

How children learn to read: A position statement

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This position statement was developed to clarify what I see as the basic facts relating to how children learn to read, and how best to teach them, as supported by current theory and scientific evidence on the processes underlying the acquisition of reading.

- 1 The purpose of reading is to gain meaning from written text.
- 2 In order to gain meaning from written text, it is necessary to convert the written text to the spoken word.
- 3 Comprehension of written text is dependent on the ability to link the written word to the spoken word, and so to access the meaning of words through knowledge of the spoken language.
- 4 Reading comprehension is dependent on the same skills as listening comprehension, and is dependent on vocabulary knowledge, subject and context knowledge, and higher order thinking skills such as reasoning and inference which are applied to the interpretation of both spoken language and written text. A competent reader should be able to comprehend in written form what they can comprehend in spoken form.
- 5 English is an alphabetic language, and the ability to convert written text to the spoken word is dependent on knowledge of the alphabetic principle. This requires an understanding of the association between letters of the alphabet and the sounds they represent (phonics).
- 6 In order to associate sounds with letters, it is necessary to be able to distinguish the smallest unit of sound in each word (phoneme), so that each sound can be associated with the appropriate letter (single letter) or grapheme (a combination of letters making a single sound, such as sh or igh).
- 7 Learning to read is not a natural process, like learning to speak, and systematic teaching of the alphabetic code is essential to learning to read.
- 8 Reading to children is important in developing their oral language skill and vocabulary knowledge, as well as their knowledge of the world and their thinking and reasoning skills, as in following the logical sequence of a story, and in making inferences about causes and consequences of certain events. This experience provides the basis for comprehension of both oral and written language. However, children do not learn to read by being read to.
- 9 Learning to read requires specific teaching of phonics. While phonics can be taught in different ways, the research evidence indicates that the most effective approach to the teaching of phonics is synthetic phonics,



where children are first taught the letters representing the 44 sounds of the English language, and are then taught to blend (synthesise) the sequence of individual sounds in each written word to read (or decode) words, and to break apart (or segment), the individual sounds in each spoken word to write words. Decodable books are used to practice this new skill, and to apply this skill to the decoding of unfamiliar words.

- 10 Teaching children to recognise words by sight, unless used in conjunction with an effective phonics-based teaching program, is not an effective way to teach children how to read. While learning common high frequency words that do not conform to common spelling patterns is helpful in the early stages of learning to read, this should not be done before children have learned to recognise the common letter sound correspondences and have acquired some basic decoding skills. Teaching children to memorise words by looking at the shape of the word and/or the beginning or end letters before they are able to recognise letters and

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the link between letters and sounds and to decode simple words is not helpful in learning to read.

- 11 Memorisation of words by sight in the beginning stages of reading is not the same as automatic word recognition in skilled readers. In this case skilled readers build up a bank of words recognised immediately by sight, without the need to decode the word, but this nevertheless involves recognition of the individual letters that make up the word. Only when skilled readers come across an unfamiliar word is it necessary for them to apply their decoding skills to arrive at the corresponding spoken word.
- 12 Once children have learned to read through decoding of text, the more they read the greater the number of words that they will be able to recognise automatically, thus enabling more fluent reading and freeing up the cognitive demands of the task so that they can focus more on comprehension than on decoding. This is referred to as the self-teaching hypothesis, and leads to what Stanovitch has termed the Matthew effect, whereby good readers read more and therefore



increase their exposure to print, and consequently their word recognition skills, and their fluency and speed of reading, while poor readers who read more slowly have less exposure to print, and therefore less opportunity to build up a bank of words recognised by sight, thus spending more time and cognitive energy on decoding unfamiliar words, and falling further behind in their reading achievement.

- 13 An effective program for teaching of reading and literacy skills involves a focus on the development of oral language skills at the pre-school level, together with exposure to the letters of the alphabet and the sounds associated with each letter, followed by systematic teaching of letter sound correspondences and decoding skills in the first year of school, with the reinforcement of these skills through reading of decodable books. Once basic reading skills have been achieved, continued reading of increasingly complex texts is required to develop vocabulary, fluency, speed of reading, and comprehension skills. The ultimate goal is independent reading, both for pleasure and for learning.
- 14 Some children have difficulties in learning to read. These difficulties may be associated with poorly developed oral language skills due to home background or other factors, failure to teach the essential skills required for reading

(letter sound correspondences and decoding skills), or underlying processing difficulties, and particularly difficulties with phonological processing. It is estimated that about 20% to 25% of children have difficulties in learning to read, and require some additional support. Regardless of the source of the difficulty, the most effective intervention for children with reading difficulties is systematic teaching of the alphabetic code.

- 15 In some cases children have persistent difficulties with reading, despite good oral language skills, exposure to an effective program for teaching of initial reading skills, and remedial assistance over a period of time. In such cases, the source of the difficulty is likely to be related to an underlying neurological processing difficulty, and such children are likely to require ongoing intervention and support for their reading difficulties. It is estimated that approximately 1% to 3% of students would fall into this category.
- 16 The term dyslexia is commonly used to describe a difficulty with reading that is severe, persistent and not responsive to remedial intervention. A diagnosis of dyslexia is only possible when other possible sources of reading difficulty are excluded. This can be a complex and time-consuming process. Since the research evidence indicates that effective strategies for addressing reading

difficulties are the same, regardless of whether the reading difficulty is attributed to dyslexia or to other causes, it has been argued that a diagnosis of dyslexia is not necessary for remediation of reading difficulties, and that resources spent on obtaining a formal diagnosis of dyslexia would be better spent on providing effective support for students with reading difficulties, regardless of the source of the difficulty. For this reason some reading researchers prefer to use the term 'low progress reader' in preference to 'dyslexia' when working with students who have a reading difficulty.

References

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- See also Hoover and Gough, 1990: http://homepage.psy.utexas.edu/homepage/class/Psy338K/Gough/Chapter7/simple_view.pdf

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