
Just stop it!

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“Their offers should not charm us,
Their evil gifts would harm us.”

(Goblin Market by Christina Rossetti)

Empty vessels make the most noise?

Some of us have been researching effective instruction for many decades; some of us have not.

Some of us have carried out dozens of true experiments in educational psychology and special education over many years; some of us have not.

Some of us know that many supposedly new, ‘innovative’ instructional practices were researched by behavioural psychologists many decades ago; some of us *clearly* do not.

Some of us know that new does not necessarily mean better; some of us do not.

Some of us believe in true evidence-based practice; some of us do not.

The effects of advanced phonemic awareness instruction in first grade

A recent article by Coyne et al. (2025) examined the effects of advanced phonemic awareness instruction on first-grade students’ literacy outcomes, specifically using the Heggerty Phonemic Awareness curriculum, with large student sample sizes.

“We randomly assigned 13 schools in a midsize district to treatment and control conditions. Treatment teachers (n= 26) implemented the Heggerty curriculum for 10–15 minutes per day during whole-class instruction for 35 weeks, and control teachers (n=20) continued with business-as-usual instruction.”

The program, which focuses on advanced phonemic awareness skills like deletion and substitution through sound-only activities without print, was implemented in seven treatment schools for 10–15 minutes daily over 35 weeks. Results showed significant improvements in phonemic awareness skills, with moderate to large effect sizes on the Phonemic Awareness Baseline Assessment. However, the curriculum did not lead to improvements in near-transfer measures of word reading, decoding or far-transfer measures of oral reading fluency. The researchers suggest that the lack of integration with letter–sound and phonics instruction may have limited the program’s effectiveness in supporting broader reading skills. Additionally, the study found no evidence that the curriculum was more beneficial for students with lower or higher initial literacy skills. Findings emphasise the importance of systematic foundational skills instruction that combines phonemic awareness with phonics and decoding.

This is an important finding given the ubiquity of phonemic awareness training in many recommended programs and texts, particularly those emanating from the United States and the Science of Reading movement. Mark Seidenberg has weighed in on this topic quite heavily. In a blog from November 2025, titled [Where did phonemic awareness training come from?](#), Seidenberg provides a very useful summary of the development of phonemic awareness activities and the emphasis on these in recommendations and sometimes even legislation in the US. He also points to different approaches adopted in the US and in England (and the UK).

What does Seidenberg say?

Mark Seidenberg comments on an earlier blog post:

“I know of zero evidence that older struggling readers benefit from ‘advanced’ phonemic awareness training. I know of no evidence that younger readers do, either. Performance on ‘advanced phonemic awareness’

tasks such as phoneme deletion and substitution is correlated with reading skill, but that is because it depends on reading skill, in particular, knowledge of relations between orthography and phonology. For older struggling readers I would say, you reach a point where you have to try something else. If an instructional approach has not been effective, merely doing more is not a good idea.”

More recently (2025), Seidenberg has specifically commented on popular books and programs:

“[P]honemic awareness instruction was promoted by educational authorities in the US who didn’t have the same influence in the UK. Each of the following resources is either recommended or required as part of the professional development stipulated in science of reading legislation in multiple states in the US.”

The first example Seidenberg gives is David Kilpatrick’s book, *Equipped for Reading Success* (EFRS). He quotes from EFRS:

“Remember: phonemes are oral and letters are written. Phoneme awareness has to do with sounds in spoken words. It has nothing directly to do with letters. It is an awareness of the sounds in spoken language,” p. 15.

“A good way to remember the difference between [phonics and phonemic awareness] is that you can do phoneme awareness with your eyes

closed but you cannot do phonics with your eyes closed,” p. 16.

Seidenberg also quotes from the manual for Heggerty, a popular multi-year phonemic awareness and phonics curriculum:

“Phonemic awareness: main focus is on phonemes or sounds; deals with spoken language; lessons are auditory; students work with manipulating sounds in words,” p. i.

Finally, Seidenberg quotes from Tolman and Moats, who are the authors of the LETRS teacher education program:

“Phonemic awareness activities [unlike phonics] do not involve print. They are listening and speaking activities; they can be done in the dark or with a blindfold on,” p. 93 3rd edition, unit 2.

Seidenberg continues:

“[T]reating phonemes as if they are units of spoken words with correct pronunciations is a mistake, and teaching phonemes without letters is the real ‘unnatural act’ in learning to read. I said there would be a second bit of evidence to consider about the best way to develop phonemic awareness; that would be the report of the National Reading Panel, which said: ‘Teaching PA with letters helps students acquire PA more effectively than teaching without letters. ... Teaching students to manipulate phonemes with letters yields larger effects than teaching students without letters,

not surprisingly because letters help children make the connection between PA and its application to reading,’” p. 2-41.

It seems that right back in 2000 with the report of the National Reading Panel we were on the right track.

Also useful in this debate is the latest Nomanis Note written by our colleague, Nicola Bell: Should phonemic awareness be taught without letters? In addition to referencing the work of Ehri (2014), Bell refers to two recent meta-analyses (2024) from Erbeli et al. and Stalega et al. and concludes that at this point there is no evidence-based rationale for withholding letter stimuli from students as they perform phonemic awareness tasks. This applies to typically developing readers and those with observed difficulties.

It would appear that we have clear direction from the research in this area. What is required is for us to take notice of it. We would recommend both of the recent Seidenberg and Bell contributions to readers.

Conclusion

We were among the first to query the efficacy of Kilpatrick’s PA program, many years ago now, and asked for supporting empirical evidence when it was first introduced. None was forthcoming then and nothing has changed since. Teaching phonemic awareness in isolation is simply ineffective as a form of reading instruction. So, why do schools continue to use programs like EFRS and Heggerty? They have been sold a pup and, as a consequence, valuable teaching time for reading instruction has been wasted for so many children for too many years. It is time to call a halt.

The answer is simple: Just stop it!

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