Triple R Teaching

It seems that whenever we're looking for a new program or resource, we find the magic words "research-based." It's kind of like the "All Natural" stamp on a box of organic Oreos. Rather than trust what everyone else says is research-based, it's smart to acquaint ourselves with the research itself.

One of the easiest ways to do this is to read the results and recommendations from the National Reading Panel, a group that spent two years studying the research surrounding the teaching of reading. Today we're finding out exactly what the National Reading Panel had to say about phonemic awareness.

Phonemic awareness is the ability to hear and manipulate individual sounds in words. For example, the word "cat" has three phonemes, /k/, /ă/, /t/. The word "ship" also has three phonemes even though it has four letters, /sh/, /ĭ/, /p/.

There are four phonemic awareness tasks: isolating sounds, blending, segmenting, and manipulating. Manipulating can include substituting, adding, or deleting sounds.

Phonemic awareness and phonics are not the same thing. Phonemic awareness has to do with the ability to hear and manipulate sounds. Phonemic awareness training may include letters, but the use of letters doesn't define it.

In contrast, phonics refers to how letters and sounds correspond to each other, and how this knowledge could help a person decode words.

As long as we're talking about words, let's talk about phonological awareness. Phonological awareness is an umbrella term that includes phonemic awareness, in addition to other skills such as syllables and rhyme.

The National Reading Panel zeroed in on phonemic awareness and that's what we're focusing on today. Their big question was, "Can you teach phonemic awareness and does it help children read more easily?"

The panel found that "phonemic awareness training was very effective in teaching phonemic awareness to students. There were large effect sizes immediately after the training and over the long term."

But that doesn't really tell us much does it? It just means that teaching phonemic awareness means that they learned phonemic awareness. So what?

Well, phonemic awareness training improved students' ability to read and spell over the long term as well. In fact, "tests of word reading, non-word reading, and reading comprehension all yielded statistically significant effect sizes." In other words, phonemic awareness training is very important for future success in MULTIPLE areas of reading.

This is the key finding of the National Reading Panel and therefore all beginning teachers of reading need to include phonemic awareness in their instruction!

When looking more closely at those studies, here's what else the panel found. Programs that focused on one to two skills yield larger effects on phonemic awareness learning than those that teach two or three skills. Instruction that taught phonemic awareness with letters helped children acquire better phonemic awareness skills than those without letters. Those students also did better with spelling. Teaching in small groups produced larger effect sizes than teaching children individually or in whole groups. Also good to know, low SES (socioeconomic status) children can benefit as much from training in phonemic awareness as middle to high SES children, despite being phonologically or culturally different.

I'd like to highlight an important note from this report. "It is important to note that acquiring phonemic awareness is a means rather than an end. Phonemic awareness is not acquired for its own sake, but rather for its value in helping children understand and use the alphabetic system to read and write. This is why including letters in the process of teaching children to manipulate phonemes is important."

A lot of times we hear that phonemic awareness is only that which can be done in the dark, that it doesn't include any print, but phonemic awareness can and often should include print so that children can make the connection to the alphabetic principle.

Now, what does the panel's meta-analysis not tell us? It does not tell us exactly how phonemic awareness instruction should be taught. It doesn't tell us exactly how much time to spend on it. It also doesn't answer some of the current questions in the science of reading community: Should we only do phonemic awareness with letters? How much time do we need to spend on advanced phonemic awareness skills like phoneme manipulation? Do we need to jump right past syllables and rhyming and go straight to phonemic awareness in kindergarten?

These are all points of debate in the science of reading community and they won't be settled until a robust body of evidence has been established. For now, keep in mind this summary from Timothy Shanahan referenced in the show notes: "Beginning readers benefit from instruction that teaches them to hear the sounds within words. This instruction prepares them for making the link between letters and sounds and should be kept simple, brief, and enjoyable. Phonemic awareness is taught through language, songs, games, and other activities that encourage students to listen for the sounds within words. Students will have successfully accomplished learning phonemic awareness when they can fully segment words with ease. For most children, this can be accomplished during kindergarten or first grade."

I'll be sure to share Shanahan's article, as well as the National Reading Panel report, and a link to an excellent phonemic awareness curriculum that incorporates letters called Road To The Code. You can find the show notes at reachallreaders.com/episode3.