

A BALANCED APPROACH IS BEST FOR TEACHING KIDS HOW TO READ

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We all want young children to be given the very best opportunities to become successful, engaged and passionate readers. The teaching of reading is constantly mired, however, in a tired old debate between proponents of “phonics” (sounding out words) and “whole language” (which focuses on meaning and using the context to decipher unknown words).

This argument is an unhelpful and misleading dichotomy given the evidence actually supports a balanced approach to literacy, which goes well beyond being able to recognise words on a page.

What is a balanced approach to literacy?

The biggest review of scientific research on reading was conducted by the US National Reading Panel in 2000. The panel was clear in finding: *Systematic phonics instruction should be integrated with other reading instruction to create a balanced reading program.* The panel argued that a balanced approach incorporates phonemic awareness and phonics (understanding the relationships between sounds and their written representations), fluency, guided oral reading, vocabulary development and comprehension. The report also stated: *Phonics should not become the dominant component in a reading program, neither in the amount of time devoted to it nor in the significance attached. It is important to evaluate children's reading competence in many ways.*

A 2005 Australian National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy supported this balanced approach, with the use of synthetic phonics recommended in the first couple of years of schooling for beginning readers. Similarly, the UK 2006 reading review recognised: *Word recognition is a time-limited activity that is eventually overtaken by work that develops comprehension.*

Of course there are differences in what the balance might look like in different classrooms and across different year levels. However, claims that teachers are using a little bit of phonics and a lot of whole language in Australian schools are wrong. Referring to balanced literacy as a mess of methods simply shows a lack of understanding about how classrooms operate. A balanced approach provides us with a best-practice model for teaching all students how to read and write across all stages of their education.

Literacy isn't just about learning how to read

It is important to remember that literacy learning is broad and takes place at all levels of schooling. It's not just about learning to read in the early years. The current focus on phonics as a fix-all for struggling readers is problematic as it misses the complexities of literacy learning.

Being literate requires a much broader repertoire of skills than simply reading and writing as the decoding and encoding of printed words. The ability to make meaning from texts, ask questions and read between the lines is, in many ways, much more important.

Paulo Freire, the much-respected Brazilian educator, called this Reading the World and Reading the Word. To teach our students to do any less would be the real failure.