

Are 'Foundational Literacy Skills' acquired or learned? Let's consider ALL the evidence.
(1)

Published in Education Week; 2/25/20

To the Editor:

In her opinion essay, Heidi Anne E. Mesmer proclaims that explicit instruction in phonics is not enough: Children must be taught print concepts, phonemic awareness, morphology, and fluency ("[Phonics Is Just One Part of a Whole](#)," Feb. 12, 2020).

Of course, children should develop competence in these areas, but should all this be taught explicitly? There is considerable published research that challenges this view, that concludes that for these "neglected" areas as well as phonics (1) there are many rules and generalizations that are extremely complex and have not even been well-described; (2) deliberate instruction does not result in improved reading comprehension; and (3) competence in these areas has been shown to emerge without instruction.

A reasonable hypothesis, one not mentioned by Mesmer, is that competence in these areas is largely, if not completely, the result of reading. To borrow terminology from second language acquisition, these competencies are subconsciously acquired, not consciously learned.

There are quite a few articles presenting and reviewing these conclusions, including my 2003 article, "The Unbearable Coolness of Phonemic Awareness"; my 2019 article, "The (Huge) Role of Stories and the (Limited) Role of Phonics"; and Jeff McQuillan's 2019 paper, "The Myth of Teaching Morphology." (2)

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(1) Ed Week gave this letter a different title: "A Debate Over Phonics Instruction."

Mesmer's article, however, assumed that the debate over phonics was settled, that phonics needs to be deliberately "taught" and consciously learned. Mesmer argued that the same is true of other aspects of literacy.

(2) The missing links: ... my 2003 article, "The unbearable coolness of phonemic awareness" (<https://tinyurl.com/y7eodokr>); my 2019 article, "The (huge) role of stories and the (limited) role of phonics." (<https://tinyurl.com/yxyy5rnk>); and Jeff McQuillan's 2019 paper, "The myth of teaching morphology." (<https://tinyurl.com/tfddqlp>)