

Are “Foundational Literacy Skills” acquired or learned? Let’s consider ALL the evidence. Submitted to and accepted by Education Week, Jan. 25, 2020. Has not yet appeared in print, as of February 11.

To the Editor:

In her opinion essay, Heidi Anne E. Mesmer proclaims that explicit instruction in phonics is not enough: children must be taught print concepts, phonemic awareness, morphology, and fluency (“There Are Four Foundational Reading skills: Why Do We Only Talk About Phonics?,” *Jan. 23, 2020*).

Of course children should develop competence in these areas, but should all this be taught explicitly? There is considerable published research that challenges this view, and concludes that for these “neglected” areas as well as phonics, there are many rules and generalizations that are extremely complex and have not even been well-described. Also, deliberate instruction does not result in improved reading comprehension and competence in these areas has been shown to emerge without instruction.

A reasonable hypothesis, one not mentioned by Mesmer, is that competence in these areas is largely, if not completely, the result of reading. To borrow terminology from second language acquisition, these competences are subconsciously acquired, not consciously learned.

There are quite a few articles presenting and reviewing these conclusions, including my 2003 article, “The Unbearable Coolness of Phonemic Awareness”; my 2019 article, “The (Huge) Role of Stories and the (Limited) Role of Phonics”; and Jeff McQuillan’s 2019 paper, “The Myth of Teaching Morphology.”

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Edweek policy is not to include full citations or links. Here they are.

Phonemic awareness: Krashen, S. 2003. The unbearable coolness of phonemic awareness. *Language Magazine* vol. 2, no 8: 13-18 <https://tinyurl.com/y7eodokr>

Phonics: Krashen, S. 2019. Beginning reading: The (huge) role of stories and the (limited) role of phonics. *Language Magazine*, April, 2019. <https://tinyurl.com/yxyy5rnk>

Morphology: McQuillan, J. 2019. The Myth of Teaching Morphology.

<http://backseatlinguist.com/blog/the-myth-of-teaching-morphology/>. October 21, 2019.