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Whole Language Fact Sheet Series: On Phonics in Whole Language Classrooms

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SLATE STARTER SHEET

Fact Sheet Series

Whole Language Fact Sheet Series: On Phonics in Whole Language Classrooms

The truth is that some attention to the relationships between spelling patterns and their pronunciation is characteristic of all types of reading programs, including whole language. . . . The fact is that all students, regardless of the type of instruction they receive, learn about letter-sound correspondences as part of learning to read. —Steven Stahl, 1992

Background

One myth about education is that whole language teachers do not teach phonics. Not true: they simply teach phonics as children read and write authentic texts, rather than in a separate program or separate lessons. Another myth is that phonics is not learned as readily when it is taught in the context of the reading and writing, instead of being taught intensively and systematically. Recent research indicates that this also is untrue. As a former advocate of intensive phonics now notes, "The integrated phonics instruction typical of some whole language first-grade classrooms might work as well as the more structured phonics instruction typical of basal reading programs" (Stahl, McKenna, & Pagnucco, 1993, citing Stahl, 1992). And, indeed, recent research suggests that students in whole language classrooms learn and use phonics skills as well or better than children in more traditional classrooms (summarized in Weaver, 1994). Furthermore, as McIntyre and Freppon note (1995), although whole language teachers' instruction in phonics is an integral part of daily classroom interactions, it is not necessarily random or eclectic, "But can be carefully planned and well thought through in whole language."

How whole language teachers help children develop phonics knowledge

Whole language teachers have faith in children as learners. Children can and usually will develop a grasp of letter/sound relationships with relatively little direct instruction, just as they learned to talk without direct instruction in the grammar of the English language. Most of the following examples, however, illustrate ways that whole language teachers often use in directly helping children develop phonics knowledge and the ability to use it in reading and writing. Since teacher aides and parents may want to use these procedures too, this list is expressed in the imperative, as good things to do to help children learn phonics.

- Read aloud to children from Big Books or charts large enough for all the children in the group or class to see the print easily. Run a pointer or your hand or finger under the words, to help children make the association between spoken words and written words.

- Part of the time, choose Big Books and/or make charts

of stories, poems, and rhymes that make interesting use of alliteration, rhyme, and onomatopoeia.

- When sharing such Big Books or charts, focus children's attention on the beginnings and ends of words. Research shows (summarized in Adams, 1990) that at first, it is much more difficult for children to hear separate sounds in words than to hear the beginning of a syllable (the "onset") as a unit (s- as in sit, but also spl- as in split) and to hear the vowel plus any following consonants (the "rime") as another unit (-it, as in sit and split). Therefore, it is helpful to focus first on elements that alliterate and that rhyme, before focusing on individual sounds. It is especially important not to focus on vowels by themselves, but in combination with any consonants that follow the vowel — the "rime" patterns (like -ate, -ant, -ast, -ere, -est, -ing, -ist, -ight, -ound, -old, ung, -ure).

- When discussing the onsets and/or rimes, it often helps to invite children first to share what they have noticed about the sounds, instead of beginning by telling what you have noticed. Ask questions like "What do you notice about the sounds in this poem?" (Mills, O'Keefe, & Stephens, 1992).

- During the discussion of onsets and/or rimes, you and the children can make charts of words with the same sound pattern. For example, "Galoshes," by Rhoda Bacmeister (*Poems Children Will Sit Still For*, edited by Beatrice deRegnier), invites lists of words beginning with s- and sp- and spl-. They may also enjoy starting a list of words that end in -ishes and -oshes, and in making up other nonsense words that follow these rime patterns. As children read other poems, additional words can be added to the charts (Jack Prelutsky's "Spaghetti," for instance, in *Noisy Poems*, (edited by Jill Bennett, 1987). These lists can be ongoing, with the children adding words in their own temporary spellings.

- Words from the charts can be put on separate strips of paper or cards, and children can be invited to categorize them in different ways, including "words that begin the same" and "words that end the same." The same thing can be done with pronounceable word parts: common onsets and rimes. Words constructed from these word parts can be listed and categorized together according to the onset and/or the rime. For example, the onset st- could be combined with only two of the

rime patterns listed above (to make state and sting), but the simpler onset s- could combine with several of them. Children will often notice how other words can be made by varying the pattern slightly (for example, s- plus -ant makes a word if we add -a: Santa). See Powell & Hornsby, 1993, for various ideas.

- Read alphabet books with children, and make alphabet books together.

- Read with children other books that emphasize sound (books such as *Noisy Poems*, edited by Joan Bennett; *Deep Down Underground*, by Oliver Dunrea; and Dr. Seuss books). Comment on sounds.

- Help children learn the important reading strategy of predicting, by covering all but the onset of a fairly predictable word in a text (Post-Its can be used for this purpose). Invite children to make predictions and then look at the rest of the word to confirm what it actually is. This usually works especially well with rhyming words at the end of a line of text, particularly if the word mostly covered rhymes with a line before it.

- Talk about letters and sounds as you write messages to children and as you help them compose something together, or individually. This is a very important way of helping children begin to hear individual sounds in words as well as to learn to spell some of the words they write.

- Help children notice print in their environment — signs, labels, and so forth.

- When children demonstrate in their attempts at writing that they realize letters represent sounds, help them individually to write the sound they hear in words (Freppon & Dahl, 1991). At first, they are likely to write only the first sound of words. Next, they commonly write the first and last sounds

(especially when these are consonants). Vowels typically come later (McGee & Richgels, 1990).

- Provide tape recordings of many selections for children to listen to, as they follow along with the written text. It helps to provide small copies of the text, not just a Big Book or chart.

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