Teaching Phonemic Awareness "With Letters"
How Social Media is Getting it Wrong

There is a common belief circulating online that the U.S. National Reading Panel (NRP, 2000) downplayed the value of oral phonemic awareness activities and recommended that letters should be visible during phonemic awareness instruction. However, these notions do not reflect the findings of the NRP. Rather, they represent a "viral" social media misinterpretation of the NRP. Below are quotes from the NRP's full report that make this clear.

The NRP reviewed relevant experimental studies on phonemic awareness instruction and concluded that teaching phonemic awareness results in better reading and spelling outcomes than not teaching phonemic awareness. After this, they made non-experimental, correlational analyses of factors they thought were relevant for instruction (e.g., group size, grade level). One comparison was between instruction in which phonemic awareness was taught "with letters" vs. "without letters." Appendix F of their report indicates which studies were of each type.

The NRP never defined what they meant by teaching phonemic awareness "with letters" vs. "without letters." Social media filled that vacuum by interpreting those terms in a manner that is inconsistent with the studies the NRP reviewed. Fortunately, the Panel described several studies they categorized as teaching phonemic awareness "with letters." These descriptions make clear what they meant by that term.

The NRP gave descriptions of eight studies they categorized as teaching phonemic awareness "with letters." In each of these "with letters" studies, phonemic awareness was taught using oral activities. None of the eight "with letters" studies they described used letters as visible prompts in the initial phonemic awareness instruction. Thus, the term "with letters" did not mean "without oral activities" nor did it mean that letters were visually present during all or most of the phonemic awareness instruction. Rather, "with letters" meant that letters were incorporated at some point into the phonemic awareness instruction. The degree of involvement of letters varied from study to study. By contrast, the studies they described as teaching phonemic awareness "without letters" did not incorporate letters at any point in the instruction.

The first NRP quote below describes four "with letters" studies, all using the same program. The NRP said students received "extensive training" in phonemic awareness that was strictly oral. These were called "with letters" studies because letters supplemented the oral activities.

In Section 2 Page 37, the Panel wrote:

> Four studies in the NRP database implemented the ADD [i.e., Auditory Discrimination in Depth] program to teach PA[1] (Kennedy & Backman, 1993; McGuinness et al., 1995; Wise, Ring, & Olson, 1999; Wise, Ring, & Olson, 2000)[2]. Children received extensive training discovering and categorizing the various phonemes in English by analyzing their own mouth movements, often using mirrors. They learned to label these sounds, for example, lip poppers, tip tappers, and scrapers. They learned to track movements in spoken words in order to identify the separate phonemes and then to represent the phonemes with graphemes.

This quote is inconsistent with the belief that the NRP devalued oral phonemic awareness activities. On the contrary, oral activities were the instrumental means of teaching phonemic awareness. Of interest is the fact that on the page prior to the above quote, the NRP highlighted the value of a particular oral phonemic awareness activity:

> ". . . phoneme segmentation is difficult because there are no boundaries in speech telling us where one phoneme ends and the next begins. . . One very helpful way to identify separate phonemes is to monitor the changes that occur in the mouth as one pronounces words. This involves directing attention to the position and shape of the lips and tongue." (NICHD, 2000, 2-36).

Having students focus on mouth movements is one of several oral phonemic awareness activities used in the studies the NRP categorized as teaching phonemic awareness "with letters." Oral activities used in these studies included verbal-only activities or non-lettered tokens. They included segmentation, blending, deletion, and substitution. The following four descriptions the Panel provided of "with letters" studies illustrate this.

In Section 2 Page 35, 36, the Panel wrote:

> Williams (1980) developed and tested the ABDs program, which taught students ages 7 to 12 to segment and blend phonemes first in speech and then using letters. Children worked with a limited set of seven consonants and two vowels. Lessons progressed from segmenting words into syllables to segmenting words into phonemes, at first two phonemes and then three phonemes. Then blending was applied to the same words. Children performed manipulations with wooden markers at first and letters later on . . . More letters were added to the set later in the program.

In Section 2 Page 40, the Panel wrote:

> Castle et al. (1994) examined the contribution of PA training to reading acquisition in a whole language program. Kindergartners with low PA were assigned to treatment and control groups. PA training included segmentation, blending, substitution, and deletion. Letters were incorporated into the PA activities later in the program.

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[1] The NRP used "PA" to refer to *phonemic awareness*.

[2] The quote here was altered for accuracy. Twice the Panel mistyped *Ring* as *King*. Also, a citation as "in press" was changed to its actual publication date of 2000.

In Section 2 Page 35, the Panel also wrote:

A key activity in Blachman et al.'s (1994) program was the "say it and move it" procedure. Children learned to move a blank tile down a page as they pronounced each phoneme in a word. After children practiced segmenting two- and three-phoneme words in this way, letter-sound correspondences were taught and they practiced segmenting the words with blank markers and letters. Additional segmentation activities were included such as moving markers into Elkonin boxes to represent phonemes in three-phoneme words.

In Section 2 Page 40, the Panel wrote:

Hatcher et al. (1994) also examined whether adding PA training to a Reading Recovery© program would improve its success. The participants were 7-year-old poor readers. The PA training that was added to RR involved teaching children to perform different types of PA, including segmentation, blending, deletion, substitution, and transposition of phonemes. Children also practiced linking letters to phonemes in various spelling and writing tasks.

In the study just mentioned, the "with letters" group used the same oral activities as a "without letters" control group. The only difference in instruction is that the "with letters" group included letter activities in addition to those oral activities.

The above descriptions by the NRP of eight studies they said taught phonemic awareness "with letters" all indicate that phonemic awareness was taught using oral activities but supplemented by letters at a later point. This supplementation prompted the NRP to categorize these studies as teaching phonemic awareness "with letters."

It is clear from the NRP's statements that the social media interpretation is incorrect. The NRP never downplayed the value of oral phonemic awareness activities. On the contrary, they explicitly stated that oral activities were used in the "with letters" studies. Thus, the NRP's term "with letters" *could not have meant* that oral activities were absent or that letters were visually present during all or most of the phonemic awareness activities. When the Panel compared "with letters" studies (i.e., oral activities plus letters) to the "without letters" studies (i.e., letters never used) they concluded, based on a correlational analysis, that the former gets better results than the latter. It cannot possibly be concluded from this that they discouraged the use of oral activities in phonemic awareness instruction.

It should be clear, then, that while the NRP did not explicitly define the terms "with letters" vs. "without letters," they provided descriptions of eight "with letters" studies. These descriptions establish what they meant as well as what they *did not* mean. If letters were

incorporated at any point in the instruction, it was deemed a "with letters" study. When one examines all the studies the NRP reviewed (i.e., beyond the ones they described in the narrative), 80% of the studies listed in Appendix F as "with letters" studies used oral activities to teach phonemic awareness. In only 20%, letters were visible from the start. The 80% of "oral activities plus letters" studies were never compared with the 20% of "letters only" studies. Rather, they were grouped together and used to compare with studies in which letters were never used (i.e., the "without letters" studies).

We can conclude that contrary to discussions on social media, the NRP never downplayed the value of oral phonemic awareness activities. They had no reason to. The research on the effectiveness of oral activities to teach phonemic awareness is strong. Oral activities were included in 80% of the NRP's "with letters" studies. People on social media have misunderstood the meaning of the "with letters" category in the NRP report, and this leads them to mistakenly de-value oral phonemic awareness activities. This pervasive but inaccurate view is not based on the NRP's findings. The NRP never made a dichotomy between oral phonemic awareness activities and letters. On the contrary, oral activities and letters coexisted in the vast majority of the studies they considered as teaching phonemic awareness "with letters."

The quotes above show that anyone can check for themselves and see that the social media interpretation is incorrect. All one needs to do is (1) download the full NRP report, (2) check Appendix F, and (3) examine the NRP's descriptions of the "with letters" studies, as was done above. Those with access to the original studies the NRP reviewed will further see how mistaken the widespread social media misrepresentation is. Of special concern is that some university faculty have been uncritically passing along this misinterpretation on social media.

The unfortunate reality is that the NRP's findings are being undermined by an unchecked misinterpretation of the Panel's use of the term "with letters." The people who are promoting these misinterpretations are genuinely interested in helping students. They want to know the most effective way(s) to teach phonemic awareness. However, they are inadvertently promoting faulty information about the phonemic awareness instructional research that the NRP reviewed.

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