

Preface

THE IMPORTANCE OF PHONICS

It is important to point out at the beginning that, even though this book concentrates primarily on providing instruction in phonemic awareness and phonics, this is not the only method of teaching reading. Phonics is simply a part—a very important part—of a total reading program that includes such factors as fluency, silent reading, vocabulary development, and, most important, comprehension. Efficient reading programs should also include elements of whole language and word identification. Without any one of these essential parts, building an effective reading program will be greatly hampered.

Recent research from the National Reading Panel (2000) has shown that phonemic awareness and phonics are a proven and effective method of learning how to read and that all students benefit from systematic and explicit phonics instruction. A long line of extensive research, by Adams (1998) and others, has concluded that the two best predictors of early reading success are alphabet recognition and phonemic awareness.

The evidence is now overwhelming that phonics works well for most children. Yet many elementary teachers today find themselves ill prepared to teach phonemic awareness or phonics—but not through any fault of their own. For the last twenty years, in many colleges of education, phonics has been ignored or taught in a superficial way while ideas about whole language have been promoted as the latest method of teaching reading.

Most educators now realize the importance of phonemic awareness and phonics, especially in beginning reading programs, and are searching for materials and ideas on how to implement them in the classroom. There is no shortage of material when it comes to learning about one particular aspect of phonemic awareness or phonics, but rarely can one find a source that covers all the aspects of phonics so that the teacher gets to see it in its wider aspects and relationships. *Teaching Phonics for Balanced Reading* lays a good foundation for understanding phonics in all of its aspects and gives practical examples and illustrations of how it may be used in the classroom.

ABOUT THIS BOOK

While recognizing the value of other methods of teaching reading, and other aspects of reading—vocabulary development, comprehension, etc.—*Teaching Phonics for Balanced Reading* presents only material that emphasizes the phonological and structural analysis aspects of reading. The focus here is on providing teachers and educators with a solid grounding in phonics and guidance on teaching phonics as part of a balanced reading program.

The goal of this book is to explain the content and ideas of teaching phonics in such a way that they can be easily understood by those who have little information about how phonics might be used in the classroom, while also keeping the content technical enough for readers with more advanced understanding. *Teaching Phonics for Balanced Reading* is intended as a reference book, not as a textbook to be read once and then set aside. It is hoped that teachers will want to keep this book in their classrooms—to be used in making lesson plans or for informational purposes.

Each topic in *Teaching Phonics for Balanced Reading* is presented in such a way as to be general enough to cover the entire field yet specific enough to be of practical value. Principles of phonics are explicitly laid out. Rules and generalizations are enumerated and explained. In the section on blends and digraphs, for example, the reader will be exposed to all, or almost all, of the blends and digraphs. And when standards are discussed, specific examples will be given. All rules and examples are integrated into practical guidance on teaching phonics. The goal is for the reader to not only gain specific knowledge and examples of each topic but also see the day-to-day application of that knowledge in the classroom.

Chapter One opens the book with a historical perspective on the debate regarding the best way to teach reading, followed by a discussion of current research on phonemic awareness and phonics and how it can be used in the classroom.

Chapter Two tackles some of the concerns teachers have about teaching phonics, the problems involved in teaching letter-sound relationships, and the good news about phonics. This chapter should give teachers a better understanding of the order and sequencing of phonics instruction as well as insights into how it may be integrated in the classroom.

Chapter Three discusses the need to learn to identify, sound out, and reproduce the letters of the alphabet and the difficulties involved in this learning. At the end of the chapter, readers will find several activities that can be beneficial in augmenting the learning of the alphabet and its sounds. For many teachers, this is the most important chapter in the book, as so many reading problems have their origin at the very beginning stages of learning to read (for example, when first learning the alphabet).

Chapters Four through Six contain material about consonants, vowels, and syllabication. Each of these chapters starts with ideas and concepts that are

easy to understand or less complex, and then proceeds to the more complicated ideas. The structure of each chapter represents the ascending order by which a teacher generally tries to introduce material to students. Rules and generalizations are presented in order to help teachers determine which ones are worth teaching or explaining to students and which ones have little or no value. It is generally conceded that rote memorization of most of these generalizations is a waste of time and serves little or no educational purpose. On the other hand, it is helpful for teachers to be aware of them as part of their knowledge and understanding of English orthography. Plenty of occasions will arise when this knowledge can be put to good use. Suggested classroom activities are interspersed throughout these chapters, placed near the discussion of relevant phonics topics.

Chapter Seven contains a discussion of educational standards for kindergarten through fifth grade as they relate to reading and phonics. In 2002 with the passage of No Child Left Behind and Reading First legislation, which were based on the findings of the National Reading Panel, educational reform efforts began to change how reading was being taught on the local, state, and national levels. This legislation opened up a whole new age of accountability for everyone involved in education—students, parents, teachers, administrators, local boards of education, and state departments of education—as they began working together toward the same objective: full literacy and mathematical proficiency for all students by 2014. Every state and school district set up grade level standards in reading to be achieved by all students. Two examples of these grade-level standards—the first from the state of Texas and the other created by the International Reading Association—can be found in Resource A: Standards for Elementary Education.

The last chapter, Chapter Eight, comprises informal tests, or assessments, that teachers can use to evaluate certain segments of phonemic awareness and word analysis skills. These assessments are specifically designed so that the teacher can quickly evaluate whether or not the child has mastered a particular skill. Using them for diagnostic or informal assessment purposes, the teacher can take note of each student's level of understanding and plan accordingly.

It must be pointed out that the manner in which the material is presented in each chapter does not necessarily reflect the exact order in which the material should be presented or learned in the classroom. As indicated earlier, the content of each chapter generally begins with the simpler concepts and proceeds from there to those that are more complicated or difficult to understand. The examples given for each lesson also proceed from simpler to more complex, and generally contain familiar sounds or words that students use in their active vocabulary. The particular order in which teachers may use these examples, however, will differ as the teachers' needs differ. Instead of trying to use everything in this book in the exact

order presented here, it is hoped that readers will pick and choose whatever material or ideas they find helpful and use them as the need occurs.

In conclusion, it is worth emphasizing that there are no miracle cures when it comes to teaching reading. No one type of program or method by itself will automatically lead all children to be successful in reading. The most important factor for the success or failure of any program is the attitude of the teacher. When a teacher has knowledge of a particular method, sees the application of the method for her students, and believes the method will work, there's a good chance that even a poorly researched program will be successful. When a teacher lacks knowledge of, or does not believe in, a particular method, even the best-conceived program is destined for failure.

This book was written with the hope and expectation that teachers will gain additional knowledge of phonics, see its value and application for their classrooms, and come to believe in the techniques enough so that the information provided here will make them better teachers.