

Research-Based Reading

RIGHT INTO READING

Jane Ervin

By Beth Davis

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, signed into law in January, 2002, by President Bush, targets reading as a top priority for the nation's schools. In the last half-century, we have learned a great deal about how children learn to read. Scientifically based research has shown us which skills and strategies children need to learn to become successful readers and writers. Reading First, the funding arm of the No Child Left Behind Act, has made grants available at the state and local levels for programs that provide systematic and explicit instruction in the five basic skills that the National Reading Panel's 2000 review of research has identified as necessary early reading skills: *phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension.*

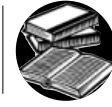
Phonemic Awareness

Phonemic awareness is the ability to hear, isolate, blend, and manipulate sounds within spoken words. It differs from phonics in that phonics is concerned with the relationship between sounds and symbols (letters), whereas phonemic awareness focuses on the sounds of spoken language. In addition, phonemic awareness is more than the ability to discriminate auditorily between sounds. Rather, phonemic awareness is the awareness of how sounds work within spoken words.

Adams (1990) identified five progressively difficult levels of phonemic awareness:

- Knowledge of nursery rhymes—having an ear for rhyming.
- Oddity tasks—finding similarities and differences in rhyming or alliterative aspects of words. Example: Which word does not rhyme (*can pan map man*)?

Right into Reading is a phonics-based reading and comprehension program designed to teach the five basic skills cited by Reading First to beginning readers, children at risk, or older children who are having difficulty learning to read. As its title suggests, *Right into Reading* leads students directly into reading using the method that the National Reading Panel (2002), which has conducted the most recent large-scale reading research, has confirmed is the right way—by systematically teaching specific sounds and applicable words. In *Right into Reading*, the words are used immediately in connected text so that students begin to read right from the start. The success that students experience from being able to read real text builds motivation for further success. The series consists of an introductory book entitled *Jump Right into Reading*, followed by Books 1, 2, and 3. Teacher's Keys are available for Books 1, 2, and 3.



- Blending and syllable splitting—identifying and producing the sounds of isolated phonemes. Example: Put these sounds together to make a word (/m/ /a/ /n/ or /m/ /an/).
- Phonemic segmenting—breaking down words into a series of phonemes. Example: What is the sound you hear in the middle of the word *man*?
- Phoneme manipulation—adding, deleting, or moving a specified phoneme, resulting in a separate word/word part. Example: What word is left when you take away the first sound in the word *mat*?

Numerous studies have shown that children's abilities with one or more of these tasks strongly predict and/or correlate with beginning reading skills, and also that low phonemic awareness is predictive of continuing reading difficulty (Stanovich, Cunningham, and Feeman, 1984; Juel, 1988; Lundberg et al., 1988). The National Reading Panel (2000), seeking to investigate the effect of phonemic awareness instruction on reading development, analyzed 52 studies with 96 treatments. The report of their findings showed that “teaching children to manipulate phonemes in words was highly effective under a variety of teaching conditions with a variety of learners across a range of grade and age levels and that teaching phonemic awareness to children significantly improves their reading more than instruction that lacks any attention to PA” (p. 2).

Phonemic awareness skills may be reinforced with phonics instruction. For example, when children use invented spelling, they are using segmenting skills as well as working on sound-symbol relationships. The National Reading Panel (2000) noted that the value of phonemic awareness instruction “is in helping learners understand and use the alphabetic system to read and write. This is why it is important to include letters when teaching children to manipulate phonemes” (p. 2-43).



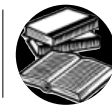
Stahl and Murray (1998) suggest that alphabetic knowledge may be necessary for phonological awareness. Working with three groups of pre-kindergarteners, teachers read conventional alphabetic books to the first group, using both letter name and initial sounds (*b* is for *bear*); to the second, they read books about letter names only; and to the third, they read conventional storybooks. The group that heard conventional alphabet books showed greater gains in phoneme awareness. Stahl and Murray surmise that “in order for children to understand how *b* could stand for *bear* they must begin to look at words phonologically” (p. 81), and that “having a concrete referent, such as a letter, may make it easier to understand an abstract entity such as a phoneme” (p.80).

Right into Reading, a strong systematic phonics program, addresses and emphasizes phonemic awareness skills throughout the introductory book, *Jump Right into Reading*. Here, all the letters are introduced and their sounds reinforced in a variety of ways that give children practice with oddity, blending, segmenting, and manipulating phonemic awareness tasks. For example, students match pictures to pictures and/or letters according to beginning, middle, or end sounds; match pictures whose names rhyme; write beginning and ending letters to words to match pictures; and match pictures to words, requiring segmenting and blending the individual sounds of the word. Book 1 also reinforces phonemic awareness tasks in exercises that ask students to match words to pictures, circle the word that does not rhyme, and make a new word by substituting a letter. By using letters with these sound-oriented tasks, this program complies with the National Reading Panel's recommendation for utilizing phonemic instruction to help learners with the alphabetic system as a means of facilitating reading and writing.

Phonics

The case for explicit, systematic phonics instruction was made convincingly by Jeanne Chall in her landmark book,

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Learning to Read: The Great Debate (1967), and has been corroborated in numerous studies since then (Chall, 1983, 1999; Anderson et al., 1985; Adams, 1990; Snow, Burns, and Griffin, 1998; National Reading Panel, 2000). As Stanovich (1993–1994) remarks, “That direct instruction in alphabetic coding facilitates an early reading acquisition is one of the most well-established conclusions in all of behavioral science” (p. 286). Naslund and Samuels (1992) support the dependability of implicitly versus incidentally learned behavior, stating that lacking explicit instruction, “many children adopt their own strategies and procedures for word recognition, with some strategies being more accurate and adapted to the reading task than others” (p. 150). Ehri (1998) underscores the need for systematic phonics instruction when she writes, “Knowing the alphabetic system greatly facilitates the task of forming and remembering relevant connections between written words and their pronunciations. In contrast, visually based connections are idiosyncratic rather than systematic and are often arbitrary, making them much harder to remember” (p. 21). Freebody and Byrne (1988), comparing groups using a predominantly decoding strategy with those using a predominantly sight-word strategy, found that lack of decoding skill by third-grade affects comprehension negatively.

Systematic phonics has been shown to be effective for varied populations of students. The National Reading Panel (2000) endorsed systematic phonics teaching, especially for disabled and at-risk readers. Foorman et al. (1998) investigated the effects of three reading programs (direct code instruction, embedded code instruction, and implicit code instruction) for Title I first and second graders at risk for reading failure. As they reported, “Children who were directly instructed in the alphabetic principal improved in word-reading skill at a significantly faster rate than children indirectly instructed in the alphabetic principal through exposure to literature” (p. 51). Pressley (2002) discusses the findings of Fielding-Barnsley, who showed that in comparing two

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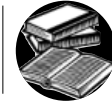


groups of children who entered kindergarten highly ready to read, students taught through decoding rather than a whole-word approach excelled not only when tested on taught words but even more so with new words or nonsense words using letters or word parts that had been taught.

Right into Reading systematically and directly teaches phonics skills throughout the four books of the program. In *Jump Right into Reading*, the first book in the series, students learn consonant and short vowel sounds and how these sounds combine to make words that have meaning. Book 1 includes review of the alphabet, short and long vowels, regular double vowels, and consonant clusters. Book 2 continues with consonant digraphs, *r*-controlled and *y* vowels, irregular vowel digraphs, and diphthongs. Book 3 lessons consider alternate sounds of consonants and vowels. Books 1, 2, and 3 work with syllables.

Each lesson starts with a letter or phonetic element and an explicitly stated phonics rule that students can easily understand (for example, for short vowel *a* the rule states that “vowels are short when there is one vowel followed by only consonants”). The rule, an example word, and a drawing of that word are boxed in red at the beginning of the lesson. Practice words and sight words are then presented, highlighted in red, directing student attention to the lesson’s objective. In the practice exercises that follow, students first work with isolated words and simple sentences but move quickly into longer contextual material with various text genres and formats where comprehension becomes the focus. The words used in the readings utilize the phonics elements that have been taught and that students can read. A concluding directed writing activity reinforces both the phonics and comprehension aspects of each lesson. Each lesson systematically builds on the phonics skills previously acquired. Each book has longer and more sophisticated reading selections.

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According to Ehri (1998), students progress through four developmental phases in learning to read words proficiently:

- In the *pre-alphabetic phase*, beginning readers remember sight words by relating visual cues, such as the two o's in the word *look*, to a pair of eyes looking at them. They are making connections between certain visual attributes of a word and either its pronunciation or its meaning.
- The *partial alphabetic phase* is guided by phonetic cue reading. Beginning readers are learning sound-symbol relationships and can segment initial and final sounds but lack knowledge of vowels and more advanced phoneme-grapheme relationships. Partial alphabetic readers might see the word *cup* or *cost* and read it as *cat*. They might write *cat* as *kt*.
- In the *full alphabetic phase*, beginning readers can fully analyze sight words, connecting, for example, the four phonemes in a word like *train* to the five corresponding letters. They can also blend letters to produce pronunciations of words they have not seen before, and they can decode by analogy.
- In the *consolidated alphabetic phase*, beginning readers begin to perceive familiar chunks or spelling patterns as consolidated units, which speeds up their word identification and accuracy.

Right into Reading reaches students at the latter three developmental phases described by Ehri. The skills developed in *Jump Right into Reading* offer appropriate material and explicit instruction to students at the partial alphabetic phase, with emphasis on letter sounds of words in all positions and the phonemic tasks referred to above. Books 1, 2, and 3 help students learn to fully analyze words through instruction with vowel and consonant grapheme representations and patterns, and to move into the consolidated alphabetic phase. Connected reading reinforces words that students practice further through connected guided writing.



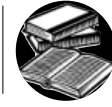
Decodable Text

Right from the start, connected text is a part of each lesson. In *Jump Right into Reading*, students say the names of pictures that illustrate the phonemic element of the lesson, match words with pictures, practice writing individual letters, fill in a missing letter in a word, and distinguish between beginning, middle, and ending letter sounds. Later, they begin to read individual sentences. Short-story paragraphs follow groups of lessons. Book 1 quickly moves from sentences to paragraphs to short stories, with some longer passages as well. In all selections, the text is decodable, allowing students to practice the phoneme-grapheme relationships and configurations they are learning.

Using decodable text has long made sense intuitively: decodable text complements the phase of word recognition that students have reached and consequently provides the practice students need to build sight recognition of these patterns. Nonetheless, the National Reading Panel (2000) determined to conduct more research to document the efficacy of decodable text. Studies that have used decodable text as part of their protocol and that have shown positive results include the Foorman et al. (1998) study cited previously and a study by Juel and Roper/Schneider (1985).

Juel and Roper/Schneider (1985) looked at how text influenced first-graders' word identification strategies. Ninety-three first-grade students received synthetic phonics instruction scripted by the school district for 20–30 minutes during each reading period, followed by an hour of reading group activities with basal materials. Half of the students used a phonics-oriented series emphasizing decodable patterned words. The other half used a popular series emphasizing high-frequency words. The differences between the two series were most significant at the pre-primer level. The study was “guided by the belief that strategies that guide ‘where children look’ are determined as much by the corpus of words to which they are exposed as by the method of

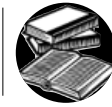
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instruction. That is, even though children are taught a 'sound the word out' strategy, they will adopt a predominantly visual strategy, keying in on length or unusual letter sequences, if the text to which they are exposed contains many words that are not easily phonologically recorded" (p. 137).

The results supported this hypothesis. Juel and Roper/Schneider showed that early on, children working with the phonics-oriented series were able to induce letter-sound relationships that had not been explicitly taught. Children working with the high-frequency series were less successful in applying "the instructed phonics strategy to the more irregular words in the pre-primers, and to induce from these words uninstructed letter sounds patterns" (p. 143), leading the researchers to conclude that regularity of words in text can foster learning. Even though by the primer and first reader levels, the two series were more equal in presenting letter-sound correspondences, the high-frequency series readers continued to need repetitions of a word in the text to acquire word recognition, while the phonics series readers were influenced more by letter-sound regularity. At the end of the year, the phonics series readers were able to read more of the 200 core words not shared by the two basals. Again the researchers concluded, "It is likely this advantage is due to the continued use of a phonological strategy by [these readers. . . —a strategy which is probably more useful in identifying words not seen before—than is the visual strategy adopted frequently by the [high-frequency series readers]" (p. 149, 150). Despite the fact that both groups received the same synthetic phonics instruction, the type of text they then used affected the degree to which the students were able to internalize the instruction. Hiebert (1999), in evaluating texts used for beginning reading, says there "can be little doubt that there should be opportunities to apply in text the information that is taught and practiced in teachers' lessons" (p. 556).

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Fluency

Fluency is a defining characteristic of the proficient reader. To achieve fluency, accurate decoding, speed, and comprehension must all characterize word recognition, which is then said to be automatic. The fluent reader has progressed from recognition that a word has been seen before, to accuracy where phoneme-grapheme connections are established, to automatic recognition where the word becomes a sight word (Samuels, 1979).

Fluent readers recognize most words by sight. As sight words are seen, their pronunciations and meanings are triggered automatically to the connections between print, pronunciation, and meaning that have been stored in the reader's mental dictionary. Confirmation of the words' pronunciations and meanings occurs automatically as well, facilitating accuracy and/or self-correction if comprehension is disrupted (Ehri, 1998). All of this occurs in one's short-term memory, which Pressley (2000) refers to as one's conscious attentional capacity.

Because short-term memory has a limited capacity, labored decoding fills up the short-term memory bank, leaving no room for the confirming process or understanding how the word relates to the remainder of the sentence or paragraph. Lack of decoding skill results in a lack of fluency, which results in a lack of comprehension.

Right into Reading encourages fluency by leading the reader quickly into connected text. After students learn a new phonics element, they practice saying the names of pictures that begin with the element, building the accuracy needed for fluent reading. Practice with decodable text embeds these words in a contextual setting that helps confirm word recognition. Because connected text conveys a story or interesting factual information, such text is also a motivating factor that helps to cement phoneme-grapheme relationships, enabling fluency to develop.

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Vocabulary and Comprehension

We teach children to read so that they can gain understanding of written text. Comprehension, therefore, is at the heart of all reading instruction. Skill in comprehension depends first of all on fluent decoding skills. When decoding is automatic, all conscious attention may focus on comprehending. Tan and Nicholson (1997), working with 42 below-average readers ages 7–10, trained two groups in rapid reading of target words, one in list format and the other in phrases. The word meanings were revealed. For the third group, the control group, the meanings of the target words were discussed and the list was read once. When all three groups read and were questioned on passages containing the target words, the first two groups showed significantly better comprehension in all respects, demonstrating “a causal relationship between rapid decoding and reading comprehension” (p. 285).

In addition to accurate automatic decoding, skill in comprehending requires vocabulary knowledge and world knowledge, or rich background knowledge about the topic of a reading (Pressley, 2000). Andrew Biemiller (2001) reports “that while more children learn to ‘read’ with increased phonics instruction, there have not been commensurate gains in reading comprehension. What is missing from many children who master phonics but don’t understand well is vocabulary, the words they need to know in order to understand what they’re reading” (p. 25). Juel et al. (2003) concur that “the ability to decode—although crucial for reading success—is not sufficient. . . . Lack of word knowledge can have a direct impact on the development of reading comprehension” (p. 14). Beck et al. (1982) showed that instruction in vocabulary “can lead to gains in comprehension” (p.520).

Vocabulary knowledge and concepts are crucial not only for comprehension but for word recognition as well. This is true for all children but particularly for those who do not

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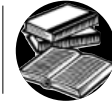


come to school with English as their primary language. When children attempt to decode words, if the words are not part of their listening/speaking vocabularies, they have no means of confirming the accuracy of their attempts at pronunciation. In addition, word meanings help clarify appropriate syllable accent (*present, present*) and related vowel sounds (*tear, tear*).

World, or background, knowledge is necessary for students to make sense of what they're reading. The more knowledge students have of the subjects about which they're reading, the more connections they will be able to make to the material, and the deeper their understanding of the text. The National Reading Panel (2000), reporting on their investigations into comprehension, states, "The data suggest that text comprehension is enhanced when readers actively relate the ideas represented in print to their own knowledge and experiences and construct mental representations in memory" (p.10).

Pressley (2000), in discussing how prior knowledge affects comprehension, speaks in terms of schema theory and propositional networks: "Much of knowledge is stored in complex relational structures, schemata" (p. 549). These allow children to make inferences from stories or selections where the information they're reading about relates to their schematic knowledge." Of course, for schemata to affect text processing, the reader must have had the experiences permitting the schemata to develop. Thus, the richer a child's world experiences and vicarious experiences (e.g., through stories and high-quality television), the richer the child's schematic knowledge base" (p.549). Prior knowledge is also "conceived as networks of propositions and macropropositions" (p.549) where the reader relates ideas from a text (propositions) to develop a general idea or summary (macropropositions) of the knowledge. "From this perspective, knowledge, in general, can be developed from reading broadly but also from other world experiences" (p.549). These propositional networks then help readers

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make inferences when they encounter related information in their reading.

Hirsch (2003), also commenting on the need for world knowledge, writes, “Once print has been decoded into words, reading comprehension . . . requires the active construction of inferences from utterances that are chock-full of understated premises and unexplained allusions” (p. 19–20). He continues, “Students don't lack inferring techniques so much as they lack relevant domain knowledge” (p. 22).

Right into Reading builds both vocabulary and world knowledge in each phonics lesson. There are several varieties of exercises with a vocabulary focus. All the student books reinforce vocabulary knowledge by asking students to match pictures with the words that students are learning to decode. Students are frequently asked to match the words with definitions or sentences as well. Juel et al. (2003) encourage lessons that provide “full multiple anchors to help students learn about the words: meanings, spelling, and sounds” (p. 16). In some instances, students are asked to use the context of a selection to discover the meanings of specific words. In other lessons, students are helped to discover the meanings of homophones through context, for example, *there* and *their*. Multiple meanings of words are used in reading selections, for example, the word *upset* on page 87 of Book 1, and students are asked to find synonyms for a designated word in a reading, for example, *big* (*vast*, *immense*) on pages 160–161 of Book 1. Each lesson also ends with a writing exercise in which students are asked to use specific words from the lesson and to make sure that their writing makes sense. Writing the lesson words reinforces both word recognition and vocabulary skills.

The reading selections found in *Right into Reading* cover a wide range of topics and genres while still focusing on the sounds that have been taught. Among the readings, students encounter fables, legends, and fairy tales. Fiction selections may be adventure stories, mysteries, and histor-

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ical and science fiction. Biographies (Louis Braille, Benjamin Franklin) news articles, factual information from content areas, maps, recipes, riddles, and advertisements are all represented. By presenting students with such diverse subjects and styles of writing, *Right into Reading* contributes to students' world knowledge as well as giving them an awareness of the many sources from which they can learn.

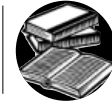
Skills and strategies that help students comprehend varieties of text are emphasized throughout *Right into Reading*. Students are asked to react to the readings at literal, inferential, and critical thinking levels. Factual and sequence questions help students to attend to the story and the information. Many selections ask students to think about or look for ideas as they read, alerting students that reading for a purpose is an aid to comprehension. Student attention is directed to figurative language. Several fables ask the student to discover the moral. Students are asked to draw conclusions, infer main idea, make judgments, and relate the readings to their own experiences.

The concluding writing exercise in each lesson helps students understand the variety of ways that they can respond to what they read as well as ways of applying the understandings they have obtained. After reading a selection about the first airplanes and some of the problems pilots faced, students are asked, "Flying—and all travel—were very different 50 years ago. Tell what you think it will be like to travel in the future" (p. 88, Book 2).

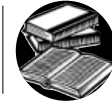
National and State Standards

The 12 Standards for the English Language Arts (NCTE/IRA, 1996) are well represented in *Right into Reading*. The standards document provides a framework that most states use to develop their standards for specific behaviors at various grade levels. Students read a wide range of print, fiction, and nonfiction in many genres (standards 1 and 2). They use a variety of strategies for com-

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prehending text including prior experience, knowledge of word meanings, word identification strategies, and sentence structure, and they write for different purposes using different writing process elements and knowledge of language structure and conventions (standards 3, 4, 5, and 6). Standards 11 and 12 are applicable as well. In addition, *Right into Reading* conforms to state standards for kindergarten through third grade (Arizona, 1996; California, 1997; Illinois, 1997; Nebraska, 2001) in its inclusion of decoding skills and vocabulary exercises, along with text readings and the comprehension and writing tasks that accompany them. *Right into Reading* also offers a phonics-based reading and comprehension program as called for by the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 and Reading First.



Jane Ervin works in Washington, D.C., with children with reading and learning difficulties, advises parents on educational concerns, lectures, and gives teacher trainings. Dr. Ervin has written more than 30 books for students, teachers, and parents; her student books have sold over 5 million copies. She received her Ed.D. and her postdoctoral diploma from UCLA.

Beth Davis received her B.A. in history from Smith College and her M.Ed. in Reading from Boston College. She has been teaching Elementary Reading at Brandeis University for almost 30 years to both Brandeis and Wellesley College students. She began her career as an elementary classroom teacher in Hamden, Connecticut, and subsequently taught elementary reading courses concurrently at Boston College and Brandeis University. She has been an evaluator for Title 1 programs in Massachusetts, has instructed tutors for School Volunteers for Boston, has given numerous workshops to school systems in the greater Boston area, and has been a presenter at the Massachusetts Reading Association. She also coaches volunteer tutoring teams for the Jewish Coalition for Literacy in Boston. Ms. Davis is the author of several literature packets for students and teachers (Novel Ideas, Sundance Publishing). She co-authored *The Remedial Reading Handbook* (Prentice-Hall, 1985) and *Elementary Reading: Strategies that Work* (Allyn & Bacon, 1995).

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