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The best ways to get a child to read

IN A country like South Africa, teachers play an important role in improving the reading skills of learners, especially those in the foundation phase: Grades R to 3. By enhancing the reading proficiency of learners, teachers help lay the foundation for future learning and academic success.

It is, therefore, crucial that effective reading instruction takes place in the classroom. However, intense debates such as the "Reading Wars" continue to rage in literacy education.

Reading Wars have been characterised by disagreements over the best approaches to teaching reading, particularly focusing on the debate between phonics (a component of reading instruction that focuses on the relationship between individual sounds and the letters that represent them) and whole language instruction methods, that is methods used to teach reading. They are not just about differing pedagogical approaches but can also be seen as a struggle for power in discussions about reading instruction.

Fortunately, reading instruction has shifted in recent years. It is no longer based on opinion of how children learn to read, but rather informed by science. In 2020, the National Reading Panel (NRP) was appointed to review reading research and determine the most effective methods for teaching reading.

The NRP reviewed more than 100 000 studies and analysed them to determine which methods worked best when teaching children to read. They concluded that there were five essential components of reading, known as the "Big Five", that should be taught for effective reading instruction. They are phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension.

Phonemic awareness is the ability to notice, think about and work with the individual sounds in words. Phonics refers to the understanding of how letters and groups of letters link to sounds to form letter-sound relationships and spelling patterns. It involves learning letter-sound correspondences and common spelling patterns. Fluency is the ability to read a text accurately and quickly and recognise words instantly, whereas vocabulary is understanding the meanings of words through direct and indirect instruction and developing tools to discover the meaning of an unknown word. Comprehension refers to making sense of what we read. Reading comprehension requires background knowledge, understanding sentence and text structures, monitoring understanding and connecting ideas.

For reading instruction to be effective, it should be systematic, explicit, cumulative and sequential. By implication, teachers should systematically review the reading skills of learners to improve their memory, explicitly teach concepts in our language syllable types, phonics patterns and syllable division rules. Lessons and instructional routines should be cumulative and build on previously learnt skills and instruction should be sequential, meaning it must begin with the easiest and most basic elements and progress to more difficult and complex material. Teachers should also follow a set scope and sequence of concepts.

As we celebrate World Book Day on Tuesday, we should also ask an important question: What does this mean for supporting learners on their learning-to-read journey?

In their reading, children often encounter words or high frequency words that have a part that can't be sounded out. Learners need to learn which phonemes (sounds) match the graphemes (letters) and which are irregular.

Parents and teachers should allow learners to practise writing such words several times. Supporting readers with phonics demands patience as learning how the 26 letters in the alphabet are used to represent the roughly 44 sounds in spoken language (for English) allows learners to unlock the code of our written language. Learning to read is a complex process dependent on many factors. On World Book Day, we should applaud all teachers who try to make sense of this complexity and teach every child how to read.

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