

Sharing Success

Research Brief

Summary of new research on topics of interest to New York State educators

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Reading: New Implications from the Research

In 2000, the National Reading Panel published its report on the status of the research about beginning reading instruction: *Teaching Children to Read* (TCR). Viewed as a landmark work among many reading researchers, TCR has played an important role in shaping federal and state policies in literacy instruction, including President Bush's **Reading First** initiative. TCR reviewed research in five areas of reading; however, findings in one area—phonics—have stirred particular controversy. Here, TCR concluded that systematic phonics instruction makes a more significant contribution to children's growth in reading than alternative programs providing unsystematic or no phonics instruction. Although the report went on to say that systematic phonics should be *integrated* with other reading instruction to create a balanced reading program, the results have been taken by some to be a repudiation of alternative reading approaches, specifically language-based approaches. But this interpretation, a number of reading experts contend, misconstrues the TCR findings; for, in fact, TCR did not investigate language-based interventions, such as whole-word or whole-language programs, or draw any conclusions about them as approaches to reading.

Now in a new study that reanalyzes the TCR data, researchers have found that systematic phonics instruction when combined with language activities and individual tutoring may *triple* the effect of phonics alone. The study, conducted by the National Institute for Early Education Research and Rutgers University, examined the same 38 studies meta-analyzed in TCR, with three additions and one subtraction. The analysis, however, differed in that the researchers looked at additional *moderator*¹ variables including the degree of coordinated language activities. Overall, their findings showed that children receiving more systematic phonics instruction did, indeed, outperform those receiving less systematic phonics. But individual tutoring and language were also identified as critical elements of reading success. Moreover, individual tutoring and language each produced *larger* reading effects than systematic phonics, and the analysis suggested that if these elements were added to phonics, the impact on reading could be three times as large. On the basis of this evidence, the researchers concluded that while systematic phonics yields a significant reading effect, "it cannot be clearly prioritized over other influences on reading skills." They further noted that as federal and state policies are formulated—especially as they are interpreted and applied in the federal **Early Reading First Program**—administrators and teachers should understand that scientifically based reading research not only supports the role of phonics instruction, it also supports a strong language approach that provides individualized instruction.

- *Teaching Children to Read* is available at: <http://www.nichd.nih.gov/publications/pubskey.cfm?from=nrp>
- The Rutgers study is available at <http://epaa.asu.edu/epaa/v11n15/>

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¹A moderator variable is one that can weaken or strengthen program effects. While the TCR study examined some moderator variables (e.g., socioeconomic status, student grouping), it did not study variations in language-based instruction.