risk-free for the child.

Implications and conclusion

Each teacher had a commitment to one specific approach to literacy instruction and they taught *all* children the same curriculum in the same way. It is important to first note that what was appropriate for Audrey, Maria and Tamara may not be especially appropriate for their classmates. Regardless of the label given to the instructional settings, we must look at the details of what happens under these labels to be able to make informed decisions about what is needed for individual children. The role of the teacher is to become informed about literacy development, carefully observe children, and to take time to meet with individual learners who need more nudging.

Teachers can set up environments in which all kinds of learners can succeed. Some teachers may choose to set places and times aside for more structured activities within a setting where children choose their own literacy activity. Teachers

may hold phonics lessons for small groups of children who appear to need it. They may find ways to work one-on-one with the children like Tamara. Most teachers recognize that some children require more help than others and that all beginning readers need to focus on the print as they emerge as readers and writers. Teachers must be careful not to assume children will focus on print on their own. Teachers cannot assume the children will learn graphophonics or that they *want* to. It is often the passive learners who slip through the cracks because no one noticed that they were not actively participating (Purcell-Gates and Dahl, 1991). Teachers can attempt to recognize these learners and to personally help them achieve success. Good teachers recognize that phonics and meaning-centered instruction are both necessary in vital ways, not as alternatives, but as complements in a deep and sensitive relation with one another.

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