

The case against intensive phonics

Submitted to the New York Times, Oct. 26, 2018

In “Why are we still teaching reading the wrong way?” (Oct 26) Emily Hanford says the research supports systematic intensive phonics, a method that teaches all the rules of phonics in a strict order to all children.

Here are objections to this conclusion:

(1) Researchers admit we have not discovered all the rules.

(2) Even among those rules that have been described, some are extremely complex.

(3) Many children learn to read with little or even no phonics instruction.

(4) Studies show that intensive phonics produces strong results only on tests in which children pronounce words out of context.

Systematic intensive phonics has little or no impact on tests in which children have to understand what they read.

(5) The best predictor of performance on tests in which children have to understand what they read is real reading, especially self-selected reading.

(6) “Basic phonics” can be helpful: teaching straight-forward rules that children can learn and can actually apply to texts to make them more comprehensible. Our ability to use complex rules is acquired as a result of reading.

Instead of misrepresenting scholars such as Frank Smith, I suggest Ms. Hanford read his books and papers. Start with *Understanding Reading*, and then read some critiques of the intensive phonics movement by Elaine Garan, Stephen Krashen (c’est moi) and Gerald Coles.

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Original article:

<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/26/opinion/sunday/phonics-teaching-reading-wrong-way.html>

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