

Teaching Today
The Science of Teaching Phonics?

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I grew up learning phonics and how to decode words through phonics. It has always amazed me of the number of students, undergraduate and graduate, that I have had that have never been taught phonics! Yes, I am aware of the continuing debate between Whole Language – Phonics – and the Balanced Approach.

Literacy – reading in particular – has become a hot topic of interest and is brought to the forefront in the news once more. Our state district report cards have reported on our reading improvement rates (or lack thereof) as well as other areas we are being held accountable. As I work with instructors and participants in our Graduate Reading Programs for Reading Teacher and Reading Specialist, the phonics discussion/debate always comes to the forefront at some point.

On September 10, 2018, Minnesota Public Radio aired a program titled *Why Aren't Kids Being Taught to Read?* This 52-minute podcast details the battle and history between whole language, phonics and the balanced approach to teaching reading. Essentially the author states, *The basic assumption that underlies typical reading instruction in many schools is that learning to read is a natural process, much like learning to talk. But decades of scientific research have revealed that reading doesn't come naturally. The human brain isn't wired to read. Kids must be explicitly taught how to connect sounds with letters — phonics* (Hanford, Podcast, September 10, 2018). And to heighten the issue even more, the question is raised as to whether or not teachers even know or are taught how to teach phonics?

Learning to read, is arguably, one of the most researched concepts of human learning going back to the 1960's. *Most teachers nationwide are not being taught reading science in their teacher preparation programs because many deans and faculty in colleges of education either don't know the science or dismiss it. As a result of their intransigence, millions of kids have been set up to fail* (Hanford, Podcast, September 10, 2018).

Congress eventually became involved and in 2000 released the National Reading Panel report, which found that phonics lessons help kids become better readers. There is no evidence to say the same about whole language.

Minnesota Public Radio followed up on their September 10 podcast with another podcast on September 26, titled *There's a Science to Teaching Children to Read*. An overview of this 50-minute pod cast states: *Children struggling to read in the third grade are likely to be poor readers for their entire lives. There is a scientifically-backed method to teaching children how to read, but the latest research on reading suggests this practice is not being implemented in most American Schools* (Miller, Podcast, September 26, 2018).

This author makes the statement that the reason reading is not taught from a scientific research viewpoint is that teacher preparation programs are not teaching this research in their programs to pre-service teachers! Stay tuned for a follow-up article on this statement as I plan to interview our literacy faculty on this 'accusation' and will share their thoughts. Meanwhile, I encourage you to listen to both podcasts linked in the references below.

References

Hanford, E., (September 10, 2018), *Why Aren't Kids Being Taught to Read?/Hard Words*. Minnesota Public Radio Pod Cast
<https://www.apmreports.org/story/2018/09/10/hard-words-why-american-kids-arent-being-taught-to-read>

Miller, K. & Bissoy-Mattis, J., (September 26, 2018) *There's A Science to Teaching Children to Read*. Minnesota Public Radio Pod Cast
<https://www.mprnews.org/story/2018/09/25/miller-theres-a-science-to-teaching-children-to-read>

[Summary of the \(U.S.\) National Reading Panel Report](#) (International Reading Association, 2002)

Teaching Children to Read: An Evidence-Based Assessment of the Scientific Research Literature on Reading and Its Implications for Reading Instruction (Report of the National Reading Panel) (National Institutes of Health, April 2000)

[Why Not Phonics and Whole Language?](#) (Bolt Beranek and Newman, Inc., 2004)

[Why Reading is Not a Natural Process](#) (Committee on Education and the Workforce, U.S. House of Representatives, Washington, D.C., July 1997)