

An Introduction to Understanding Foundational Literacy Grades 6-12

Note Catcher: Secondary Foundations

	Key Concepts	Connections	Instructional Practices for Secondary Intervention	Source(s)
Phonological Awareness				
Phonemic Awareness				
Phonics				
Fluency				

Phonemic Awareness vs. Phonics

July 6th, 2020 [Foundations in Literacy](#) By Marjorie Bottari

In 2000, the National Reading Panel (NRP) identified 5 components of effective literacy instruction: phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension. In addition to naming these five components, the NRP also concluded that phonemic awareness and phonics instruction needed to be increased in primary grades. While both phonemic awareness and phonics were named separately, these two terms are often confused or used interchangeably. Both components are absolutely essential for reading, but it is important to understand that they are not the same thing.

What is Phonemic Awareness?

Phonemic Awareness is the understanding that spoken words are made up of individual sounds, called phonemes. Phonemic awareness is oral and auditory, and the focus is on the sounds in words. Phonemic awareness is often confused with phonics, however, unlike phonics, phonemic awareness does not involve print or letter names. It is critical to understand the difference between the two, as reading is phonologically based, not visual as we often think it is.

Phonemic awareness instruction provides children with the understanding that the words they hear in oral language are not whole units but are co-articulated sounds that make up a word. Once children have this understanding, we can have them isolate, blend, segment and manipulate those sounds. These phonemic awareness skills are necessary to becoming a proficient, fluent reader.

The basic phonemic awareness skill of blending directly correlates to phonic decoding or sounding out a word. When we blend, we take the parts (sounds) and blend them together to make a whole word. For example, the sounds /s/ /u/ /n/ blended together make the word sun.

Segmenting is also a basic phonemic awareness skill. Segmenting mirrors blending and directly correlates to encoding or spelling. When we segment, we take the whole word and break it into parts. If I segment the word plan into all of the phonemes I hear, /p/ /l/ /a/ /n/, I will be able to spell that word once I have letter-sound knowledge (phonics).

Why is Phonemic Awareness Important?

In the past, many parents and educators have thought that teaching blending and segmenting was adequate phonemic awareness instruction. However, research shows that instruction in phoneme manipulation plays a critical role in creating proficient and fluent readers. As Louisa Moats states in her podcast *Of Hard Words and Straw Men*, “Perhaps the most critical and least-practiced component of effective early instruction is phoneme awareness. Awareness of the sounds that make up spoken words, facility at manipulating those sounds, and the links between speech and print must be mastered for students to be fluent readers and accurate spellers of an alphabetic writing system like ours.”

Phoneme manipulation includes adding, deleting and substituting sounds in words. When engaging in these phonemic awareness activities, students learn they can make more words by manipulating individual sounds. For example, I can add /m/ at the beginning of at to make the word mat. I can also delete phonemes to make new words – the word play without /l/ is pay. I could also substitute a sound to make a new word. In the same word play I can change the /l/ to a /r/ and the new word is pray/prey. If students are able to manipulate phonemes orally, they will be able to transfer these skills to reading and writing during phonics instruction.

The Importance of Phonemic Awareness in Spelling

Once students are engaged in phonics instruction, we can see the evidence of phonemic awareness skills in their reading and spelling. Educators and parents can observe students blending sounds together to read words or turning unknown words into automatic sight words by quickly manipulating phonemes (e.g. may, day, say, pay, lay) to read the words.

When students write, we can look at their spelling and see the sounds they are hearing in words. Oftentimes, our younger readers and writers hear the first and last sounds in words before the medial sounds – they might spell the

word cat as ct. Analyzing writing and spelling helps us guide our instruction on which phonemic awareness skills students still need instruction in.

While phonemic awareness instruction transfers to reading and writing, we do not need to wait to teach it. Students can engage in phonemic awareness lessons before they know their letters and sounds. I can ask students to tell me the first sound they hear in the word man /m/, even if they do not yet know that M is the letter that makes the sound /m/.

What is Phonics?

While phonemic awareness is oral and auditory, phonics instruction is both visual and auditory. The focus of phonics instruction is letter-sound relationships. During explicit phonics instruction students are taught the letter or letter combinations that represent the 44 sounds or phonemes in the English language.

As students match letters or letter combinations to the sounds they hear in words, they apply the phonemic awareness skills of blending, segmenting, and manipulating phonemes with the print that represents each sound. In this way, phonemic awareness is connected to phonics. When students know the sounds the letters they see in print make, they are able to blend or manipulate those sounds to read words. When spelling, students hear the whole word, segment the word into sounds and match the letter or letter combinations to the sound it makes.

Critics of explicit phonics instruction believe that the English language is too unpredictable, and students should learn to use context or visual cues to “read” words rather than sounding them out. While it is true that English is not always predictable, it is still an alphabetic language with many consistencies. In fact, 84% of English words are phonetically regular. Additionally, many of the irregular words are only often irregular by one phoneme only.

For example, in the word the, the initial sound /th/ is phonetically correct, and the letter e saying /u/ is not. Compare this to using context clues, in which only 25% of words can be predicted through context (Gough, Alford, & Holley-Wilcox). Many of those words are function words like the and an. As readers move on to more content-focused texts, only 10% of words can be predicted by context (Gough, et al., 1983).

Why Should We Teach Both?

To understand the importance of phonemic awareness and phonics, we must first understand that reading is not natural. We do not learn to read the same way we learn to speak. In fact, reading is relatively new when we compare the amount of time humans have been communicating orally to when reading first came on the scene. As Barbara Foorman so clearly states, “Humans are biologically specialized to produce language and have done so for nearly 1 million years. Such is not the case with reading and writing. If it were, there would not be illiterate children in the world.”

It is essential to explicitly teach students how sounds in words work (phonemic awareness) and how those sounds connect to the letters they see in print (phonics). Phonemic Awareness instruction does not replace phonics instruction, but rather, both skills are necessary when teaching students to decode words accurately and automatically. As Wiley Blevins explains, “Phonemic awareness training provides the foundation on which phonics instruction is built. Thus, children need solid phonemic awareness training for phonics instruction to be effective.”

According to the research brief completed by the EAB, reading instruction in kindergarten through third grade should have a greater focus on word decoding until students become fluent readers. Much work has been done around Linnea Ehri’s phases of word reading to help us understand how phonemic awareness progresses into phonics, phonic decoding and eventually fluent and automatic reading.

In the partial alphabetic phase of reading, children begin to understand that words are made up of individual sounds and learn the letters that represent those sounds. As they move beyond the partial alphabetic stage, and into the full alphabetic stage children begin using the skills of blending and segmenting to decode and encode words.

The Literacy Gap

It has often been thought that if children could blend and segment they would be proficient readers. However, blending and segmenting are only enough to get children to the full and consolidated alphabetic phases, not the automatic phase of reading. This is the cause of the lack of proficient readers our nation produces. In 2019, NAEP scores revealed that only 35% of 4th graders and 34% of 8th were considered to be proficient readers. Many of our students are left at the basic or below basic level of reading. There are two main contributors to the struggle to create proficient readers:

Students are not explicitly taught phonemic awareness and phonics. Instead, they think of words as visual and memorize them as whole units. They tend to guess at words using picture clues or the beginning sounds in a word. As we shift from “learning to read” to “reading to learn” in 3rd grade and beyond, these students do not have any strategies to read unknown words.

Students may have received explicit phonemic awareness and phonics instruction, but only to the basic levels of blending and segmenting. This allows students to sound out words, but does not give them the skills necessary to turn unknown words into automatic sight words. Sounding out words, or phonic decoding, does not allow students to focus on the content and comprehend what they are reading. Instead, they are laboring over the words they are reading and focusing on decoding.

All of Ehri’s phases of reading are important to the development of a reader. However, we don’t want students to get stuck in the full and consolidated alphabetic phases. We need to move beyond those stages and provide advanced phonemic awareness instruction with phoneme manipulation to allow students to reach the automatic phase. We can show students how the work we do through the air can transfer to print, allowing them to read and spell more words.

Bringing Phonemic Awareness and Phonics Instruction Together

While phonemic awareness and phonics are not the same thing, they do enjoy a reciprocal relationship. We do not need to wait for phonemic awareness to be fully developed before beginning phonics instruction. Instead, educators should help students understand the connection between phonemic awareness and phonics. When planning reading instruction, phonemic awareness only needs to be about 10-12 minutes of the literacy block for the primary grades. This instruction should include early, basic and advanced phonemic awareness skills.

Within the same literacy block, instruction should teach students how to apply the phonemic awareness skills to print, focusing on grapheme-phoneme correspondences. We can explicitly show students how blending sounds through the air connects to reading words as we blend the sounds the letters represent to read a word. We can model spelling words by segmenting whole words into individual sounds. Once we hear the sounds in words, we use our phonics knowledge to use the appropriate grapheme(s) to represent the sounds we hear.

For older students, phonemic awareness and phonics instruction can happen in tandem. We show students how we can manipulate phonemes in words by changing phonemes within print. Repeated practice allows students “to bond the spellings, pronunciations, and meanings of specific words in memory” (Ehri, 2014). These repeated exposures to grapheme-phoneme correspondences is necessary for orthographic mapping. Orthographic mapping uses sound-to-letter relationships to anchor phonemes in a word’s pronunciation to the printed letter strings into long term memory for future retrieval.

It is important to note that phonemic awareness and phonics instruction needs to be systematic, explicit and consistent. A sprinkling of phonemic awareness and phonics instruction here and there will not provide the repetition and practice needed to become automatic decoders of print. These skills are also a means to an end and at no point the only literacy instruction necessary to create fluent and proficient readers. However, these skills are not optional, and they lay the foundation on which additional reading components are built.

Phonics

P. 033

Syllable Patterns

Map and Swoop

Objective

The student will segment syllables in words.

Materials

- ▶ Student sheet

Choose target syllable pattern(s).

When mapping VCE syllables, the "e" is placed below the final grapheme with a slash and an arrow is drawn leading back to the vowel that it is making long.

- ▶ Pencil

Activity

Students map graphemes to phonemes and mark syllables within words.

1. Provide the student with a student sheet.
2. Student writes each word using phoneme-grapheme mapping (i.e., one grapheme per box).
3. Underlines each vowel (i.e., single, r-controlled, and vowel teams).
4. Swoops the syllables underneath the letters.
5. Continues until the student sheet is complete.
6. Teacher evaluation

Name _____		P.033							
Map and Swoop		closed syllables							
cobweb		c	o	b	w	e	b		
1. napkin									
2. helmet									
3. volcanic									
4. problem									
5. cricket									
6. fantastic									
7. trumpet									
8. inhibit									
9. plastic									
10. consistent									

Extensions and Adaptations

- ▶ Combine syllable types.
- ▶ Use different words.

Name _____

Map and Swoop

		final stable syllables							
	maple	m	a	p	le				
1.	jungle								
2.	stifle								
3.	castle								
4.	juggle								
5.	sparkle								
6.	multiple								
7.	wrestle								
8.	impossible								
9.	resemble								
10.	pebble								