



K¹² PRIMARY PHONICS AND LANGUAGE ARTS

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In *Straight Talk About Reading* (1998), Louisa C. Moats and Susan L. Hall write, “Reading is the most important skill for success in school and society.”

In the primary grades, the most critical educational task is to ensure that children learn to read. To help ensure success in this task, K¹² has developed a primary Language Arts curriculum with a comprehensive focus on phonics and decoding, as well as meaning and comprehension.

The focus on phonics helps children acquire the skills they need to turn letters on a page into their corresponding speech sounds. The focus on meaning introduces children to the rich world of literature—stories, poems, nonfiction, and more—that they can explore independently once they have mastered the requisite skills.

The Great Debate

In 1967, Jeanne Chall published her seminal and influential study, *Learning to Read: The Great Debate*.

On one side of this debate, there was the “look-say” method. This method—popularized in the *Dick and Jane* series—emphasized teaching children to recognize whole words and sentences.

On the other side of the debate was phonics, which had been brought to national attention by Rudolf Flesch in his controversial bestseller, *Why Johnny Can’t Read* (1955). Flesch condemned the look-say method and cried out for a return to traditional phonics.

Based on her examination of decades of research, Chall was led to acknowledge the effectiveness of early phonics instruction. (Her research has since been extensively confirmed—see the Bibliography cited at the end of this paper.) She noted that the

phonics focus on decoding skills was necessary but not sufficient. As children are learning to read, Chall noted, they need instruction that focuses on both decoding and comprehension.

Chall’s balanced and carefully researched approach was jettisoned in the 1980s by educators in the “whole-language” camp. They attacked phonics as mechanical, mind-numbing, and unnatural. Whole-language teachers discouraged children from sounding out words. They encouraged children to guess words by looking at pictures and using context clues. They also argued that children immersed in a language-rich environment would naturally learn to read at their own pace. As one whole-language proponent explained, “The child learns surrounded by language. It’s just like oral language: through interaction with other language users, all of a sudden things start making sense” (cited in Levine, 1994).

But whole-language advocates were mistaken in comparing learning to speak with learning to read. They drew faulty conclusions based on a partial understanding of the work of the pioneering linguist Noam Chomsky, who theorized that children are born with a “language acquisition device” in their brains. We are born, as it were, hard-wired for speech. To learn to speak, children simply need to hear adults speaking to them. So, to learn to read, children just need to have adults read to them, right?

Wrong. In learning to speak, infants hear people making sounds, begin to imitate those sounds, and eventually learn to communicate through speech. The human brain has specific subsystems designed to learn and process speech. Because speech is hard-wired into the brain, learning to speak seems natural. By contrast, there is nothing natural about learning to read; reading skills are not wired into the brain at birth. Learning to read doesn’t “just happen.” It requires explicit, systematic, and careful guidance

from the instructor and a conscious effort from the learner (Adams, 1998; Chall, 1967; Flesch, 1986; Moats, 1998; NRC, 1998; and Shaywitz, 2003).

Part of what makes learning to read unnatural is the arbitrary nature of the conventions of written language. When you see this letter – **T** – there is no natural reason for you to hear /t/, a sound like a short, clipped “tuh.” The association of the letter with the sound is an artificial convention: **T** says /t/ because that is what we’ve all agreed. It is just as reasonable that we might have agreed that the sound /t/ should be represented by the symbol #, but we didn’t. The association of certain written letters and combinations of letters with certain sounds makes up a code—an arbitrary set of conventions.

Phonics: Unlocking the Code

Phonics, as the term is used here, refers to a systematic approach to teaching letters (and combinations of letters) and their corresponding speech sounds. Phonics begins with the alphabetic principle: language is comprised of words made up of letters that represent sounds. Consider the word *cat*, which has three letters:

c a t

These three letters represent three speech sounds, or phonemes (FOE-neemz), which are written as:

/k/ /ă/ /t/

Phonemic Awareness

Reading begins with phonemic awareness—the ability to hear, discriminate, and manipulate the sounds that make up words. It is not an easy task to hear these sounds. As the distinguished reading researcher Marilyn Jager Adams explains, it is difficult to become aware of phonemes because

people do not attend to the sounds of phonemes as they produce or listen to speech. Instead, they process the phonemes automatically, directing their active attention to the meaning and force of the utterance as a whole. The challenge, therefore, is to find ways to get children to notice the phonemes, to discover their existence and separability. (Adams, 1998)

K¹² begins phonics instruction with eight units of instruction dedicated to enabling children “to notice the phonemes, to discover their existence and separability”—in other words, to developing phonemic awareness. For example, an exercise might note that *mat* and *man* begin with the same sound (/m/) and that you can replace that sound—say, with /k/—and get two new words, *cat* and *can*. The lessons offer a variety of games and activities to help develop children’s listening skills, make them aware of the sounds that make up words, and engage them in manipulating those sounds, often in playful ways.

During these opening units on phonemic awareness, it is important to understand that even though children are not working with written text, they are learning to read. Phonemic awareness is not just a prerequisite—it’s an initial and integral part of learning to read.

Making Decoding Automatic

While some children seem to figure out the code for themselves, most need to be taught, in a carefully organized way, how to transform the letters on the page into their corresponding speech sounds. For this reason, K¹² developed PhonicsWorks®, a comprehensive program designed to ensure that, beginning in kindergarten, children make rapid and efficient progress toward becoming fluent decoders, and master the skills required to turn the marks on the page into their corresponding speech sounds.

In learning to read, most children must go through the normal (and sometimes difficult) process required for learning new skills: conscious effort and repeated practice until the skill becomes subconscious and the child no longer has to think about what he’s doing. This is followed by yet more conscious effort until the next layer of skills becomes subconscious, instantaneous, and automatic.

As Louisa Moats explains, “Automatic word recognition, which is dependent on phonic knowledge, allows the reader to attend to meaning; likewise, slow, belabored decoding overloads short-term memory and impedes comprehension” (Moats, 1998). Compare, for example, the progress

of the budding pianist, who moves from practicing scales to picking up “Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star” to playing a Mozart sonata. In reading, only when a child no longer has to make a conscious effort to decode—when he can instantaneously turn letters into sounds—is his mind free to comprehend, analyze, and enjoy what he is reading. Only when decoding becomes automatic is the child prepared to gain meaning from written text.

Features of K¹² PhonicsWorks

PhonicsWorks helps students reach these important goals:

- Recognize the relationship between sounds and letters
- Blend sounds into words
- Read, write, and spell longer, unfamiliar words by breaking them into syllables
- Read “sight words” (frequently used words such as *said* or *was*, most of which do not follow previously taught spelling patterns)
- Read and write sentences

Key features of the program include:

- Multisensory instruction that allows the student to look, listen, touch, move, and speak
- PhonicsWorks Tile Kit that provides visual, auditory, tactile, and oral learning opportunities
- Phonological awareness instruction that develops listening skills
- Phonics lessons presented in a systematic, explicit, and developmentally appropriate manner
- Sight words to improve word recognition abilities
- Daily oral reading activities using decodable K¹² PhonicsWorks readers or Sentence Sheets to provide repeated opportunities for students to increase fluency
- Daily handwriting practice presented in a developmentally appropriate manner

Comprehension: Meaningful Literature

In *The Great Debate*, Jeanne Chall noted that phonics is only part of the story—and a relatively short part at that. The key is to give children an early and efficient grounding in phonics and then make the transition into reading literature. This approach places the initial emphasis, typically in the first two grades, on phonics. Then, assuming the child has mastered basic decoding skills, it moves briskly to an emphasis on comprehension and fluency, with continuing practice in more complex phonetic and spelling activities.

In the primary K¹² Language Arts program, while the emphasis in the first two grades is on phonics and decoding, there is a complementary emphasis on comprehension, surrounding the child with rich and meaningful texts. How does the child gain access to these texts if he cannot read them? Through listening.

As the child learns phonetic skills, she reads “decodable readers”—brief booklets that feature a high percentage of words with phonetic patterns that have already been taught, as well as a few common sight words. For example: “The cat sat on the mat,” or “Pam and Kim can swim.”

As the child makes progress in phonics, she moves on to guided reading, the “daily assisted or supported reading and rereading of texts that are slightly more difficult in wording or in linguistic, rhetorical, or conceptual structure” (National Research Council, 1998). K¹²’s guided reading texts include such favorites as *Frog and Toad Are Friends*, *A Picture for Harold’s Room*, and *Amelia Bedelia*.

Decodable readers and guided reading selections provide important practice as well as the considerable satisfaction of being able to say, “I can read it by myself” or “with only a little help.” Still, these books are necessarily limited in the difficulty of their vocabulary and syntax. Because children in the primary grades can understand many more words than they can read on their own, K¹² emphasizes reading aloud to children, in order

to build vocabulary, develop comprehension, and delight the imagination.

Read-aloud selections from K¹² focus on classic literature—folk tales, fairy tales, fables, and poetry. Read-aloud selections also include a generous sampling of modern-day children’s classics, such as the *Peter Rabbit* tales, *Make Way for Ducklings*, and *Mike Mulligan and His Steam Shovel*.

Vocabulary: Words Represent Knowledge

“Words, words, words”—as Hamlet replied when asked what he was reading—are key to a child’s development. A young child thrives in an environment teeming with rich, interesting, and challenging words—words that tickle the tongue and stimulate the imagination: ziggurat, tyrannosaurus, archaeologist, deciduous, constellation, chlorophyll, cylinder, still-life, self-portrait, harmony, harpsichord, and more.

The essence of reading is the comprehension of what is being read. And the development of comprehension depends greatly upon the development of children’s vocabulary—in particular, in the early grades, their aural (listening) vocabulary. In the early grades, children understand more than they can read. A first grader, for example, can enthusiastically learn about pyramids and pharaohs, knights and castles, and astronauts and asteroids, without necessarily being able to read any of those words.

To build vocabulary is to build background knowledge, because words represent knowledge and experience. Beginning in kindergarten, the K¹² curriculum exposes children to a broad range of rich content and helps build children’s vocabulary, providing the background knowledge necessary for comprehending materials they will be asked to read in the later grades. (See Hirsch, 2006.)

The entire K¹² curriculum—not just the discipline of English/Language Arts—addresses comprehension by providing, through diverse media, a broad and

rich variety of content to help develop children’s aural and oral vocabulary. Much of the instruction in the primary grades is conveyed through adult talk. The adult reads text aloud—for example, a science or history lesson—and is prompted by the lesson to discuss the content with the children. Outside of lesson time, it’s likely that informal talk goes on about what the children are learning. This sharing and content-rich conversation reinforce early reading skills by building the children’s store of background knowledge.

Beyond the curriculum, adults can also model reading as a source of pleasure and information. It is a powerful example for a child to see a parent reading and enjoying a good book, or for the parent to talk with the child about a newspaper or magazine article that caught the parent’s interest. If parents show, through their daily behaviors, that reading is important and enjoyable, children will understand why they must work hard to master this skill—it means a lot to the adults who get so much out of it.

Research Base

The K¹² elementary Language Arts program is in full accord with the latest scientific research on early reading strategies—research that has now been accumulated and refined over more than thirty years. In accordance with the best research on effective literacy instruction, the K¹² program is thoroughly grounded in two complementary principles:

- Effective reading programs develop in children an early awareness of the alphabetic principle—the correspondence between letters and speech sounds—and offer explicit, systematic, and multisensory instruction in phonemic awareness and decoding skills.
- Early and systematic instruction in phonics needs to be complemented by equal attention to meaning, comprehension strategies, language development, and writing. Developing children’s interest and pleasure in reading must be as much a focus as developing their reading skills.

According to the No Child Left Behind Act (2001) and the subsequent Put Reading First initiative, a comprehensive reading program requires instruction in phonics, vocabulary, word recognition, fluency, and comprehension. K¹² PhonicsWorks addresses phonics, word recognition, and fluency, and K¹² Language Arts addresses vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension. The National Reading Panel supports the notion that a core, comprehensive reading program will reach all learners if it includes a strong, systematic, and explicit phonics component. That is the guiding principle behind K¹² PhonicsWorks, a research-based, explicit, systematic, and direct method for teaching phonics.

K¹² PhonicsWorks was developed under the guidance of K¹² Education Advisory Committee member Louisa Moats, a leading scholar in the field of early reading and, at the time of program development, a project director at the National Institute for Child Health and Human Development (NICHD). The K¹² approach to reading instruction is strongly backed by a consensus among experts that rests on decades of scientific research and has been embraced by a number of commissions and organizations, including:

- The National Reading Panel (see *Teaching Children to Read: An Evidence-Based Assessment of the Scientific Research Literature on Reading and Its Implications for Reading Instruction*)
- The American Federation of Teachers (see “Teaching Reading IS Rocket Science”)
- The Learning First Alliance (see *Every Child Reading: An Action Plan of the Learning First Alliance*)

Research studies that both shaped and corroborate the K¹² approach include Marilyn Jager Adams’s *Beginning to Read: Thinking and Learning About Print* (1990) and Louisa Moats’s *Speech to Print: Language Essentials for Teachers* (2000).

For more information about the K¹² PhonicsWorks program and how this curriculum could be used by your school or district, please contact 866.903.5122 or visit K12.com/educators.

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