

Ready Readers

Ready Readers, a beginning literacy program from Modern Curriculum Press, reflects a broad range of scientifically-based principles organized for systematic, direct instruction in phonics. These principles comprise the four basic skills and concepts of beginning reading: phonemic awareness, phonics and decoding, fluency, and comprehension.

PHONEMIC AWARENESS

The first stage of reading development is phonemic awareness, the conscious awareness of sounds in spoken words. Phonemic awareness is developed by sound play and exposure to poems, songs, and nursery rhymes. It includes abilities such as discriminating sounds as like or different; recognizing whether or not words rhyme; and removing, adding, and substituting phonemes to form new words (Cunningham, 1995). A related prerequisite skill for learning to read is letter naming or alphabet knowledge.

Researchers for the Center for the Improvement of Early Reading Achievement describe these two skills as “the two most powerful” predictors of later reading success. “Instruction that promotes phonemic awareness engages children in hearing and blending sounds. ...Such instruction has demonstrated positive effects on primary-grade reading achievement, especially when it is coupled with letter sound instruction” (CIERA, 1998).

Other researchers have elaborated on the interactions of phonemic awareness and letter knowledge. Fielding-Barnsley (1997) notes that “phonemic awareness is necessary but not

sufficient for acquiring the alphabetic principle.” Juel (1996A) describes how these two skills in combination assist the beginning readers:

“Why are these two factors so powerful?... [I]t is because a primary task of the beginning reader is to learn how to decipher words. Children must unlock the relationships between the sounds they use to say and the letters of the alphabet with which they will read and write these words.” Juel asserts that “Children without phonemic awareness cannot develop letter knowledge.” This inability to hear a sound within a word prevents them from writing a word or sounding it out.

Numerous additional studies show that children who lack these early skills are slower than classmates to recognize words and, without significant intervention, frequently remain poor readers (Clay, 1979; Juel, 1988; Juel, Griffith, & Gough, 1986).

Development of these skills, obviously, is not an end, but a means. “... [T]he integration of phonemic awareness with knowledge of letter names in order to decode unknown words in texts is the ultimate goal” (CIERA, 1998B).

Phonemic Awareness

Scientific Research Base	Ready Readers Components	How Ready Readers Program Supports Research
Hearing, Segmenting, and Blending Sounds	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Activities for Phonemic Awareness in Program Overview, pp. 43-46 • Phonics Activities in Teaching Plans • Word Cards, Picture, and Letter Cards • Big Books • Audio Cassettes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develops auditory discrimination, listening, rhyming skills • Refines auditory discrimination of target sounds • Provides cues for auditory discrimination tasks • Used for shared reading; focus attention on sounds and words • Used for hearing sounds and words in listening centers
Letter Name Knowledge	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Building Word Power in Teaching Plan • Letter Cards • Assessment Pack • Stage ABC Little Books 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Targets key letters and sounds for lesson • Allows active engagement with letters • Measures alphabet letter recognition • Promotes phonemic awareness through repetition; raised, textured letters engage tactile learners

SYSTEMATIC PHONICS AND DECODING

The ability to decode words is another key skill in early reading. “To recognize unfamiliar words when reading, successful beginning readers use phonics (letter-sound associations)” (CIERA, 1998C).

Like phonemic awareness and letter naming, systematic phonics instruction is another of the ten principles of early reading success identified by the Center for the Improvement of Early Reading Achievement. These skills are developed in the following manner: “Primary level instruction that supports successful reading acquisition is consistent, well-organized, and focused. Teachers lead lessons where children receive systematic word recognition instruction on common, consistent letter-sound relationships and important but often unpredictable high-frequency words” (CIERA, 1998D).

Learning to read, unlike learning to speak, is not a biologically driven process. Since learning to read is so much more difficult and unnatural, reading acquisition for the majority of children often requires explicit instruction in phonics and word study (Gough & Hillinger, 1980; Lieberman & Lieberman, 1992).

The ability to decode unfamiliar words and read fluently includes recognition of words that are phonetically regular as well as those that do not follow consistent, predictable spelling patterns.

The principles of phonics (letter-sound associations) are generally acquired in first grade in a series of stages. Sound units within words are often broken into onsets (initial consonant) and rimes (phonograms). First, children learn to recognize the beginning sounds of words. Then they progress to recognizing rhymes, and finally blending onsets and rhymes (Ehri & Robbins, 1992; Goswami & Mead, 1992).

A group of 38 phonograms appears in 600 words, each of the phonograms occurring in between 14 and 26 words. For many children, recognition of rimes such as these allows them to make analogies from known syllable units to read and write new words (Goswami & Bryant, 1992; Goswami & Mead, 1992; Fielding-Barnsley, 1997).

Experience with this type of onset-rime word analysis is more effective than memorizing traditional phonics rules because of the high percentage of exceptions to so many of those rules. In contrast, within common rimes, the pronunciation patterns are far more consistent (Adams, 1990; Stahl, 1992). In addition, automatic recognition of the phonogram allows children to skip the intermediate step of restating a rule and then applying it (Juel, 1996B).

Cunningham (1995) also notes that because of the brain’s tendency to seek pattern recognition, these phonograms allow readers to make comparisons to known words in order to

decode new words with familiar patterns. Therefore, instruction in key phonograms can be a highly efficient way of helping children make independent analogies to many, many words (CIERA, 1998C).

Children with minimal skills also benefit from sounding and blending of individual phonemes within rimes (Juel & Minden-Cupp, 1999). Recent research indicates that onset and rime instruction “might be most effective for children with some decoding skill and some degree of phonological awareness, while sequential letter-by-letter decoding might be more effective for children with less literacy knowledge” (Bruck & Treiman, 1992; Ehri & Robbins, 1992; Vandervelden & Siegel, 1995; Juel & Minden-Cupp, 1999).

According to Bear, Invernizzi, Templeton, and Johnston (1995), phonics instruction for low readers is most successful when it incorporates “hands-on” phonics and phonemic awareness activities, including sorting word cards based on orthographic patterns and picture cards based on onset, rime, or medial vowel sounds.

Juel (1996B) describes these matching activities as motivating, requiring children to think critically. “As children sort and classify, similarities and differences among targeted features are determined. ... Thus children are engaged, they make decisions for themselves and they learn about the structure of words.”

Juel (1996B) notes that, “Specific word study provides children with the skills they need to decode less predictable text.” Cards displaying individual words drawn from familiar text can be used to practice reading even without adult support by matching the words to known text and using predictable text for support. This repeated matching helps children focus on all the letters in words and encourages faster and more accurate recognition with each repetition. While these word and picture sorting activities enhance word recognition, they also promote active engagement and decision-making and encourage development of the critical skill of comparison and contrast among sounds (Juel, 1996B; Juel & Minden-Cupp, 1999).

The goal of this systematic instruction in letter-sound recognition is to foster automaticity in word identification (CIERA, 1998C). As readers become more proficient in applying phonics skills and move toward independently reading texts, various studies suggest that the scaffold of decodability may be diminished (Beck, 1995; Beck & Juel 1995).

Emerging readers may need a higher degree of phonetic regularity than readers at other stages, but they do not need perfect regularity. Beck and Juel (1995) suggest that a 70% match between known phonics elements and texts is adequate. Mesmer (1999) notes, “Decodable text is like a set of training wheels: it offers temporary support and is designed to facilitate future independence.”

Systematic Phonics and Decoding

Scientific Research Base	Ready Readers Components	How Ready Readers Program Supports Research
Letter-Sound Correspondence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Picture Cards • Letter Cards 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hands-on, allows comparing, contrasting and sorting by sounds • Use with picture cards for developing letter-sound awareness; use with word cards for matching and sorting
Systematic Development of a Skill	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Phonics Skills Trace 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Highlights organization of phonics skills development
Word Study	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Building Word Power in the Teaching Plans • Activities for Word Study in Program Overview • Word Cards 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Highlights initial consonants, phonograms and other phonics elements targeted for instruction • Strengthens letter-sound connections • Focuses on word analysis and comparisons with words in book context
Decodable Text	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 355 Little Books • 85 Big Books 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provides opportunities to practice known phonics elements in supportive context • Provides opportunities for shared reading

FLUENCY

Fluency may be defined as “the ability to read quickly with comprehension and expression” (Cunningham, 1995). In addition to learning to decode words that follow regular patterns, it is essential for beginning readers to develop the ability to decode other high-frequency (irregular) words with increasing fluency. Repeated exposure to words in both categories allows children to decode with increasing fluency. Cunningham (1995) notes, “Lots of easy reading in which most words are easily recognized is essential for both the development of instantly recognized words and the ability and willingness to decode the occasional unfamiliar word.” This points to the need for reading books in which vocabulary reinforces what children can decode fluently, adding just a few new words at a time. The National Research Council (1998) also cites “practice with a wide variety of well-written and engaging texts at the child’s own comfortable reading level” as a way to promote fluency.

Repeated exposure to high-frequency words allows children to decode with increasing fluency. “At the heart of independent reading is rapid recognition of a core group of words, beginning with the 25 most frequent words and extending by the end of the primary grades to the 5,000 words that account for 90% of texts” (LaBerge & Samuels, 1974). A group of just 300 words accounts for 65% of the words in texts (Fry, Kress & Fountoukidis, 1993), highlighting the importance of helping children decode these words automatically. “Rapid recognition of this core

group of high-frequency words is gained through extensive involvement in reading and writing. For young children, these occasions often involve oral reading where children read quickly, expressively, and with good phrasing—a process described as fluent reading” (CIERA, 1998D).

Learning to recognize the most frequently occurring words allows children to attend to decoding “less frequent words, and more importantly, for processing meaning” (Cunningham, 1995).

For struggling readers “[a]ssisted and repeated reading with audiotapes and adults, partner reading, and home reading can all contribute to their fluency.” These same strategies are also beneficial for children who are acquiring English (CIERA, 1998D).

While phonics elements and high-frequency words are targets for individual word study, “Others concur that building fluency in phonics elements and high-frequency words may be done within the context of programs that also expose young readers to varied, motivating texts. Children enjoy texts that have engaging illustrations, patterns, and storylines. The best solution likely lies in inclusion of many different texts in beginning reading programs, including those that emphasize the phonics patterns and high-frequency words of instruction” (CIERA, 1998C; Hiebert, 1996).

As children master fluent decoding of increasing numbers of individual words, they can develop other elements of reading fluency, such as reading with appropriate phrasing

and expression. Cunningham (1995) recommends “lots of very easy reading” along with other strategies, including opportunities for self-selected reading, many opportunities for rereading, graduating difficulty of books on the same topics to build background knowledge, and reading aloud, to accomplish these goals.

Peterson (1995) has identified a classification system for books for beginning readers. She describes groups of traits that provide differing degrees of scaffolding such as “familiarity with the story, the match between the illustrations and text, and the predictability of language patterns and story episodes.” These traits engage beginning readers and contribute to their development of fluent reading.

Peterson breaks these traits into five groups of levels with lessening degrees of repetition, text-picture match, and consistency of text placement.

Peterson cites the benefits of providing readers with many varied books and reading experiences, noting that these “little books are valuable in that they provide simple, repetitive texts that quickly engage beginning readers in the process of reading.” Readers develop fluency by reading and rereading these little books, repeatedly accessing all the print and picture supports they provide.

Fluency

Scientific Research Base	Ready Readers Components	How Ready Readers Program Supports Research
High Frequency Words	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Building Word Power in Teaching Plan • Assessment Pack 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Highlights high-frequency words targeted for lesson • Includes stage-by-stage high-frequency words
Word Recognition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Word Cards 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Builds automaticity
Reading Aloud	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 85 Big Books for Shared Reading • Audio Cassettes • 8 Assessment Packs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provides teacher modeling of fluent reading • Models pacing, cadence, expression • Used to assess children’s strengths and needs (2 books per stage)
Predictable Texts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 355 Little Books in graduated levels of difficulty 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Repeated readings build fluency; text supports include repetitive, predictable texts, text-picture match
Independent and Recreational Reading	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Phonics Related Books in Teaching Plan 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provides links to phonics practice in literature to build fluency
Home-School Connection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 355 Take-Home Books 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourages children to write and share stories with families

READING COMPREHENSION

“Beginning in the earliest grades, instruction should promote comprehension by actively building linguistic and conceptual knowledge in a rich variety of domains, as well as direct instruction about comprehension strategies,” according to the National Research Council report, *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children* (1998).

These different focuses of developing comprehension are not entirely discrete; in fact, they are interwoven strands in the scientific research foundations of early reading.

Direct instruction is a crucial element in the use of reading strategies. The Center for the Improvement of Early Reading Achievement recommends direct instruction and modeling of comprehension strategies such as “predicting, inferencing, clarifying misunderstandings, and summarizing” as keys to developing children’s understanding of what they read, along

with repeated reading, guided reading and writing, and discussions (CIERA, Summer 1998). CIERA notes, “Even though both the readers’ processes and the kind of texts encountered become increasingly complex as children move through the grades, these accomplishments underscore the importance of comprehension even at the very earliest stages of reading.” This source adds that even struggling readers should learn strategies such as self-questioning and summarizing as well as find “opportunities to consolidate skills and strategies” in books at their independent reading levels (1998E).

The National Research Council (1998) also encourages direct instruction about comprehension strategies such as summarizing the main idea, predicting events and outcomes of upcoming text, drawing inferences, and monitoring for coherence and misunderstandings.

Strategies such as semantic mapping and semantic feature analysis also allow children to expand existing schemata and organize new and previous information. These concepts and the vocabulary used to think, read, and write about them expand as children listen and participate in conversations. "...[O]ral language activities accomplish three major goals of a reading program—building background knowledge, developing comprehension strategies, and participating as members of a reading community" (Hiebert, 1989).

Embedded in the notion of linguistic and conceptual knowledge are both children's language concepts and concepts of print. Children bring a great range of experiences with both language and print when they first arrive at school. The authors of Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children cite the need to stimulate discussion to promote vocabulary development and talking about books at the earliest levels of school since "[c]hildren who are particularly likely to have difficulty with learning to read in the primary grade are those who begin school with less prior knowledge and skill in relevant domains..." (National Research Council, 1998).

Building background has long been acknowledged as a key step in reading instruction to enhance reading comprehension (Anderson et al., 1985). Background knowledge, the sum of prior experiences and conceptual understanding, determines how children interpret what they read (Hiebert, 1989).

The range of experience children bring with them to school can vary tremendously. Some may lack understanding of basic concepts such as a word, a sentence, and a letter, and they may not even know that to read you hold a book right side up and turn the pages from front to back (Anderson, et al., 1985). These concepts of print also "include knowing that print carries a message, that print represents the sounds in spoken language, and that English print has conventions such as left-right and top-bottom movement" (Morris, 1993; CIERA, 1998). Children develop concepts of print through literacy experiences at home and at school.

For children who arrive at school with limited book experiences, activities such as observing a teacher read aloud from a big book informs a child's understanding of the connections between spoken and written language and reinforces recognition of text features such as words, sentences, print tracking, punctuation, and the match between pictures and text (Hiebert 1989). While children acquire print concepts through activities such as reading aloud with big books, various features of text can also influence young children's ability to read independently: repetition, familiarity of content, familiarity of language patterns, rhyme, picture-text match, length and amount of text, and clarity of format (Hiebert, 1996).

Reading Comprehension

Scientific Research Base	Ready Readers Components	How Ready Readers Program Supports Research
Strategic Comprehension	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reading the Story section of Teaching Plan • Word Study Overview for each stage • Reading and Writing Activities in Teaching Plans • Assessment Guide • Little Books • Take-Home Books 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focuses on strategies used in context • Highlights comprehension strategies developed in Little Books • Provides opportunities to assess key story concepts • Provides little book text for miscue analysis • Provides consolidated opportunity to practice using strategies and phonics skills • Retelling provides measure of story comprehension
Background Knowledge	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reading the Story Across the Curriculum in Teaching Plan • Children Acquiring Language/ESL in Teaching Plan • Multiple texts organized by themes (see Program Overview, pp. 52-59) • Independent and Recreational Reading Theme-Related Books in Teaching Plan • Take-Home Books 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discussion of topic builds background • Focuses on key vocabulary and language concepts • Builds thematic understanding • Supports and expands themes • Extends little book concepts

Reading Comprehension (Continued)

Scientific Research Base	Ready Readers Components	How Ready Readers Program Supports Research
Vocabulary Concepts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Picture Cards and Word Cards • Little Books • Word Study Overview • Theme Charts in Program Overview 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develops and expands concepts • Develops and expands concepts and theme knowledge • Highlights vocabulary concepts developed in little books • Demonstrates thematic organization of Ready Readers Little Books
Print Concepts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Big Books • Reading Checklist in Assessment Guide 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teacher reading demonstrates print tracking • Assesses print concepts

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