

Phonics Instruction: One Size Does Not Fit All

By Wendy Seger | Categories: Reading, Reading Intervention and Acceleration (Grades K-5)

Pretend with me for a minute. This past year, the school board in the town of We-Care decided to support the newcomers to public school in a very special way. They provided each incoming kindergartener with a new pair of well-constructed, durable sneakers. The sneakers sported a gender-neutral color of neon orange, heel-activated sparkling lights, and velcro closures. Initially, the students loved the sparkling lights, the teachers loved the velcro closures, and the parents loved the relief to their budgets. However, there was one major caveat: they only came in size 12.5.

The drawback to this constraint soon became abundantly clear. On students with a much smaller foot, the shoes were so loose they flopped around and slipped off, sometimes becoming lost. On students with a larger foot, the sneakers were so tight they were painful to wear and the students began to discard them and go sock-footed or barefoot in the classroom. Recess became a real problem. In the end, this sneaker program worked only for about a third of the students—the ones who could fit into this shoe size. What a waste. What a dilemma. What were they thinking?

This “one size fits all” story seems a bit far-fetched, right? Or is it? I would contend that in the past we took the same stance when it came to phonics instruction. I am reluctant to admit that I taught whole-class phonics instruction to my first grade students for many years. I now believe the reality of that practice parallels my sneaker story. Some of my students were struggling to form their letters and were insecure in most of their sounds, while others in my class were ready for more complex phonetic and lexical knowledge, having figured out or been taught the system of decoding English a couple of years earlier. In truth, the instruction “fit” only about a third of my students in any year. What a waste. What a dilemma. What was I thinking?

In an article called “Finding Manageable Ways to Meet Individual Needs,” Scott Willis and Larry Mann speak to the practice of teaching to the whole class when student needs span a wide continuum:

“Every child is unique. Although we may rejoice in this fact, it poses a dilemma for educators. When students are diverse, teachers can either “teach to the middle” and hope for the best, or they can face the challenge of diversifying their instruction.” (ASCD Curriculum Update, 2000).

In *Being a Reader* Small-Group Reading, we take on the challenge of differentiating phonics instruction because we know that we can do more than teach to the middle and hope for the best. When we use data to identify where students are in their developing understanding of how the language works and what students need to know to “break the code,” we can provide them with the appropriate instruction. The goal of *Being A Reader* Small-Group Reading Sets 1-5 is to provide differentiated instruction in phonics and other foundational skills in the context of real reading. To paraphrase the *Being a Reader Small-Group Teacher's Manual*:

Developed for students who are just beginning to grasp letter-sound relationships and the conventions of written English, the sets follow a developmentally appropriate sequence, allowing teachers to place students at their point of need. Formal and informal assessments help teachers place students in the appropriate groups, monitor individual growth, and track emerging readers' mastery

of foundational skills. The students read books that correspond to a scope and sequence of phonics and high-frequency word instruction, and which were developed by the Center for the Collaborative Classroom with careful attention to natural-sounding language, plot, and character development, a variety of appropriate fiction and nonfiction topics, and high-quality illustrations. Lessons that accompany these books focus on phonological awareness, concepts of print, phonics/decoding, and high-frequency word recognition. By the end of Set 5, the students will have mastered single-syllable phonics, acquired many high-frequency words, and been introduced to polysyllabic decoding. They will also have had many experiences using reading strategies informally to understand text.

Providing targeted phonics instruction in a small group setting with a systematic process for monitoring learning allows us to be responsive to our students' needs. We can adjust the pace, frequency, and focus of our instruction, reteaching and reviewing when necessary. While this may be an instructional shift for many, it can be life-changing for our students, especially as they encounter the increasing demands of more complex texts in the intermediate grades.

In this springtime of planning and preparation for the next school year, I'm wondering how I might score an invitation to speak to the school board at We-Care. I would show them how *Being a Reader* Small-Group Reading provides a better, more personalized way to welcome their new kindergarteners than "one-size-fits-all" sneakers.

Scott Willis and Larry Mann, "Finding Manageable Ways to Meet Individual Needs," *Curriculum Update*, ASCD, Winter 2000.