Really Great Reading®

Bringing Research to Practice with Foundational Reading Skills Instruction for Beginning Readers

Research **Paper**

The Joy of Reading

How many of us have experienced the exhilaration of entering a new world with Harry Potter? The feelings of injustice, and of good and evil, through Scout's eyes in *To Kill a Mockingbird*? The joy of friendship and the devastation of loss in *Bridge to Terabithia*? And the comfort of curling up with a good book when you are having a *Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day*?

It's true, as Dr. Seuss said, "The more that you read, the more things you will know. The more that you learn, the more places you'll go." What a wonderful opportunity we have as readers to go to so many places and learn so many new things. What an honor to teach children to read and grant them access to these magical and mystical places, these new feelings and perspectives! We want all of our students to experience the magic of reading. So how and what can we teach to set our students up for reading success?

The Key Skills Necessary for Proficient Pre-Decoding and Decoding

Really Great Reading's programs for emerging and beginning readers are evidence based, teaching students the key skills they need to become efficient and accurate decoders, which ultimately leads to their success not only in word identification, but also in comprehending what they read. According to the report issued by the National Reading Panel (NRP) (2000), to successfully teach children how to read, there are five areas in which children must be provided direct and systematic instruction: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and text comprehension. A growing body of research from the last two decades has shown that several of these areas emerge as critical when dealing with the teaching of pre-decoding and decoding skills. These key skills include phonological and phonemic awareness, alphabet knowledge, and phonics knowledge (including decoding and encoding, which stem from a solid understanding of the alphabetic principle).

Almost 30 years ago, Adams (1994) noted that knowledge of the alphabet letters and the phonemes associated with them is a well-known, strong predictor of how a child will succeed in learning to read. Kilpatrick (2016) concurred, explaining that "reading problems can be *prevented* if all students are trained in letter-sound skills and phonological awareness, starting in kindergarten" (p. 13, emphasis in original). The NRP (2000) similarly determined that phonemic awareness and phonics instruction led to improved reading for young children and that providing instruction that is systematic is more effective than that which is not systematic. Acquiring these phonemic awareness and phonics skills can predict later reading success; and even more importantly, *not* acquiring these key skills can, and does, predict later reading failure. This is why our mission to help students develop into proficient readers is extremely urgent.

Our Urgent Mission to Prevent Reading Failure

How well students perform at certain pre-reading and early literacy tasks can have an enormous impact on their ultimate proficiency as readers in later years. Thus, our urgent mission is to help students master key skills early so that they do not continuously struggle as readers throughout their lives. Chall's seminal research, as summarized by Adams (1994), found that "for both young readers and pre-readers, familiarity with letters and sensitivity to the phonetic structure of oral language were strong predictors of reading achievement—stronger, in fact, than IQ. Beyond the third grade, low levels of phonic knowledge continued to be a good predictor of low levels of reading achievement" (p. 39).

Many researchers have since confirmed the validity of Chall's work. Citing Good, Simmons, and Kame'enui (2001) as well as Torgesen (1998, 2004), Moats (2009) explains that students who experience phonemic awareness difficulties will struggle in reading. She concludes that "phoneme awareness predicts later outcomes in reading and spelling. Even before a student learns to read we can predict with a high level of accuracy whether that student will be a good reader or a poor reader by the end of third grade and beyond" (p. 19). Likewise, poor decoding skills in the early elementary years can also predict students' reading in the grades to come; Wolf (2007) shares that "not being able to decode well in grade 1 predicted 88 percent of the poor readers in grade 4" (p. 117). The National Early Literacy Panel (National Institute for Literacy, 2008) found the same, stating that alphabet knowledge and phonological awareness, in particular, are two of the variables that "not only correlated with later literacy...but also maintained their predictive power even when the role of other variables, such as IQ or socioeconomic status (SES), were accounted for" (p. vii).

In fact, research shows that students who do not read at least "moderately well" by grade 3 will likely struggle with reading throughout their time in school (National Association of State Boards of Education, 2006), and sometimes even students who look like strong readers in the primary grades end up struggling in the upper elementary years and beyond because they never developed strong foundational reading skills (Leach, Scarborough, & Rescorla, 2003). It seems clear then that what and how we teach students in their early school years has a big impact on how well they ultimately read.

How Does Really Great Reading Help Educators Teach Foundational Skills?

As evidenced above, we know a great deal about *what* our emerging and beginning readers need to know so they can become proficient readers as they grow. Our focus, therefore, must shift to *how* we should teach these foundational skills to ensure that children become strong decoders who can ultimately

comprehend what they read with a high degree of accuracy. Really Great Reading has taken the key early literacy skills of phonological and phonemic awareness, alphabet knowledge, and phonics knowledge (decoding and encoding) and created a family of programs that help educators teach these in ways that are explicit, systematic, engaging, multisensory, and developmentally appropriate for young children. The explicit and systematic nature of Really Great Reading's instruction is especially critical in the early years; as Moats (2007) explains, a full 40 percent of children will not become "capable readers" without "explicit instruction (including phonics)." When students enter school, we cannot know with certainty who will struggle with reading later on, so we must provide explicit, systematic instruction to *all* students.

Really Great Reading's *Countdown*, *Blast Foundations*, and *HD Word* programs allow educators to teach key skills in phonological and phonemic awareness, alphabet knowledge, decoding and encoding, and the reading of phonetically regular and irregular high-frequency/sight words in just 15-20 minutes of daily instruction that is supplemental to a core reading program. To give a more complete picture of how these programs align with the research surrounding the most effective content and skills required for early elementary students to master, it is helpful to examine the research behind these key early literacy skills more closely.

Phonemic Awareness

WHAT DOES THE RESEARCH SAY?

Phonemic awareness, or the ability to isolate and manipulate the individual phonemes (sounds) in words, is critical for learning to read and spell in an alphabetic writing system. There is a robust research base on the importance of effective phonemic awareness instruction for developing reading proficiency. Strong phonemic awareness skills lead to strong readers (NRP, 2000) because phonemic awareness puts into place the underlying framework for reading (decoding) and writing (encoding) when letter-sound correspondences (phonics) are learned (Trehearne, 2003). As Kilpatrick (2016) makes clear, "Students with good phonological awareness are in a great position to become good readers, while students with poor phonological awareness almost always struggle in reading" (p. 13). When students have issues with word recognition, it often stems from their difficulty breaking words and syllables apart into phonemes (Fletcher and Lyon, 1998). In fact, researchers have found that "among poor readers, 70-80% have trouble with accurate and fluent word recognition that originates with weaknesses in phonological processing" (Fletcher, Lyon, & Fuchs, 2007). Henry (2010) concurs, explaining that "when children lack awareness of the role that sounds play in words, [they] rarely learn to read easily" (p. 76).

Tolman (2018) fits phonological skills into the shape of the top half of an hourglass; phonological skills start with the larger units of language (words and syllables) and become smaller and smaller, down to

the individual phoneme level. In her hourglass, Tolman said instruction should begin with the early phonological awareness skills of syllables, alliteration, and onset-rime, and then move down toward the narrower part of the hourglass, reaching basic phonemic awareness; this is where students segment and blend individual phonemes, or the individual sounds, they hear in words. Phonological awareness is a broad term that encompasses speech sounds at all levels, while phoneme or phonemic awareness is an awareness of individual phonemes. According to Tolman, students must start with the bigger sound units, but "we want to get them to where it really matters, the individual phoneme level" (Tolman, 2018).

Phonemic awareness should be fun and engaging for both the students and the teachers. Students are learning to listen for the phonemes without ever being exposed to print. "For some children, these activities may be enjoyably superfluous. For others, however, they may bridge a critical gap between inadequate preparation for literacy learning and success in beginning reading" (Griffith & Olson, 1992). Adams (1994) emphasizes that while phonemic awareness is essential for learning to read, it is not easily established, and children need explicit instruction to gain the necessary skills. In addition to this explicit instruction, students also need modeling and plenty of practice. This is where Really Great Reading's fun and engaging instruction plays a vital role.

HOW DOES REALLY GREAT READING PUT THIS RESEARCH INTO PRACTICE?

Really Great Reading recognizes the essential nature of phonemic awareness instruction in developing students' pre-decoding and decoding skills. All of Really Great Reading's programs include a major emphasis on instruction in and practice with phonological and phonemic awareness skills.

Students are never exposed to print during Really Great Reading's phonological and phonemic awareness instruction; it is taught orally and auditorily and through a variety of online graphics and activities that include word play, listening to stories, rhyming, and blending and segmenting words. In kindergarten, *Countdown* students develop an ear for the words in a sentence, the syllables in a word, the same sounds at the beginnings and endings of words, and the same rime units. These skills are easier to grasp than the segmenting and blending of individual phonemes, which "means that kindergarteners may profit from some early attention—prior to the teaching of phonemic awareness—to rhyming and syllable awareness if these abilities are not yet in place" (Shanahan, 2005).

Really Great Reading moves students quickly from the broader phonological awareness activities to the more refined level of phonemic awareness through engaging activities, stories, and opportunities to play with sounds at all levels of the hourglass. The youngest learners play with the larger phonological units in words at the beginning of *Countdown*, but they quickly progress to working with individual speech sounds, or phonemes, with a focus on beginning sound isolation and phoneme blending. *Countdown* students soon move into more complex phonemic skills, such as phoneme segmentation and even manipulation; by the sixth week of instruction, *Countdown* students are learning to segment the individual phonemes in words, using both their fingers and magnetic color tiles, which is a critical skill

because mastery of phonemic awareness can be measured by a student's ability to "fully segment words with ease" (Shanahan, 2005).

In *Blast Foundations* and *HD Word*, first and second graders begin working at the individual phoneme level immediately. These programs emphasize the segmentation of phonemes with a focus on identifying and categorizing vowel phonemes and also incorporate phoneme blending. Vowel phonemes are taught using hand motions, helping to cement the sounds into the students' memories. As students' phonemic awareness becomes further solidified, they are able to do more complex phonemic tasks such as phoneme manipulation (addition and deletion of initial and final phonemes and vowel substitution). This supports students' decoding and encoding of words with more complex phonics features. Phoneme manipulation, in particular, is a key skill in helping students learn to read and spell English words, especially when reading connected text, and phoneme manipulation helps students recognize words automatically and build them into their sight word memory (Kilpatrick, 2015).

Research is clear on the power of phonemic awareness instruction. The phonemic awareness activities in Really Great Reading's *Countdown*, *Blast Foundations*, and *HD Word* programs are one of the reasons RGR's programs are so powerful and effective. If children have trouble distinguishing sounds in spoken words, they will have trouble decoding unknown words that they encounter, which in turn will lead to difficulties in comprehension (Lyon 2000). Students with a good understanding of phonological awareness have the underlying framework in place for reading (decoding) and writing (encoding) when letter-sound correspondences (phonics) are learned (Trehearne, 2003). It is the learning of these letter-sound correspondences and their application to decoding and encoding words that is the focus of the next section.

Alphabetic Principle

WHAT DOES THE RESEARCH SAY?

Perhaps the most important goal, in the interest of giving students a productive knowledge of grapheme-phoneme correspondences, is to convey to them the basic alphabetic principle, or the idea that words are made of sounds and that letters represent those sounds in a systematic way (Paulson & Moats, 2010). Students' success in reading relies heavily on their understanding and use of the alphabetic principle. A firm grasp of the alphabetic principle, when coupled with students' mastery of phonemic awareness skills, leads them to proficiency in decoding and encoding because "...children need letter-sound knowledge to make use of their phonemic awareness skills in decoding and spelling words" (Schuele & Murphy, 2014, p. 16). Ziegler, as cited by Foorman et al. (2016), believes that students who are able to segment the sounds in words and also connect those sounds to written letters should be able to "read about 70 percent of regular monosyllabic words, such as fish, sun, and eat."

Kilpatrick (2015) tells us that "... without letter-sound knowledge, one cannot effectively develop word-

specific knowledge" (p. 63). Paulson and Moats (2010) concur, explaining that "because letters and words are the building blocks of print, understanding the alphabetic principle is necessary for early reading" (p. 75). However, learning the alphabetic principle is not something that happens through "simple immersion in print and writing activities" (Stanovich, 1993). This type of simple immersion is not enough for them to "pick up the alphabetic principle"; these children need "explicit instruction in alphabetic coding" (Stanovich, 1993).

HOW DOES RGR PUT THIS RESEARCH INTO PRACTICE?

Once students develop a base level of proficiency with phonemic awareness, Really Great Reading's programs help students deeply understand the concept of one-to-one phoneme/grapheme correspondence and how to apply that concept to decoding and encoding words. The research above makes clear that the alphabetic principle must be taught explicitly and that students will not just "pick it up" through mild exposure. Really Great Reading provides this explicit instruction beginning in kindergarten and continuing through the primary grades.

Really Great Reading's *Countdown* lessons first introduce the alphabetic principle to kindergarteners explicitly and systematically. Children learn to isolate and pronounce the short vowel and most common consonant sounds of the English language first, and then they are systematically introduced to the symbols that represent those sounds. In this way, children are taught how to "break the code" of the English language. In *Countdown*, letters are introduced in clusters of three or four, allowing children to move quickly to decoding words and reading connected text.

Really Great Reading emphasizes letter sounds before letter names at the early childhood level and beyond in order to lead students to a deeper understanding of the alphabetic principle and eventually, the "code." Rather than teaching the code backward, from print to speech, we recognize that it is more efficient to help students link speech to print (Moats, 1999). Teaching students letter names, while important at the pre-kindergarten level in particular (Paulson & Moats, 2010), is not the most efficient path to decoding in kindergarten and beyond. Using the letter names as a method for learning the letter sounds is confusing and inefficient because not all letter names follow the same pattern. Some letter names begin with the sound for that letter, like **b**, **p**, **d**, and **k**; others end with the sound for that letter, like **m**, **n**, **f**, and **l**. Several letters (like **h**, **w**, and **y**) do not contain the letter sound within the letter's name at all. Mastering the letter sounds first, before the letter names, is a far more reliable method that facilitates a child's learning to decode.

As children progress to *Blast Foundations* and *HD Word*, they have typically already mastered the alphabetic principle and begin focusing on utilizing that knowledge to become proficient with putting letters and letter combinations together to read and spell increasingly complex words. However, *Blast Foundations* and *HD Word* provide opportunities for children to continue developing proficiency with letter sounds through engaging online instruction and practice activities.

Phonics

WHAT DOES THE RESEARCH SAY?

Once students have mastered some key phonemic awareness skills and the alphabetic principle and know at least some of their letter sounds, they must be able to put those sounds together to read and spell words. Explicit and systematic instruction in phonics helps all children read and spell words more accurately and fluently than non-phonics instruction (Moats, 2008, p 51). The National Reading Panel's (2000) meta-analysis revealed that systematic phonics instruction produces significant benefits for students in kindergarten through 6th grade and for children having difficulty learning to read. The ability to read and spell words was enhanced in kindergartners who received systematic beginning phonics instruction. First graders who were taught phonics systematically were better able to decode and spell, and they showed significant improvement in their ability to comprehend text. The National Reading Panel Report also found that non-systematic, or responsive, phonics instruction is far less effective than systematic instruction (Shanahan, 2005). In fact, Moats (2007) tells us that 40 percent of children will not become capable readers without explicit instruction (including phonics).

Adams (1994) also noted that "...programs that included systematic phonics resulted in significantly better word recognition, better spelling, better vocabulary, and better reading comprehension at least through third grade" (p. 38) and that "approaches in which systematic code instruction is included alongside meaning emphasis, language instruction, and connected reading are found to result in superior reading achievement overall" (p. 49). The research is clear that explicit and systematic phonics is essential for developing strong readers. Really Great Reading's programs make it easy for teachers to align their instruction with this research.

HOW DOES REALLY GREAT READING PUT THIS RESEARCH INTO PRACTICE?

Each of Really Great Reading's programs has a major instructional focus on decoding and encoding words to facilitate students' eventual reading fluency and comprehension. Pflaum, Walberg, Karegianes, and Rasher (1980) determined that the application of letter-sound knowledge to the decoding of words should happen immediately once students have been taught enough letters to read such words (as cited in Shanahan, 2005). Thus, explicit letter-sound instruction should segue into explicit phonics instruction. Really Great Reading helps students to move from learning individual letter sounds to putting those sounds together in the encoding and decoding of simple words as quickly as possible.

As they learn each cluster of letter sounds, *Countdown* students immediately apply their alphabet knowledge to encoding (spelling) and decoding (reading) simple, controlled, one-syllable words using the letter sounds they have explicitly been taught. As early as the sixth week of instruction, teachers are scaffolding their students' decoding and encoding of words like **map**, **pat**, and **tap**. Students use magnetic

color tiles to represent the phonemes in a word and then match each phoneme to a spelling, placing a letter tile below each color tile. By the middle of the kindergarten year (Unit 16), *Countdown* students have learned all 26 letters (names and most common sounds) and are, independently or with the teacher's assistance, reading and spelling words with all the short vowel and most common consonant sounds. More importantly, *Countdown* helps students understand the structures within these words and how to use their phonemic awareness skills (segmenting and blending) for reading and spelling.

What Works Clearinghouse recommends that students begin reading connected text as soon as they have a rudimentary grasp on decoding a few words (Foorman et al., 2016). In *Countdown*, after students have learned only 16 letters, they are already engaged in simple phrase reading. By the end of *Countdown* Unit 16, most typically developing students are, with or without support, reading simple phrases (like "in the van") and are ready to transition to more complex phonics concepts. In the second half of *Countdown*, students continue to review and develop mastery with letter sounds, but they also apply their deepening phonics knowledge to the decoding of single-syllable words with more complex structures, including digraphs and 2-sound blends, and even to the decoding of simple multisyllabic words with two closed syllables.

Blast Foundations and *HD Word* students also focus on decoding and encoding increasingly complex words using explicit and predictable routines and procedures. They are taught to incorporate functional strategies for breaking down words at both the single-syllable and multisyllabic word level. Students often struggle to read unfamiliar multisyllabic words because they lack the functional strategies for approaching a new word. When they encounter a word they don't know, they often skip it or take a guess. Over time, these habits result in frustrated and disengaged readers. In *Blast Foundations* and *HD Word*, students learn several functional strategies for decoding that are easy to understand, remember, and utilize. They are taught to look for the vowel letter spellings first; then to write each of those spellings on their own whiteboard; and then to add in the consonants around the vowel spellings, leaving room to flex the consonant placement if the pronunciation does not work out the first time. If Plan A does not work when trying to decode an unfamiliar word, RGR students have a Plan B and maybe even a Plan C to try.

The scope and sequences for *Countdown, Blast Foundations*, and *HD Word* progress from simpler to more difficult concepts. Students begin by learning short vowel sounds and the closed syllable spelling pattern and gradually progress to more challenging long vowel sounds and the multiple spellings of those sounds. By the end of *HD Word*'s scope and sequence, students as young as second grade have been explicitly taught to decode all six syllable types, including spellings of the short, long, r-controlled, and variant vowel sounds; prefixes and suffixes; and other functional word parts.

Sight Words

WHAT DOES THE RESEARCH SAY?

High-frequency words are words that should eventually be known "by sight," without analysis, either because they occur very frequently (high-frequency words) or because of their phoneme-grapheme (sound-letter) irregularities. Learning to read these words with accuracy and automaticity is an essential part of a student's journey to reading proficiency; as Foorman et al. (2016) explain, "increasing the ease of word recognition allows students to focus more on word meaning when they read, ultimately supporting reading comprehension" (p. 22).

Sight word instruction is an essential part of helping students read a large number of words in print; this is due to the fact that approximately half the words in written text can be found on most published high-frequency word lists' top 100 words (Kress, 2000). Many of the words on these lists do not conform to standard phonics rules, necessitating instruction in identifying and reading them by sight as whole units. Students' sight word learning is facilitated by their alphabet knowledge and phonemic awareness; Boyer and Ehri (2011) found that "learning to read words from memory entails a process of forming connections between letters in spellings and phonemes detected in pronunciations, storing these connections in memory, and accessing them to read the words the next time they are seen. Phonemic awareness is needed to read words in this way...." (p. 442).

HOW DOES REALLY GREAT READING PUT THIS RESEARCH INTO PRACTICE?

Students are taught to read sight words throughout Really Great Reading's programs, leading to more automaticity and fluency in reading. In *Countdown* and *Blast Foundations*, students are taught to read three to five new sight words a week with engaging online instructional and practice activities. *Countdown* students will learn and practice 60 sight words by the end of kindergarten, and *Blast Foundations* students will learn and practice 110. Students are taught to read these words in isolation but are also provided with practice opportunities to read the words in connected text at the phrase and sentence level. When sight words are decodable, students are directed to use their phonemic awareness and phonics skills to decode the words but are encouraged to see these words as whole sight words.

Really Great Reading Supports Teachers

The work of setting students up for reading success is critical for early childhood teachers. Through explicit and systematic instruction, Really Great Reading supports educators in helping their students develop phonemic awareness skills while introducing them to the alphabetic principle and then teaching those students to apply the alphabetic principle to decoding and encoding words.

Each program in Really Great Reading's Phonics Suite (including, at the early childhood level, *Countdown*, *Blast Foundations*, and *HD Word*) comes with teacher guides that provide direct, explicit, systematic, and sequential lessons. The guides include practices that help overcome obstacles to efficient and effective instruction while providing clear explanations of how to make lessons multisensory and highly engaging, how to differentiate instruction, and how to provide positive error correction. There is a What You Need to Know section for each lesson providing the background knowledge necessary for teachers along with suggestions for small group or whole class instruction; the lessons are designed for emerging readers as well as for students who require intervention.

In addition to the support given for teaching Really Great Reading's programs, the company offers complimentary diagnostic surveys and a grouping matrix. The surveys assess pre-reading and reading skills. Responses can be entered into an online grouping matrix to assist with grouping and program recommendations, progress monitoring, and reporting. Really Great Reading also offers multiple hands-on, activity-driven professional development trainings throughout the year to further support and enhance learning for the crucial work teachers are charged with.

In Conclusion

Really Great Reading's foundational reading skills lessons give students concrete strategies for decoding both single-syllable and multisyllabic words. Students hear and manipulate the sounds in words in intentional, fun, and engaging ways. They use manipulatives and simple questions to break words down into individual sounds and syllables. Students are taught to look for the vowel letters that are the heart of each syllable. They learn to read both decodable and high-frequency words with accuracy and automaticity. By explicitly teaching students to play with the sounds in spoken words and then to analyze and attack those words on paper in developmentally appropriate ways, *Countdown*, *Blast Foundations*, and *HD Word* lessons set students on the path to becoming successful decoders and, ultimately, successful and fluent readers.

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ABOUT US: At Really Great Reading, we help children and adults master the skills for reading fluency and comprehension. Our approach, including our Phonics Suite materials, gives educators and specialists the tools to prevent bad habits while students are learning to read in K-3 and to identify and remediate bad habits when they appear in older grades.

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