

## Explicit, Systematic Phonics Instruction? So glad you asked . . .

By Wendy Seger | Categories: Reading, Reading Intervention and Acceleration

*Does your program provide explicit, systematic phonics instruction?*

How would you respond to this question in real time? Would you gaze toward the nearest open doorway and slip through ASAP? Or would you confidently engage in conversation, “Does our program provide explicit, systematic phonics instruction? I am SO glad you asked!”

Recently I revisited this topic with colleagues in a partnering district. We did a deep dive into how *Being a Reader* small group reading instruction matched their state framework for phonics instruction. With the assistance of the 2006 National Institute for Literacy document *Put Reading First* and specific examples of instruction from *Being a Reader* Small-Group Reading, I would like to build our confidence in answering this question without hesitation.

First let’s consider: *What does explicit instruction mean?*

*Put Reading First*. Simply put, *explicit* means “the direct teaching of a set of letter-sound relationships.” (p. 12)

*Explicit* signifies that we *show* the students the letter symbol and *tell* the students the letter sound. In the step of each *Being a Reader* lesson titled “Introduce the Spelling-Sound \_\_\_,” we provide explicit phonic instruction. Note the explicit instructional language in this *Being a Reader* Small-Group Reading example (Set 2, Week 2, Day 1, p. 25):

### **2** Introduce the Spelling-Sound *p /p/*

Explain that today’s sound is /p/, and have the students say the sound. Point to the alphabet wall card for *Pp*. Explain that the picture of the pencil will help them remember the sound /p/ because the word *pencil* begins with the sound /p/. Write *p* on your wipe-off board, point to the letter, and say the letter name. Tell the students that the letter *p* stands for the sound /p/. Have the students repeat the sound as you write the letter. Then have the students each trace the letter *p* on the table in front of them with one finger as they say /p/.

Next: ***What does systematic instruction mean?***

*Put Reading First*: "A program of systematic phonics instruction clearly identifies a carefully selected and useful set of letter-sound relationships and then organizes the introduction of these relationships into a logical instructional sequence. The instructional sequence may include the relationships between the sounds associated with single letters (for example, the sound /m/ with the letter *m*), as well as with larger units of written language (for example, letter combinations such as *th* or *ing* or spelling patterns such as *ea* or *ie*)." (p.14)

Matching examples are found in the *Being a Reader* Scope and Sequence for Sets 1–5. They are nestled into a larger sequence of letter-sound associations that supports the students in recognizing the English letter and word system and how it works.

Set 1, Week 2: consonant m /m/

Set 2, Week 5: digraph th /th/

Set 3, Week 1: inflectional ending ing /ing/

Set 4, Week 6: long vowel sound ee, ea /ē/

Consonant and vowel letter-sound relationships are taught in order of utility in *Being a Reader*, giving the new reader immediate opportunities to use what they are learning to decode words in isolation and in connected text. Students also learn that some words are decodable while other words are irregular and must be learned and remembered (high-frequency words).

There is another essential question to consider in our preparation for this conversation:

***What else should I look for in a phonics program?***

*Put Reading First*: "Programs should acknowledge that systematic phonics instruction is a means to an end. Although children need to be taught the major consonant and vowel letter-sound relationships, they also need ample reading and writing activities that allow them to practice using this knowledge." (p.15)

Phonics instruction in *Being a Reader* is always in service of meaning. Words appear strategically in the connected texts for each week of instruction, requiring readers to use the recently learned sounds and words to navigate the text independently and make sense of what they've read. To wrap up the lesson each day, students further apply their growing letter and word knowledge to encode words and sentences in the Guided Spelling step. Valerie Fraser, our lead in program development of Collaborative Classroom materials, recently explained in the Collaborative Classroom Circle publication that ". . . students need to see that decoding is immediately applicable. Immediate application to connected text and to spelling communicates to students that phonics is not dry material to be mastered: it makes a whole world of reading and writing possible." (Fraser, 2019)

Wait! There are other questions: ***What about phonemic awareness? What about phonics taught in small groups rather than the whole class?***

While important, these questions will have to wait for another conversation! For now, lead toward your room, locate your *Being a Reader* Small-Group Reading materials, and show how your students indeed receive explicit, systematic phonics instruction.