

Kenneth Goodman comments on the latest incarnation of the phonics issue, shared with permission.

I wrote a book some years ago that I titled Phonics Phacts (Heineman) . In that I explored in some detail the nature of alphabetic language and the mistaken view that learning to read requires being taught letter sound relationships. This assumes that (1) There is a simple one-to one relationship between letters and sounds (or more correctly graphemes and phonemes) (2) These relationships can be learned by young children through "skill and drill" prior to reading meaningful texts (3) Once learned the young reader can use this simplistic phonics to read words and make sense of texts.

In fact the relationships are far more abstract and complex. Whether an approach to instruction is Synthetic <c> <a> <t> or Analytic (cat/ rat / mat) they are undependable abstractions and abstractions are difficult for young children to learn. Furthermore the relationships are not one-to-one but pattern to pattern. Site, situate, situation for example shows three related words in which the <t> represents three different sounds. All unaccented vowels in English are reduced to schwa, a further complication.

And all relationships vary from dialect to dialect in all languages. Printers standardized spellings to avoid the need for having to provide different editions for different dialect communities.

But all this complexity is not a problem if young readers are reading authentic predicable texts. In fact research has dependably shown that readers invent spellings in their writing that show their developing awareness of the relationships between how words are spelled in sound in context. Grammar and meaning disambiguate phonics complexities.

In short phonics is developed in the context of reading and writing. In fact even the most behavioristic of researchers (Furman for example) have found that the only factor in instruction that predicts success in reading is- tada: "Time spent reading".

It is sad that ILA (Internatinal Literacy Association) has turned back to old phonics mythology and ignorance of what the profession has learned.

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