

Comment on the draft of the Primary Program Document of the Ministry of Education of British Columbia

Linda Siegel

Professor, Educational and Counselling Psychology & Special Education
Dorothy C. Lam Chair in Special Education
University of British Columbia

A draft of the Primary Program has been released by the Ministry of Education of British Columbia. Unfortunately, this report contains many errors and ignores important research that has been conducted in British Columbia and educational materials that have been developed in British Columbia.

The report states that, “The advice in this guide is supported by a wide, comprehensive, and current research base, to help Kindergarten to Grade 3 teachers.” (Page 5) In addition, the report claims to be founded on “rigorous criteria” based on evidence from studies in which “the blind, peer review process used in well-established journals.” (Page 5). Ironically, the report ignores research that has been conducted in British Columbia and published in well established journals. In some cases, the statements in the report are not supported by research.

The Important of Phonological Awareness

A very important precursor of reading skills is what is called phonological awareness. Phonological awareness is a broad term that describes such skills as the ability to hear sounds in words, recognize and produce rhyme, segment words into syllables, and recognize whether words start with the same sound. Phonological awareness skills refer to oral language skills and develop before the child is taught reading skills.

It is important to note that the Primary Program document appears to confuse phonological awareness and phonemic awareness and to use these terms interchangeably. These terms have different meanings. Phonemic awareness is a much narrower term and is the ability to hear and isolate phonemes which are the smallest unit of sounds in words.

Years of research have shown that teaching and reinforcing phonological awareness skills is important to the development of reading skills. A locally developed program, called Firm Foundations, does an excellent job of teaching these basic phonological awareness skills.

One of the most surprising aspects of this document is that there is **NO** mention of Firm Foundations. Firm Foundations is a document produced in British Columbia by the teachers of the North Vancouver School District. It is a play based program that provides teachers with a variety of games and activities to teach phonological awareness skills (such as rhyme, recognizing initial sounds, and syllable and phoneme segmentation)

and phonics skills, such as knowing the sounds of the letters. The program features activities that can be used with the entire class, activities that can be used in small groups, and activities that can be used with an individual child. There are activities for parents, who are an important part of the learning process. More information about this program is available on the following web site: www.nvsg44.bc.ca. The program can be purchased from the BC Government web site. <http://www.crownpub.bc.ca/hitlist.aspx>

My colleagues and I have conducted a series of studies (published in peer reviewed journals with high standards of peer review) that have clearly shown that the use of this Firm Foundations program has resulted in significantly improved **reading comprehension skills**, as well as spelling, decoding and word recognition skills. Firm Foundations develops phonological awareness and phonics skills. It is helpful for students who have English as a second language as well as students who have English as a first language.

Some studies demonstrating the effectiveness of Firm Foundations are listed below: (None of these studies is cited in the Primary Program draft document.)

Lesaux, N.K. & Siegel, L.S. (2003). The development of reading in children who speak English as a second language. Developmental Psychology, 25, 1005-1019.

D'Angiulli, A. & Siegel, L.S. (2004). Schooling, socioeconomic context and literacy development. Educational Psychology, 24, 867-883.

Low, P., & Siegel, L.S. (2005) A comparison of the cognitive processes underlying reading comprehension in native English and ESL speakers. Written Language and Literacy Vol. 8:2 207-231.

Lipka, O., Siegel, L.S., & Vukovic, R. K. (2005). The literacy skills of English Language learners in Lessons from research. Learning Disabilities Research and Practice, 20, 39-49.

Lesaux, N.K., Lipka, O., & Siegel, L.S. (2006). Investigating cognitive and linguistic abilities that influence the reading comprehension skills of children from diverse linguistic backgrounds, Reading & Writing: An Interdisciplinary Journal. 19, 99-131.

Lipka, O., Lesaux, N. K., & Siegel, L. S. (2006) Retrospective analyses of the reading development of a group of grade 4 disabled readers: Risk status and profiles over 5 years. Journal of Learning Disabilities. 39, 364-378.

Lipka, O. & Siegel, L.S. (2007) The development of reading skills in children with English as a second language. Scientific Studies of Reading, 11, 105-131.

Lesaux, N.K., Rupp, A.A., & Siegel, L.S., (2007) Growth in reading skills of children from diverse linguistic backgrounds: Findings from a 5-year longitudinal study.

Journal of Educational Psychology, 99, 4. 821-834.

Siegel, L.S. (2008) Morphological awareness skills of English language learners and children with dyslexia. Topics in Language Disorders 28 1, 15-27 .

The Primary Program draft claims to be based on evidence from research. Yet it ignores the evidence cited above. This is especially perplexing as the evidence comes from British Columbia.

Teaching Phonological Awareness

The Primary Program document fails to recognize the importance of phonological awareness training. The following statement appears on page 112 “Expressive vocabulary is a stronger predictor of reading than phonemic awareness. (Phonemic awareness appears to be a side effect of more general language abilities, and is related to single-word reading but not comprehension.) “

No research evidence is cited to substantiate that statement. Actually, the available evidence contradicts this statement. The references cited above show that phonological awareness training enhances reading comprehension skills (as well as decoding, word recognition and spelling) and phonological awareness is correlated with reading (including reading comprehension) and spelling skills

The report ignores the evidence of the value of phonological awareness training. On page 124 the following statement appears. “While some people advocate that primary teachers allocate large amounts of time to teaching students how to perform better on phonemic awareness tasks, there are no longitudinal studies that support the effectiveness of this practice in increasing the reading achievement of the children when they reach the intermediate grades.”

This statement is incorrect. See the references above. The gains in decoding, word recognition and reading comprehension as a result of phonological awareness instruction last until at least grade 7 (the final year of our study).

Teaching Phonics

Phonics instruction involves teaching children the sound of the letters. It is a very important part of reading instruction.

The Primary Program document misrepresents the proponents of phonics instruction and implies that they do not teach the children anything besides phonics. The report states, “Debates about the best ways to help children in the early stages of reading stem from differing views of reading. Phonics-first advocates consider reading to be word identification or decoding.”(page 126). Who are these mythical phonics first advocates? The Primary Program report fails to support the existence of these phonics proponents. Yes, there are people who believe in teaching phonics, that is learning the sounds of the

letters, the exceptions to the rules and how English words are constructed. However, no one has ever advocated ONLY PHONICS. To imply that there are any people who do is at best nonsense and at worst a malicious distortion of the evidence. Furthermore, no references are cited for this bizarre statement.

There are programs like Firm Foundations that teach the sound of the letters but Firm Foundations also develops phonological awareness and vocabulary skills. Teachers in the classroom in which it is used, engage in many literacy activities such as reading to children, have children write stories, etc. The picture that this document paints of phonics instruction is of young children sitting rigidly at their desks saying the sounds c-a-t for hours at a time. This is simply incorrect. It is absolutely critical that children are taught the sounds of letters (which appears to be somewhat of a crime in the eyes of the report). However, if they are taught these basic skills, then they are also exposed to a rich language environment and that the teacher does discuss concepts and ideas, read to them, engage in language games etc.

The report also states that “Those who propose a more comprehensive approach (of which word recognition is a part) view reading as a meaning-making process. The latter approach informs the BC English Language Arts Curriculum and the Primary Program.” No one who teaches children the sounds of the letters denies that meaning is a critical part of reading. Again, this document provides no references to support the assertion that there are responsible researchers who deny the value of meaning in reading.

The report also states that “Direct instruction - phonics may produce higher scores on phonemic awareness and word attack skills and sometimes on comprehension tests, particularly with children labeled at risk or reading disabled, when they are tutored one-on-one or in very small groups. However, this seems not to last very long, particularly for comprehension tests.” page 126

Again this statement is contradicted by the evidence. Phonological awareness and phonics instruction produced gains in the students in the North Vancouver schools and these gains lasted until at least grade 7 (the last year of the study)

The report states that “Writing, especially with invented spelling, provides the best context for teaching children letter sound correspondences.” There is no evidence provided for this statement. In fact, children develop a knowledge of phonics by teaching them the sounds of the letters. Invented spelling is one way but it does not supplant actual direct teaching of the sounds of the letter.

The report also states that “we do not have adequate evidence that phonological awareness treatment programs are valid and effective in classroom environments’. Page 123. Again this is incorrect. See the references above and many others that clearly show that classroom based instruction in phonological awareness helps all children.

Children Who have Difficulty Learning How to Read

Although we know that there are children who have significant reading problems and these children have a problem called dyslexia or a reading disability, the terms dyslexia or reading disability do not appear anywhere in the document. We know that we can diagnose dyslexia as early as toward the end of grade 1 and that it is important to do so as early as possible in the child's school career, there is no mention of this important area in the document. Teachers should be taught to recognize dyslexia and information provided on how to help the child with dyslexia. To omit this information from a document that purports to be based on research is irresponsible.

To be fair, the document does discuss "struggling readers." However, there appears to be little understanding of the research studies of struggling readers and what their difficulties and what constitutes appropriate instruction for them. This report fails to recognize the importance of direct and explicit instruction in phonics.

The report states that "The literature clearly supports a combination of a wide variety of teaching strategies focused on all aspects of the reading process as critical to the support of struggling readers. While they may need more explicit or differently designed instruction to support their learning needs, they do not need a focused reliance on instruction in phonic knowledge and phonemic awareness activities." page 127. The report is incorrect. Children with reading problems do need help with phonics. Giving them help with what they need does not mean that their other needs will be ignored. They need help with vocabulary, grammar and the development of self-esteem, among many other needs. However, it would be inappropriate and damaging to ignore their need to learn the sounds of the letters.

The report claims that "Allington and Baker (2003) contend that struggling readers and writers are served best by appropriate instruction and many activities to engage in real reading than being labeled and receiving instruction that focuses almost exclusively on skills." P. 127. There is ample research showing that children with reading problems need to be taught phonics skills. As noted earlier, these phonics skills are not all they need to be taught but phonics skills are necessary for reading in an alphabetic language like English.

Learning from Australia

Primary school teachers and university professors from Australia have prepared a document on teaching reading. Here is one of their recommendations:

"The Committee recommends that teachers provide systematic, direct and explicit phonics instruction so that children master the essential alphabetic code-breaking skills required for foundational reading proficiency. Equally, that teachers provide an integrated approach to reading that supports the development of oral language, vocabulary, grammar, reading fluency, comprehension and the literacies of new technologies."

The full report is available at the following web site
<http://www.dest.gov.au/nitl/report.htm>

Summary

The Primary Program draft document is inaccurate and misleading in the area of literacy. Hopefully, the document will undergo substantial revision in this area.