

Here is what is wrong with the American Public Media report, “Why millions of kids can’t read ...”, aired on Morning Edition. January 2, 2019.

The role of poverty

There is no evidence that “Millions of kids can’t read ...”. But there is overwhelming evidence that low reading ability is related to poverty, contrary to the claim in American Public Media’s report.

Poverty means, among other things, much less access to reading material. Children of poverty have fewer books in the home, live in neighborhoods with fewer bookstores and libraries with fewer books and open fewer hours. They also attend schools with inadequate school and classroom libraries.

Studies done all over the world show that more access to books means more reading, which in turn results in better reading achievement and better literacy development in general.

When we find those who learn to read quite well despite poverty; in every case the reader managed to find access to books, often through a friend. When we find those who don’t read well despite access to books; in every case the person did not develop a reading habit.

Phonics

Phonics consists of rules relating sounds to spelling, e.g. the letter “b” is generally pronounced in as in the first sound in “bomb,” but is sometimes silent, as the last “b” in “bomb.” The rules of phonics can either be unconsciously absorbed (“acquired”) via reading, or can be consciously “learned” through study and instruction.

Studies that have been done on the effect of phonics instruction focus on the impact of one extreme version of phonics, “systematic intensive phonics,” a method that attempts to teach all the rules of phonics in a strict order to all children, resulting in conscious knowledge of the rules.

Here are the problems with systematic intensive phonics.

First, researchers admit they have not yet discovered all the rules.

Second, even among those rules that have been described, some are extremely complex and have numerous exceptions.

Back in the 1960's, Theodore Clymer examined the phonics rules frequently taught in school to see how well they worked. Among them was the famous rule, "when two vowels go walking the first does the talking" (say the letter name of the first vowel, as in "bead"). Clymer looked the texts used in four popular basal series. This rule held in only 45% of the cases. Most instances of two vowels back to back were exceptions (e.g. "chief", "captain"). Studies done since Clymer's work have found an even higher percentage of exceptions.

As Frank Smith has pointed out many phonics rules are "unreliable ... there are too many alternatives and exceptions ... 300 ways in which letters and sounds can be related." For example, each of these uses of "ho" has a different pronunciation: hot, hoot, hook, hour, honest, house, hope, honey, and hoist. Smith notes that even if a reader knew the rules, the words cannot be read accurately from left to right, letter by letter: The reader needs to look ahead.

Smith also notes the different phonics programs teach different rules, a stunning counterargument to the claim that teaching complex rules is necessary.

It has been claimed that The National Reading Panel report, issued in 2000, concluded that the experimental research supports intensive systematic phonics. Professor Elaine Garan, after a thorough examination of the panel's report, noted that the impact of intensive phonics is strong only tests in which children read lists of words in isolation, but it is miniscule on tests in which children have to understand what they read. Thus, intensive phonics instruction only helps children develop the ability to pronounce words in isolation, an ability that will emerge anyway with more reading. Garan's results agree with the results of many other studies that show that intensive phonics instruction has a positive impact on tests of decoding but not on tests of comprehension. The best predictor of performance on tests of comprehension is the amount of self-selected reading that has been done.

Third, many children learn to read with little or even no phonics instruction.

How do we learn to read?

We learn to read by understanding what is on the page. This means the use of context. Context is provided not only by pictures, but also knowledge of the world, knowledge gained from life experience, from reading, and from school.

Critics of the use of context argue that context can be misleading, leading to the wrong meaning. Studies show, however, that most contexts do not lead readers astray: they are not “deceptive,” especially if the passage is long enough. A number of studies confirm that each time we see an unfamiliar word in print in a comprehensible context, we pick up a small percentage of the meaning, enough to account for vocabulary acquisition if we read enough.

Of course, phonics makes some contribution to understanding texts and thus helps children learn to read, but it is not the heavy extremist view supported by proponents of systematic intensive phonics.

Basic phonics

Whole language supports basic phonics, the conscious learning of a few basic, straight-forward rules. Conscious knowledge of some basic rules can help children learn to read by making texts more comprehensible. Frank Smith explains how this can happen: The child is reading the sentence "The man was riding on the h ____." and cannot read the final word. Given the context and recognition of *h*, the child can make a good guess as to what the final word is: the reader will know that the word is probably not *donkey* or *mule*. This won't work every time (some readers might think the missing word was "Harley"), but some knowledge of phonics can restrict the possibilities of what the unknown words are.

Our ability to use complex rules, including those not yet described by scholars and therefore not taught, is gradually acquired as a result of reading. We cannot state the rules, but have instead a sense of what is correct. They are “acquired,” not consciously learned.

Basic Phonics is the position of the authors of *Becoming a Nation of Readers*, a book widely considered to provide strong support for phonics instruction: "...phonics instruction should aim to teach only the most important and regular of letter-to-sound relationships ... once the basic relationships have been taught, the best way to get children to refine and extend their knowledge of letter-sound correspondences is through repeated opportunities to read. If this position is correct, then much phonics instruction is overly subtle and probably unproductive" (*Becoming a Nation of Readers*, 1985, p. 38).

Phonemic awareness.

It has been asserted that teachers need to teach “the sound structure” of the English language,” and need to be able to divide a word into its component parts, e.g the idea that the first sound in “Eunice” is not [u] but [y]. This is called “phonemic awareness” (PA). The American Public Media report accepts the view that children need to first be taught phonemic awareness explicitly (“phonemic awareness training”) in order to master phonics and learn to read.

There is good evidence that PA develops without PA training. Children in comparison groups in PA training studies who get no PA training typically improve in PA, and longitudinal studies show that nearly all children score very well on tests of PA by about grade 3. Very few have had PA training.

Also, phonemic awareness training studies show little or no effect of PA training on reading comprehension. So far, PA training has been shown to have an impact only on tests of PA and pronouncing words in isolation, but not on tests in which students have to understand what they read.

Increasing phonemic awareness doesn't result in better reading, but reading results in the development of PA. Illiterates improve in PA after they learn to read, and studies show improvement in PA from listening to stories.

PA training has not been shown to be a prerequisite to learning to read in first language or in second language development or even to be helpful. This conclusion is not only consistent with the evidence presented here, but is also supported by the obvious fact that millions of people learned to read before the concept of phonemic awareness was discovered by researchers.

Note that both intensive phonics and intensive systematic phonics have little or no impact on tests in which children have to understand what they read.

Citations available on request.

Note

I am Professor Emeritus, University of Southern California.

I was elected to the Reading Hall of Fame in 2005. I have published over 500 professional papers and books and have been a major speaker at many language education conferences. I have published in the New York Times, Los Angeles Times, the Washington Post, and dozens of other newspapers around the world. I

have appeared on Democracy Now, Which Way LA? and as well as on MSNBC. I also hold a black belt in Tae Kwon Do and was the 1977 Venice Beach Incline Press Champion. I currently train at Gold's Gym, Venice, CA.