Literacy Research Discussion

Phonics: There is much controversy about the place of phonics in a literacy program. How should teachers go about teaching phonics well?

Phonics is an essential component of student reading development and underpins all elements of what children are able to understand from a text (Shepherd, 2009). Phonics is a method of teaching children to read where children are able to clearly learn about the relationships between letters and sounds in order to recognize words (Mesmer & Griffith, 2005). There has been strong debate about the value of phonics in a literacy program. In modern classrooms, most teachers will incorporate explicit, systematic phonics to some degree within their teaching program (Griffith, Beach, Ruan, Dunn, 2008). The use of this skill is an essential tool for when students begin to recognize words instantly by sight, rather than having to sound out each individual phoneme (Griffith, et al., 2008). Explicit teaching of phonics will help to give beginning readers an approximate pronunciation for an unfamiliar word and ultimately children will store this visual representation in their long term memory for later retrieval of words instantly by sight. Thus, phonics serves as an important aid in the process of learning words by sight (Griffith, et al., 2008). It is essential, when teaching phonics, to create an atmosphere of investigation and exploration in order to encourage students to solve the phonics puzzles (Hill, 2012).

Lightfoot (1983) writes that teachers must be “knowledgeable and discerning school actors who are the primary shapers of the educational community” (p.24). It is essential when teaching phonics that teachers develop a strong work ethic and high expectations for themselves while inspiring the same achievements in students simultaneously (McEwan, 2009). Although debate regarding the place of explicit phonics teaching has been ongoing for decades, it has been proven that teaching letters in alphabetic order without a phonemic component (that stresses the ability to identify and manipulate sounds) is not effective (Adams, 1998). Teachers must explicitly and systematically instruct students on how to relate letters and sounds, how to break spoken words into sounds, and how to blend sounds in order to form words (McEwan, 2009). This explicit phonics teaching will enable children not only to understand why they are learning the relationships between sound but allow them to apply their knowledge of phonics when they read words, sentences and text in a number of different contexts.

Teachers will often utilize a combination of different approaches to teaching phonics and will draw on many activities (Hill, 2012). In order for the teaching of phonics to be meaningful, it should be taught within the context of literacy and at the point of need for each individual. Phonics can be
taught explicitly at many stages throughout the literacy block. During shared reading with a text large enough that all students are able to see, the teacher is able to make reference to sounds in words according to the needs of the children. The focus for one group could be sounds in small words such as 'c/a/t' and another focus for a group of children that are more advanced in their phonetic awareness could be explicitly taught that the sound 'e' can be represented by the letters 'ea' like in 'bread' (Burriss, 2002). It is important that the teacher provides phonemic experiences using a variety of mediums in order to cater for different learning styles; these could be magnetic letters, iPads, computers, worksheets, big books etc. Phonics can be taught with much success through guided reading (Lyons, 2011). The development of phonics is supported through teacher modelling, coaching and explicit teaching (Hill, 2012). In a guided reading context, students have the opportunity to take part in extended word study with a strong focus on sound and letter relationships that occur in books that children have read at their instructional level (Hill, 2012).

Phonics is an essential aspect of reading ability which ultimately enables students to phonemically decode words by investigating the letter/sound relationship through matching graphemes and phonemes (McEwan, 2009). The teaching of phonics is most effective when it is taught explicitly and to every individual students learning needs.
References


