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Senior Capstone Paper

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Teaching Young Children How to Read: Phonics vs. Whole Language

Introduction and Background

I am interested in learning how to teach children to read because I want to be a kindergarten teacher. As a kindergarten teacher, it will be my responsibility to teach my students how to read. My friend home schools her three children and I was over there doing a lesson with them. When I got there, the oldest was working on a phonics work sheet. I heard my friend help her with the assignment and realized I do not know phonics. I do not know the sounds of the letters in the alphabet. I realized I was not prepared to teach children how to read so I decided to use my Capstone as an opportunity to learn about the approaches to teaching children to read.

There are two approaches to teaching children to read, phonics and whole language. There has been a debate for years over which approach is the best way to teach children to read. Phonics has been around since the 1600s, phonics was used in the *New England Primer* (Blevins 1998 p 12). Whole language has been around since about 1980 (National Council of Teachers of English, 2006). For most of the late 20th century, educators have been debating about which approach is the most effective.

The MLOS satisfied by this project are MLO C2, English communication, advanced. My project involves this MLO because I will be focusing on how to teach every child to read, which is one way to communicate in English. The second MLO is MLO B5, English communication. My project relates to this MLO because I will be learning better ways to learn how to read in English. The third MLO is MLO C9, linguistics and language development. My project relates to this MLO because I am focusing on how to develop literacy in children.

To guide my research, I have a primary research question and six secondary research questions.

My primary research question is:

How does phonics teach young children to read as compared to the whole language approach?

My secondary research questions are:

- 1. What is phonics? And what is whole language? What does the California language arts standard say about the content specifications for teaching reading for young children?*
- 2. What does research say about the advantages and the disadvantages of these two teaching approaches?*
- 3. What are the components involved?*
- 4. How have phonics and whole language been used in California public schools? If so, to what extent?*
- 5. Which of these two approaches is more effective in teaching young children to read according to the literature?*
- 6. How does each of these two approaches contribute to young children's ability to read?*

Literature Review

To answer my six secondary research questions, I did some research and found information written about phonics and whole language. In this section, I will talk about the sources I used to write my Capstone paper and the information given in the writing on whole language and phonics.

The California Department of Education (CDE) website has a detailed list of the California curriculum standards in every subject for every grade. There is also English language development for Spanish speakers. There is also information about the Academic Performance Index, Standardized Testing and Reporting, the Williams court case and No Child Left Behind. The website also has curriculum frameworks, instructional materials, adequate yearly progress and the California High School Exit Exam. There is also information the California Teachers of the Year, health children ready to learn and specialized programs to help children (California Department of Education, 2006).

The article, Explicit or Implicit Phonics: "Therein Lies the Rub" states explicit phonics is more effective in teaching children to read than implicit phonics. Explicit phonics moves from the smallest part to the whole part, for example, teaching letters and sounds and then how to combine them into words. Implicit phonics teaches the large part then breaks it down into the small parts (Hiskes, 1998).

Learning to Read is a book that has information about phonics, how to teach phonics and the principles of a good phonics program. A good way to teach phonics is to teach the individual sound-symbol units, consonants before the vowel and the vowel plus what comes after the vowel and the whole word. The principle of a good phonics program allows children to find meaning in print in an efficient manner. Phonics also leads to knowledge about language that generalizes to

language activities such as differentiating similar vocabulary items (Moats, Furry & Brownell, 1998).

Phonics from A to Z talks about phonics. There are ten important research findings about phonics and how to create phonics lessons. The book mentions explicit phonics instruction is more beneficial than implicit phonics instruction. Also, most poor readers have weak phonics skills and a strategy imbalance. Finally, phonemic awareness is important to phonics instruction (Blevins, 1998).

A website, Whole Language vs. Phonics, talks about the fact that whole language expands on the fact that children naturally use whole words without paying attention or knowing the sound every letter makes. The problem with whole language is children need to know how to deconstruct a word so they can know how to figure out unfamiliar words. Also, a lot of people think phonics is and the drills and repetition will bore the children but children like repetition (Halycon House, 2006).

Whole Language, Whole Learners talks about what makes a person a good reader. A good reader interacts with the story. A good reader uses what they already know to make predictions about the story. A good reader asks questions about the story and subject matter. Also, a good idea in a whole language classroom is to have children work with partners when checking out library books so they can talk about the books (Robb, 1994, p. 53). The book talks about some pre-reading activities in a whole language classroom. First, the students can predict what is going to happen, they can read the pictures, browse books, brainstorm, cluster, ask questions, skim, give a concept question, collaborative murals (Robb, 1994, p. 54-60).

The website from the National Council of Teachers of English talks about a study done on the whole language reading approach. The study found that whole language students develop a stronger sense of selves as writers and readers (National Council of Teachers of English, 2006). Also, whole language improves students writing skills (National Council of Teachers of English, 2006). The whole language approach helps students strengthen their vocabulary and spelling skills (National Council of Teachers of English, 2006).

The book, Report of the National Reading Panel: Teaching Children to Read, talks about a study done on the phonics approach. The study concluded that systematic phonics instruction is more effective than unsystematic phonics instruction or no phonics instruction in teaching children to read (National Reading Panel, 2000). Also, phonics is more effective when taught in preschool and kindergarten rather than later, after first grade (National Reading Panel, 2000).

The article, Whole Language or Phonics: Improving Language Instruction through General Semantics, talks about both phonics and whole language. The article states whole language has children interact with text and phonics tells children there is a relationship between the symbol and sound in the alphabet (Brooks & Brooks, 2005). Also, researchers found that phonics helped children achieve more than whole language (Brooks & Brooks, 2005, p. 273).

The book, Progress in Understanding Reading: Scientific Foundations and New Frontiers, talks about both phonics and whole language. Whole language works naturally with the brain, because the brain is integrated, not in pieces (Stanovich, 2000). Also, awareness of phonics is important and helps reading. Successful reading requires the use of phonics (Stanovich, 2000).

Both Discretion in the Translation of Research to Policy: A Case from Beginning Reading and Response: Misrepresentation of Research by Other Researchers are articles that talk about the same study on teaching children to read. Discretion talked about how an earlier study discounted the impact of socioeconomic status and primary language had on teaching children to read (Taylor, Anderson, Au & Raphael, 1999). Response said that they recognized the effect of socioeconomic status on reading and were trying to bridge the gap between the knowledge of rich and poor by looking at the instruction of reading. The study was trying to see if the gap could be bridged by improving instruction (Foorman, Fletcher, Francis & Schastshneider, 2000). The results were not affected by socioeconomic status and primary language because the students were equal in these areas (Foorman, et al, 2000).

Methods and Procedures

To conduct my research, I went through several steps of literature library research. I searched phonics and whole language on the Internet and then I searched through the sites to find reputable ones. Then, I went to the Pacific Grove Public Library website and searched for books and phonics and whole language. Finally, I went to the CSUMB library and looked at peer-reviewed journals for articles on phonics and whole language. I looked through all the research I found and obtained the best sources to answer my secondary research questions.

This research approach helped answer my research questions because I found studies that had been done on whole language and the phonics approach so I could see how they worked in real children. I did not have the time to do the human research myself so seeing another researcher's result was very helpful in answering my questions.

Results and Discussions

The purpose of my paper is to compare and contrast the whole language and phonics approaches to teaching reading. To compare the two, I asked six research questions. From the books, journal articles and websites I found I was able to answer my six secondary research questions. In this section, I will answer each of my six secondary research questions.

What is phonics? And what is whole language? What does the California language arts standard say about the content specifications for teaching reading for young children?

Phonics is an approach that teaches children reading and spelling that emphasizes symbol-sound relationships in the alphabet (Moats, Furry & Brownell, 1998). There are two types of phonics, explicit phonics and implicit phonics. Explicit phonics moves from the smallest part to the whole part and implicit phonics teaches the large part then breaks it down into the small parts (Hiskes, 1998).

Whole language is an approach that teaches children to read by teaching the students whole words through books and poetry (Moats, Furry & Brownell, 1998). Whole language operates from the premise that students acquire language rather than learn it and they learn by talking and doing rather than listening (Brooks & Brooks, 2005, p. 271). Whole language has students interact with the text by asking questions, writing, drawing and orally responding (Brooks & Brooks, 2005, p. 272).

The California language arts standard talks about content specifications for teaching reading to young children. The standards for kindergarten and first grade will be mentioned in this paper because those are the ages children generally first start learning to read. The standards say that kindergarteners will be able to differentiate words and letters, identify and create rhyming words and blend vowel - consonant sounds verbally to make words or syllables. Also, a

kindergartener should be able to “track (move sequentially from sound to sound) and represent changes in simple syllables and words with two and three sounds as one sound is added, substituted, omitted, shifted, or repeated”(California Department of Education, 2006).

A kindergartener also needs to be able to match short-vowel and consonant sounds to the correct letter, read one syllable and high frequency words and distinguish spoken one-syllable words and separate their beginning and ending sounds. A kindergartener needs to be able to understand that as the letters of words change so do the sounds (the alphabetic principle) and be able to count the number of sounds in syllables and syllables in words. A kindergartener should be able to “track (move sequentially from sound to sound) and represent the number, sameness/difference, and order of two and three isolated phonemes (e.g., /f, s, th/, /j, d, j/)” (California Department of Education, 2006). Finally, a kindergartener should be able to track each word in a sentence and each syllable in the words by hearing (California Department of Education, 2006).

A first grader needs to be able to match spoken words to written words. Also, the child must be able to identify the sounds (initial, medial and final) in a single syllable word. Next, a first grader needs to identify long and short vowel sounds in a spoken word. A first grader must be able to create and state a series of rhyming words. A student in the first grade needs to be able to segment a single syllable word into its parts. Also, a first grader must be able to read compound words and contractions and read common word families such as -ate. Finally, a first grader needs to be able to read aloud with fluency like their normal speech (California Department of Education, 2006).

What does research say about the advantages and the disadvantages of these two teaching approaches?

Research shows advantages to phonics instruction. The first advantage is phonics can help all children learn to read. Also, phonics knowledge affects the student's ability to decode words. The last advantage is phonics improves spelling ability (Blevins, 1998, p. 9-12).

Research shows two disadvantages to phonics. The first disadvantage is good phonics instruction can not be regulated, it depends on the teachers. A teacher's knowledge of phonics affects their ability to teach phonics so if a teacher does not know or understand phonics they will have a hard time teaching phonics. The last disadvantage research shows is it is possible to overdo phonics instruction (Blevins, 1998, p. 9-12).

Research shows advantages to the whole language approach as well. The first advantage is whole language exposes children to literature, which can enhance their love of reading (National Council of Teachers of English, 2006). Whole language also helps children develop a stronger sense of self as a reader and writer because they see language as a whole rather than in pieces. When asked if they know a good reader, eighty-two percent of children in the kindergarten classroom said themselves while only five percent in traditional classrooms said themselves (National Council of Teachers of English, 2006). Also, whole language gives students better skills in writing (National Council of Teachers of English, 2006).

The disadvantage of whole language is it does not teach students the rules of the English language so the students cannot figure out unknown words (Moats, Furry & Brownell, 1998).

What are the components involved?

The components involved in phonics are phonemic awareness and sound-symbol relationships (Blevins, 1998, p. 9-12). Phonemic awareness is knowing that letters have a sound and phonics teaches the relationships (Brooks & Brooks, 2005, p. 273). Knowing that the word not is made up of three letters n/o/t/ is phonemic awareness. The sound-symbol relationship is knowing the letter makes an ah sound and phonics teaches the sound-symbol relationships in the alphabet.

The components involved in whole language are whole words and spelling (Moats, Furry & Brownell, 1998, p. 67). Whole language is taught by showing children whole words, such as run and walk. By learning whole words, students learn how they are spelled so they improve their spelling.

How have phonics and whole language been used in California public schools? If so, to what extent?

According to research, both whole language and phonics have been used extensively in California schools. In 1987, California decided to replace phonics instruction in schools with whole language. When using whole language, California's test scores dropped until California had the lowest scores in the United States. However, it is important to remember that while whole language seems to have failed, California's libraries are also ranked extremely low and California has high poverty levels. The material was not available to implement the whole language approach properly so it cannot be fully known how effective it would be in California. (Krashen, 2000).

After using whole language, California went back to phonics in about 1994. California's scores slowly started to come up. Also, Project Follow-Through concluded in 1995 and compared phonics to eight other styles of teaching reading. Phonics was the most effective in teaching reading (Research Regarding Phonics, 2006).

Which of these two approaches is more effective in teaching young children to read according to the literature?

Most of my research came to the same conclusion, that phonics is the most effective way to teach children reading (Research Regarding Phonics, 2006). Phonics is more effective because it gives children language arts knowledge (Research Regarding Phonics, 2006). Whole reading just tells children words and they memorize them but do not learn the words. Also, since children do not learn about the language, when they see a word they do not know, they do not have the skills to figure out the word (Research Regarding Phonics, 2006).

Studies done by the National Reading Panel, Halycon House and researchers from the articles by Brooks & Brooks show that phonics instruction is more effective than whole language at teaching children how to read. Also, Project Follow-Through compared phonics to eight different types of reading teaching approaches and phonics was the most effective. The Education Journal also found phonics to be an effective way to teach reading (Rose, 2006). Stanovich also reports that successful reading requires the use of phonics (Stanovich, 2000). Also, phonics is part of the California curriculum standards in reading so it is required children learn phonics, which shows how important phonics is.

How does each of these two approaches contribute to young children's ability to read?

Phonics teaches children the sounds that make up the letters of the alphabet so they can put the sounds together to make words (Moats, Furry & Brownell, 1998). Phonics teaches the sound-symbol relationships in the alphabet so children learn the rules of English and are able to decode unfamiliar words (Moats, Furry & Brownell, 1998). Also, students can extend their knowledge of language and learn new vocabulary rules and sentence structure rules (Moats, Furry & Brownell, 1998). Also, phonics contributes to student's ability to read by improving spelling (Blevins, 1998, p. 9-12).

Whole language teaches children to read by showing the student words and then the child sees the words in books they read (Moats, Furry & Brownell, 1998). The child learns words by hearing them from the teacher, seeing the words in the text and interacting with the text through asking questions and writing about the text (Moats, Furry & Brownell, 1998). Whole language helps children fall in love with books by exposing them to many different kinds of literature so they want to read. Also, see themselves as a reader so they read and learn to read by doing (National Council of Teachers of English, 2006).

Problems or Limitations

I had a few of problems while conducting research and writing my Capstone. The biggest problem was the lack of time. By the time I had finished my prospectus, my topic, my research question and secondary research questions, I had a month to do research and write a fifteen page paper. I overcame this obstacle by working a little each day as much as I could to get the project finished.

Another problem I had was finding information on the phonics approach. Most of the websites and books I found were phonics worksheets, not information on what phonics is, how it helps children learn to read or how successful it is in the classroom. I overcame this obstacle by researching a few different times to sort through the information I was finding.

The last problem I had was finding a concrete definition of the phonics approach and the whole language approach. Both approaches encompass a lot of different aspects and are done different ways. The articles would mention aspects of the approaches but no concrete definitions.

Conclusion

I did a research paper on which approach is the most effective in teaching children to read, phonics or whole language? To answer my primary question, I came up with six secondary research questions. My questions are 1. What is phonics? And what is whole language? What does the California language arts standard say about the content specifications for teaching reading for young children? 2. What does research say about the advantages and the disadvantages of these two teaching approaches? 3. What are the components involved? 4. How have phonics and whole language been used in California public schools? If so, to what extent? 5. Which of these two approaches is more effective in teaching young children to read according to the literature? 6. How does each of these two approaches contribute to young children's ability to read?

Phonics is an approach that teaches the sound-symbol relationships in the alphabet. Whole language is an approach that teaches reading from exposing kids to words through books. The California curriculum standards want children to know the beginning, middle and end sounds of words and be able to blend those sounds into words. The advantages of phonics are helps a child decode words and improves their spelling. The disadvantages of phonics are it is

possible to over do phonics and teachers knowledge of phonics affects their ability to teach. The advantages of whole language are it exposes children to literature and gives them confidence as a reader and writer. The disadvantages of whole language are it does not teach the rules of the English language. The components of phonics are phonemic awareness and sound-symbol relationships. The components of whole language are whole words and spelling.

Whole language was used in California starting in 1987 and the reading scores went down because the materials were not available to do whole language effectively. Phonics replaced whole reading in 1994 in California and the reading scores have improved. Phonics teaches children to read by teaching them the rules of the English language and whole language teaches children to read by exposing them to the language through books.

I did library research and found books, websites and journal articles. From my research, my conclusion is phonics is more effective at teaching children to read than whole language. Whole language does not teach children the rules of language so they will only learn the words taught to them. The kids do not have the tools to figure out words they do not know from whole language.

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