

A Public Statement by Susan Brady
April 5, 2021

On March 21st, I took part in an online 'Conversation' hosted by Mark Seidenberg and Molly Farry-Thorn on the seidenbergreading.net website. In that meeting, I wanted to share instructional recommendations based on the body of research about the development of phoneme awareness. During the discussion, I made a few remarks that I understand have caused some controversy and confusion. Here I will address those comments with the hope to set minds at ease.

Because relatively few people were able to listen to the session, first I want to provide information about what was discussed. Key conclusions about the development and teaching of phoneme awareness were as follows:

- (1) Awareness of larger sound structures such as syllables is not a necessary prerequisite to acquiring awareness of phonemes. Accordingly, phoneme awareness should be the primary awareness focus in kindergarten, progressing from the initial phoneme, to the final phoneme, and then to the medial vowel in words with simple syllable structures (CV, VC, CVC) as children master each of these beginning levels of phoneme awareness.
- (2) Students benefit from instruction that explicitly links phoneme awareness of initial, final, and medial vowel phonemes with corresponding letter skills rather than providing these two components of reading development as unaligned, isolated learning goals.
- 3) Advanced phoneme awareness consists of acquiring awareness of the internal consonants in words that have a complex syllable structure with consonant blends (also known as consonant clusters) (CCVC, CVCC, CCVCC, CCCVC). Thus, it is awareness of internal consonants that is important for teachers to foster in order to help students achieve advanced phoneme awareness. Instruction at this level of phoneme awareness generally can occur in first grade, provided that students have mastered the earlier levels. Again, tasks that incorporate letters for adding, deleting or substituting internal consonants are beneficial, reducing the memory and cognitive demands and enhancing development of phoneme awareness and orthographic skills.
- 4) Because students arrive at school in kindergarten with different degrees of phoneme awareness and with individual differences in underlying phonological abilities (e.g., phonological memory), they will be ready for different levels in the sequence of phoneme awareness development and may progress at different rates. Hence, it is important to monitor student progress and to differentiate instruction accordingly.

The rationale for these recommendations is elaborated in an article in *The Reading League Journal* (Brady, 2020) and in an expanded version of the article that is posted on The Reading League website. I want to underscore that research evidence provided the bases for these conclusions.

Against this backdrop, my main purpose in writing the present statement is that I want to earnestly apologize for misstatements about Dr. David Kilpatrick's program (Equipped for Reading Success; EFRS) that occurred during the March 21st meeting. These were not intended as personal attacks in any way. First, I inaccurately stated that Kilpatrick advocates utilizing a 'linguistic' reading program in Kindergarten that involves memorizing words in word families. The latter claim was incorrect. The 2016 version of his Equipped for Reading Success program with which I was familiar suggested using a linguistic reading approach that focuses on onset-rime patterns in written words in kindergarten and into first grade, but he did not promote memorization or whole word instruction of the words in word families as other programs of this kind often do.

As it happens, Dave and I had multiple conversations in 2019 and early 2020 about the kinds of reading instruction that would be beneficial in kindergarten. In the 2016 edition of EFRS available at that time, in one column of Table 5.2 (pg. 48), the "Developmentally Appropriate Reading Approach for this Level" listed the linguistic approach mentioned above as appropriate for kindergarten and the first half of first grade, a phonics approach as fitting for mid-first grade to the end of first grade, and stated that "Any reading approach will work after that". I read these as recommendations for when and how long the different types of programs should be used, and in the talk stated that phonics instruction needs to begin earlier and to extend beyond the end of first grade, in contrast to the timeline in his table. This last week Dave told me that I misinterpreted the table: his intention was for it to indicate what he believes to be the earliest starting points for these reading methods, not the endpoints. Dave also shared that for an updated printing with text corrections in 2020, changes were made to several lines of text that in part grew out of our conversations. This week I learned that Table 5.2 now lists that a phonics reading approach can begin during the kindergarten year, and that in late first grade to late second grade, the reading approach can "Reinforce code knowledge, morphology, and expand reading experience".

A related mistake was stating that Dave is not a "fan of phonics". In the 2016 version of the EFRS manual, Dave makes several comments that endorsed "phonic decoding." For example, he states that, "without the combination of phoneme awareness and good letter-sound skills it is very difficult for students to develop the insight we call the alphabetic principle" (p. 36). In the glossary (p. 263), phonic decoding is defined as "the process of combining letter-sound knowledge and oral blending to sound out unfamiliar written words". My impression was that he thought a basic introduction to phonics would suffice. However, to be fair, Dave had not aimed to provide a combined phoneme awareness and phonics program and perhaps wasn't getting into further depth about phonics because of that. Also, there seems to be an issue of terminology. I interpreted another of his terms, 'letter-sound proficiency,' as pertaining just to early phonic skills; Dave has explained that this label is meant to describe a high degree of decoding expertise.

In closing, my aims on March 21, as described above, were to discuss the implications of research for teaching practices for phoneme awareness. However, because some inaccurate remarks were made pertaining to the Kilpatrick EFRS program during the discussion, I am writing to take responsibility for those and to correct the mistakes. Dave and I have differences of opinion, nonetheless I gladly acknowledge that he has been a consistent advocate of phonics and of applying scientific findings in reading instruction.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Susan Brady". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long, sweeping tail that extends to the right.

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Comment by David Kilpatrick

I want to thank Susan for making these corrections and clarifications. She and I share firm convictions about the importance of phoneme awareness and phonics for successful reading development. Our differences in views about implementation in no way negate the importance of instruction in phoneme awareness and phonics for reading development. Educators can rest assured that the broad foundation of knowledge in these areas is solid.