

Posted in the Units of Study Facebook group, downloaded Oct 25, 2020

Dear Colleagues,

Many of you are asking questions in response to the latest Ed Week blog. While I am glad that Ed Week and Emily Hanford are studying the work we are doing at Teachers College, their articles can spawn misunderstandings and misconceptions, so let me clarify.

We have long supported strong and systematic phonics instruction. For decades before we developed Units of Study in Phonics, we helped schools use Foundations, Words Their Way and other phonics curricula. And of course, reading and writing workshops have always been phonics-rich. But yes, after reading the books and articles recommended by voices in the Science of Reading movement and studying with the psychologists and neuroscientists at Child Mind Institute we did make two strands of revisions to our curriculum.

First, we strengthened the phonological awareness portion by adding a year-long phonological awareness curriculum. Of course, we have always supported phonological awareness—and invented spelling is an especially powerful way to encourage the development of phonological awareness as researchers have consistently found. But because this is such important work for all kids in kindergarten and first grade (and is especially necessary for the 5-15% of kids with dyslexia), we've also added a very basic, very quick assessment where teachers ask kids to read a few words in order to quickly detect whether their knowledge of phonics is growing. This assessment allows teachers to give extra support to kids who need it.

Similarly, the fact that we see a place for decodable books is not new. In fact, we wrote some decodable texts for the phonics curriculum. But our thoughts about decodable books are nuanced. Those books are no cure-all. The data supporting their use is inconclusive, and some of the leaders in the field of reading instruction—Freddy Hiebert and Jim Cunningham—have warned that many decodable books are less than ideal because they don't follow typical oral language patterns, and they often feature decodable words like "jut" and "sod" that kids don't know. This means the books won't make total sense even when decoded successfully, sending some kids the counter-productive message that reading is about calling words rather than about making meaning. Freddy once said to me that this can be especially problematic for English Language Learners because it is even less likely that uncommon words like "jut" and "sod" will be in their English vocabularies, making it all the more likely that certain decodable books will not make sense to them. Of course, MLLs need, above all, to monitor for sense, and if reading accurately does not lead to sense, that hinders their progress.

So, we do not advocate for using only decodable books, nor for all decodable books. We do not want kids reading books that make little or no sense. But frankly, many of the A, B, C leveled books also make little or no sense. And, as I said in the paper I wrote a year ago, it absolutely matters that once kids have learned the phonics knowledge necessary to decode CVC phonics patterns, they should have access to books that allow them to apply that knowledge in order to read!

And, as their phonics knowledge grows, the books they have access to should continue to provide them opportunities to use that new knowledge to read. Some leveled books work for that, while frankly some are written to steer kids to continue to rely mostly on pictures and repetition, not phonics knowledge. TCRWP would love to have meaningful decodable books in kids baggies starting in about January in kindergarten, along with other books, and, for kids who are tentative as readers, we'd hope teachers

would sift through the leveled books in their collections to steer kids towards books in which paying attention to the letters will most pay off. We also know that kids with dyslexia will benefit from reading mostly decodable books until they have a solid grasp of phonics concepts, while also having open access to audio books to help them tap into the rich benefits of authentic texts.

You won't be surprised that, yes, we are writing a whole series of meaningful, decodable books for readers in kindergarten and early first grade. These will be books that follow kids' oral language patterns, that make sense, and that are culturally relevant. We meanwhile recommend Flyleaf Emergent Readers and Little Blossom Stories (and we encourage teachers selecting decodable books to be vigilant, excluding books containing harmful stereotypes as a few books in some collections do include these).

We have also refined and amended our thinking about the ways we suggest teachers prompt kids when they get stuck on an unfamiliar word. For example, when a child is reading a sentence such as, "It was cold, so I put on my jacket," and the child gets stuck on jacket, we now suggest the teacher nudge by saying, "Look at the letters, have a go with that word," rather than saying, "Think about what's happening. What might the boy put on?" By prompting students to use phonics at that moment of challenge, we encourage them to apply and practice the phonics they know. We also know that when they use phonics to decode a word, they are more apt to add that word to their sight vocabulary.

Of course, the child may say something like jake-it in which case the teacher will need to follow up the phonics prompt with a prompt for meaning, "Does that make sense?" Then the child will use their understanding of the context to correct the mispronounced word so that they can fully comprehend the passage. This correction, too, adds to their phonics experience. That is, even when phonics is centered, meaning will never not be important, as the goal of reading is to understand and to learn.

Teachers need aim for the reader to be reading the text for meaning first and foremost—which is apt to happen if the child has oriented herself to the text, is envisioning, is integrating the different content conveyed by the words and the pictures etc., so, when the child comes to jacket, the child will already be thinking the word is apt to be an article of clothing. So, meaning is still the reader's focus. But, there is a moment when phonics knowledge should be prioritized—the moment when the child encounters an unfamiliar word.

While the journalists will try to persuade you otherwise (controversy gets more eyes on the page than consensus), this is actually a small shift in our thinking, one that applies to the way that a teacher coaches a child who is in the early stages of reading development—which, if using Guided Reading Levels, aligns with approximately levels C through H. Some kids progress through the levels at pace, and for them this shift doesn't really matter. However, it is an important shift to make for those readers who've not picked up the phonics knowledge they need and for working with kids who have dyslexia.

What stays the same in our work with K-1 readers? 98% of it. We still support the rich comprehension work that has always been a part of workshop teaching. We still support kids reading with agency. We still support choice and rereading and reading to learn and talking about books. We still support the reciprocity between writing and reading. We still support kids learning letters, onsets and rimes, spelling patterns, and high frequency words as we have taught them. We still support using the learning progressions and assessment-based teaching. We still support kids reading with phonics, fluency, and comprehension. We still support kids seeing themselves in books and learning about others through reading. We still support kids learning to lead richly literate lives.

And above all, we support educators having the humility to continue to learn from kids, from each other, and from research, recognizing that there always will be more to learn.

Lucy