

TEACHING PHONICS IN WHOLE LANGUAGE CLASSROOMS

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Introduction

Over recent years there has been much debate about phonics and whole language. Many contributors to the debate are ignorant about whole language and perpetuate myths, one of which is that phonics is not part of whole language programs. The word 'whole' in the term 'whole language' denotes that all the language systems (phonic, semantic, syntactic) are learned as an integrated whole. One cannot claim to teach language holistically and then ignore one of the language sub-systems, namely phonics.

Phonics is the study of the relationships between the letters and sounds in a particular language, and hence is to do with written, not spoken language. Phonemic awareness, which is sometimes confused with phonics, is the ability to be able to identify the individual sounds within words. It is to do with spoken, not written, language.

Written English and Phonics

It is important that the difference between letters and sounds is understood. One sees a letter, while one hears a sound. One writes a letter which may represent a particular sound in a particular context. One cannot write a sound. While it is true to say there are twenty six letters in the English alphabet it is not true to say there are only twenty six sounds in spoken English. It is generally agreed that there are approximately forty three to forty five sounds in spoken English. The precise number of sounds used by English speakers varies, according to the dialect spoken. Consider the different sounds in Australian English, American English, Yorkshire English.

It is also important to know that letters represent sounds only in the context of words. Consider the different sounds represented by letter 'u' in the following words.

up put use rude

Some words need the wider context of a sentence to determine the particular sound represented by a particular letter. Examples of such words are 'wind' and 'desert'. Note the two different sounds represented by the letter 'i' and the letter 'e' in the following sentences.

Please wind up the car window

The wind blew the hat off my head,

Luckily the lost explorers reached an oasis in the desert.

The husband planned to desert his wife and children.

To instruct children that in written English, a particular letter represents one particular sound is poor teaching. To have individual letters written on a set of cards and to have each child 'read' a particular sound for each letter is misleading.

a

Sometimes teachers have children read 'the sound' for the above letter, and expect the children to give the sound as heard in the middle of 'cat' and 'hat'. However, letter 'a' represents many different sounds in written English as illustrated in the following list.

was cat apron about any although bath

Spoken words are made up of sounds

The words we use when speaking are combinations of the forty three to forty five phonemes or single speech sounds which make up spoken English. When we write we draw upon the twenty six letters to represent these spoken words. Often we use letters to represent the individual speech sounds but as the English language includes words

which have come from other languages it is not always true to say that all letters used in written English represent the sounds heard. Additionally some English spelling represents meaning rather than sound.

medico

medical

medicine

sign

signal

hear

heard

Most young children starting school are not able to hear and identify the individual sounds within words. Children learning English as a second language may not have heard all the individual sounds of spoken English, in the language they hear spoken at home, let alone be able to separate the individual sounds within any word, or even separate one word from the next word in an English phrase. Where phonics is taught from the first day of school, how difficult it is for those children who cannot separate and identify, the individual speech sounds. They are expected to learn letter/sound patterns for which they have no meaningful reference.

Letters represent sounds in the context of words

It is important to remember that letters represent sounds only in the context of words. The letter 'a' written on the card above is not a sound. It cannot represent a sound unless it is part of a word. Therefore letters written by themselves are identified by their names not by sounds. Letters may represent more than one sound and one sound may be represented by more than one letter or group of letters.

Study the following list of words. Which sound is letter 'a' representing? If several of these words occurred in classroom texts which the children were reading, it would make sense to group them together and discuss the sound/letter association.

was want wash Lachlan salt halt what wallaby

The children can be encouraged to find other words with this same sound/letter pattern.

It is when children can read a word that it makes sense to discuss with them the phonics of the word. If for example a child recognizes and reads aloud 'won', the teacher might discuss the sounds and sound/ letter relationships within this word. Alternately if the child cannot recognise and read aloud this word it would be almost impossible for him to 'sound it out' or to discuss the sound letter patterns.

Phonics is learned as children learn to read and write

The study letter/sound relationships (phonics) occurs as children learn to read and to write. The discussion of individual letters, individual sounds and individual sound/letter relationships, occurs in the context of meaningful written texts. This provides points of reference for young learners. For example a child whose name is 'Sally' and who needs to write 's' in 'sand' is able to visualise her name and see letter 's'.

Children who have read and loved 'Mrs Wishy Washy' (Cowley & Fuller, 2002) and talked about the letter 'w' at the start of her name will be able to see in their minds, the letter 'w' on the cover of the much loved book, when they need to use letter 'w' in their own writing.

As children learn to read and write, they learn about sound/letter relationships. For teachers who teach holistically it is impossible to say which sound/ letter relationship the children will learn first. Different individual children learn different sound/letter patterns in different sequences, because they read and write different words. The word each young child is most familiar with is his name and generally one of the first letters learned by a child is the first letter in his name. In fact children's very early writing often consists of strings of letters from their own name, for these are the letters which they know best.

Repeated readings of favourite texts makes possible for young learners the association of printed words with spoken words, the building of sight vocabularies, and the learning of sound/letter patterns.

Although holistic teachers cannot display the sequence in which particular sound/letter patterns will be learned, at the commencement of a school year, phonics is an integral component of holistic teaching.

From Whole Text to Smaller Elements within Text

Holistic teaching which focuses on meaning and purpose, while incorporating the learning of language conventions such as phonics, handwriting, punctuation and grammar, makes use of what are called authentic texts. These are texts which stand in their own right: they have been written to inform about the world, or to tell a story, or to tell how to make something, or to satisfy a multitude of other life purposes.

Early literacy experiences include immersions in meaningful real world texts: rhymes, songs, fiction and non-fiction books, joint constructions about classroom experiences, captions describing three dimensional models, environmental print etc. Important early literacy experiences also include observing as others read and write, and access to books, pencils and paper.

In holistic classrooms, the teaching sequence begins with a whole text, the construction of meaning, and then, with revisiting the text, or re-readings, moves to learning about the language conventions or the separate elements of language which go to make up the whole.

Print Conventions

Print conventions include directional knowledge of a written language. Written English goes from left to right and progressively down a page. The following terms are necessary in coming to understand the print conventions of written English: 'book', 'top of page', 'bottom of page', 'front of book', 'back of book', 'cover', 'page', 'print', 'picture', 'sentence', 'word', 'letter'.

In early literacy programs the teacher uses the language of print conventions as she reads and writes with the children. She makes comments like:

I'll start at the front of the book.

See the picture at the bottom of the page.

I'll write the first word.

Now what will the first word be?

Oh, this is a long sentence.

I'll have to start on a new page.

Now, which letter does 'dinosaur' start with?

I'll write that letter again?

This is letter 'l'. My name starts with that letter.

Thus in rich context children are learning about sentences, words and letters.

Learning words.

When working with whole texts the teacher is ever alert to children developing awareness of the smaller elements within texts such as words and letters. For example, after children read a text they have helped to compose, she fosters understanding of the concept of a word, with the following instructions.

Can you cover the first word?

Can you cover a word?

Put your hand on a long word.

Cover a short word.

Can you see a word the same as this one?

Discovering Letters

Holistic teaching takes the lead from the learners in relation to the introduction of specific surface language features or what are commonly known as the skills.

Teachers instruct by building upon children's questions and discoveries. Children noticing letters within words, make comments like the following:

That shape's in my name.

That word starts like my name.

That's an 's' (letter name) and I've got 's' in my name.

I know that letter.

For example the teacher might be writing on the chalkboard following the arrival of a delivery of sand.

We now have sand for our sand tray.

A small voice calls out,

'I see two shapes the same.'

The teacher might proceed as follows:

'Jessica, come and point to the shapes you see.'

The child points to 's' in each written form of 'sand'.

The teacher writes letter 's' by itself and asks

'Does anyone know the name of this letter?' (Introducing the term 'letter'.)

If no-one does, she introduces the letter name.

'This is letter "s".'

The teacher continues,

'Do any of you have 'letter 's' in your name?'

The children might all get their name cards to discover who has the letter 's' in their names- especially Jessica!

A letter 's' chart is started..

The children then do a print search around their classroom looking for other words containing letter 's'. These are added to the list.

The teacher might read some of these words to see if the children can hear a common sound.

' "Sally", "Sam", "Sebastian", "silent" . Does anyone know the sound at the start of these words?'

If the children are readily able to hear the first sound she might ask them to suggest which letter is representing that sound in these words. This association of sounds with letters within words, is phonics. If the children have difficulty isolating the sound at the start of the words or relating the letter to the sound heard, there is no point in forcing the issue at this point. The list of 's' words is displayed in the classroom and referred to on following days. The children are asked to watch out for other words containing letter 's'. Occasionally the teacher will return to the issue of the letter /sound relationship, asking if the children know which sound the letter 's' is representing.

Jessica	sand	mouse	sneeze
Sally	nest	spider	
slipper	Sebastian	mini-beast	
six	Sam	Nicholas	
horse	Lisa	six	
silly	seven	snail	
sand	Sausage	silent	

Once the children are familiar with a letter, they know its name and can recognise it within words, it is appropriate to practise handwriting that particular letter.

Learning the Alphabet

When children start noticing letters within texts, and begins using letter like shapes in their writing, it is timely to teach the alphabet. There is no logical way to explain the order of the letters of the alphabet. Remembering the order requires rote learning. Learning an alphabet song is one way for the children to learn on order the letters of the alphabet.

As well, the alphabet is displayed in the classroom at a height the children can see with ease. Pictures accompanying each letter are of objects or people recognisable to the particular group of students. The class may help find pictures to accompany each letter for their own class alphabet strip. These pictures could include a photograph of each child in the class. It is valuing the children to have each of their names featured in the class alphabet display.

Throughout the year there will be opportunity to develop class alphabet books from classroom investigations.

Eg Animal Alphabet

Aa ant Bb bee Cc caterpillar

Clothing Alphabet

Aa anorak Bb boot Cc cardigan

Bracelet

The alphabet can be painted on the school ground along a path from the infant building to the adventure playground or from the infant building to the children's toilets. The children can step or hop along the alphabet trail saying the names of the letters.

Discovering a Sound

The introduction of sounds and letters occurs in the context of language use – saying a rhyme, reading a big book, writing story. Sounds and letters are not introduced in isolation. Teaching a letter or a sound a week from some pre-determined sequence is not part of this approach.

My experience has taught me that young children generally comment much more frequently about individual letters or 'shapes' they see in written text than they ever voluntarily do about sounds heard in language. However if a child does comment upon a sound heard within a word the teacher takes opportunity to build upon that knowledge. She might start a list of words with that same sound.

Another strategy for developing awareness that words consist of sounds is for the teacher to sound some words as she writes.

This is not a long drawn out exaggerated process. However if for example the teacher is scribing on the chalkboard she might say,

'The next word is "teacher".'

As she writes she begins sounding the word – 't-ea-ch-er'. I find if I do this occasionally with first and second year children, they start to join in sounding out the word with me. What I am demonstrating is that one way of spelling a word is to sound it out. This is useful information for young learners in the early stages of writing.

Children's Phonic Knowledge is Revealed in Their Writing.

When children write (compose) from their first days at school their writing reveals all they know about writing; directional features, text types and writing purposes,

print concepts such as letter, word and sentence, and, significantly, sound/letter relationships.

Phonic tests are not needed to assess a child's phonic knowledge, for close observation of a child's writing will inform any teacher of that child's ability to hear the sounds within words and to choose letters to represent those sounds.

Note in the two examples following how logical the children's spellings are.

speshal (special) Is the child hearing each sound in the word? Yes. Why has he chosen 'sh' to represent the fourth sound in the word? 'Sh' is the most common spelling of this sound and is evident in words such as 'ship', 'fish' and 'splash'.

Qwik (quick) Is this child hearing each sound? Yes. Why has he included letter 'w'? The word 'quick' has four sounds k-w-i-k. He has heard all four sounds and has included letter 'w' to represent the second sound. The letters 'qu' are used in other words such as 'queen', 'quite' to represent the first two sounds so he has obviously seen words like these and is remembering the 'q' as the first letter. That is, he is using visual memory as a spelling strategy. Both these examples show young children working very logically to solve the mysteries of sound/symbol patterns.

Children apply generalisations gleaned from reading, and from observing others write, as they write for themselves. From learning what letters are, what they look like and some of the sounds they represent, children begin applying this knowledge when they write. Careful observation of children's generalisations informs the teacher of points for teaching.

After a walk to the local park an eight year old wrote,

yesday we went to the puk

Several other children also spelled 'park' as 'puk'. At sharetime the teacher drew the children's attention to the word park. She asked if the children could identify how many sounds were in park. There are three sounds. With the children helping where they could, she wrote 'park' on the whiteboard. There was a discussion of the letters which together represented the middle sound, namely letters 'ar' together. The children were asked if they knew any other words with this spelling pattern. One child said, 'car'. It is good teaching to encourage children to look for patterns of similarities and difference between words for learning to spell is not memorising the spelling of each individual word.

With this approach to the study of phonics the more frequently used letter/sound patterns are learned by the children before some of the less frequently used associations. Thus you may see children in their first year of school correctly applying 'sh' as in 'fish' and 'ay' as in 'day' before they use for example letter 'x'.

A class of Grade 2 children went to a showing of the film 'Charlie and the Chocolate Factory' after which they talked, wrote and drew about the experience. From their writing the teacher started a word chart with 'Charlie' and 'chocolate' written upon it. She asked the children to tell her what was the same in the spelling of the two words. From this discussion, a particular sound was linked with the letters 'ch'. The children were asked to add other words which included the same sound/ letter pattern.

Their list included	Charlie	chocolate
	church	cheeky
	children	chop
	chat	lunch
	chips	crunch

A student whose name was 'Christine' volunteered that her name started with letters 'ch' but they made a different sound. Another column was added to the chart and the words 'Christine' and 'Christmas' were added. On this one chart children are gaining valuable insight as to how with written English, the same letter or group of letters may represent different sounds.

Rather than teaching words and sound/letter patterns from a commercial list, lists are developed by the teacher and children together, and consist of words studied by them or of interest to them, in their classroom.

As children's reading and writing vocabularies expand they come to realise that in written English, the one sound can be represented by several different letters or groups of letters.

Again the children's discoveries are capitalised upon. They are entered on a chart. Other words are added on following days.

o	a	ou	au
dog	was	cough	sausage
fox	salt		because
hot	what		
stop	want		

Where children daily interact with, and create their own, written texts, there is no need to spend money purchasing commercial phonic programs. Phonics, the study of sound/letter relationships is so easily done using texts the children can read and those they write.

Using Children's Names

Because generally speaking the first word a child reads is his name, much valuable early literacy understanding about letters and sounds can be achieved by referring to the children's names. All that is needed is for each child's first name to be written on a card. (Later in the year a different set of cards could contain both the first and surname for each child.) The cards are kept in a box clearly labelled 'Children's Names'. Children who have a few free moments may choose to take out the name cards and sort them in some way.

The following tasks can be done with all children sitting in a circle and with their name cards scattered in the middle:

1. Individual children find their own name cards. They read them and then show their name to the person sitting next to them in the circle.
 - They teach one another to read the names.
 - They look to see if there are any letters the same in their two names.
2. The name cards are scattered in the middle of the circle: (This won't happen right at the start of the Kindergarten year.)
 - Individual children choose a friend's name. They have to say how they know it is their friend's name.
eg It's Ken's name because it has a 'K'.
I know it's Sonya's name because I can read it on her locker.
3. Grouping names with common letters.
 - Children are each given their own name cards.
They find someone whose name starts with the same letter as their name. The teacher might copy the first letter name groups onto a chart, or each group might copy their names onto a piece of paper.

Sam Aidan Phuc Xavier

Sally Amy Pamela
Sean Annabelle

- All those with letter 'e' in their name, form a group.
- All those who have letter 't' in their names, form a group. If ropes are used to circle each group the children might work out how to show intersecting sets. For example 'Peter' belongs in each of the above groups.

4. Last One Standing.

This is a little like Musical Chairs, except that you are out of the game when your name has a designated letter. All children stand, holding their own name cards. Teacher or child says

'You are out of the game if you have letter 't' in your name.'

'You are out of the game if you have capital 'C' in your name.'

Children sit down as they are eliminated from the game but watch the other children's name cards to ensure everybody is playing fairly.

5. Grouping for common sounds

When children are able to identify single sounds in words they might do the following.

- Form a group if you hear this sound in your name: the 'a' sound as at the start of 'Amy'.

Daimon, Amy, Maisy, Fay all form a group

- Form a group if you hear this sound in your name: the 'c' sound as at the start of 'cat'.

Christine, Chris, Katie, Ricky and Catherine all form a group

Each group writes their names on a list and discusses the letters representing the particular sound.

6. Last one standing; sound/letter relationships.

Children hold their own name cards and are eliminated when their name contains a sound/letter pattern given by the teacher or maybe a child. All children are encouraged to look at other children's name cards to check whether they include the particular pattern.

- Sit down if you have letter 'd' representing the 'd' sound of 'dog'.
Donaldo would be out of the game.
- Sit down if your name has letters 'au' representing the 'or' sound we hear in
'sport' and in 'door'. Paul would be out of the game.

Phonics is just one spelling strategy

The media debate on phonics ignores the fact that phonics is but one spelling strategy. Two other significant strategies are the morphemic and visual recall. The morphemic strategy applies understanding that words which mean the same are spelt similarly.

Note the related spelling so of,

ear, hear, and heard

Note the different sounds represented by the letters 'ear' in hear and heard. Here these three letters are representing meaning rather than sound.

All writers sometimes write a particular word in several different ways and ask,

'Which one looks right?'

This is the application of the visual recall strategy. Through seeing words in print we store visual images of them and so when we come to write these words we are able to call upon their visual appearance to assist with the spelling.

'If students continue to spell mainly by sound, they will remain immature spellers. Visual patterns and morphemic knowledge (meaning) must be used if spelling is to move from the phonetic stage, through the transitional stage to the conventionally correct stage. (Gentry & Gillet, 1993; Snowball & Bolton, 1985).'

Marie Emmitt, David Hornsby, and Lorraine Wilson, 2006.

SUMMARY

The study of phonics is an integral component of holistic learning programs. However there is no predetermined sequence for the introduction of sounds and letters nor is any commercial phonic program necessary. The classroom study of sounds and letters and sound/letter patterns builds upon discoveries made by the children as they read, and from knowledge revealed as they write. Sound letter relationships are more readily understood when they are discussed in words known to and able to be pronounced by a child.

Sadly much effort and media space is used to promote isolated phonic skill programs. If only such effort and space were used to promote the importance of capturing young children's interest in, and passion for reading and writing, of the need to read to babies from birth, joyous, beautiful books, and of the need for all schools to be richly resourced with libraries, books, pencils, paper and other classroom publishing materials.

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