Copyright is owned by the Author of the thesis. Permission is given for a copy to be downloaded by an individual for the purpose of research and private study only. The thesis may not be reproduced elsewhere without the permission of the Author.
Whole Language and Phonics: Which Instructional Practices are Most Effective in Teaching At-Risk Students to Read?

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

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Tamara Ann Senior

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Abstract

A disproportionately large number of New Zealand students fail to learn to read. Results of recent international studies demonstrate that the gap between New Zealand’s highest- and lowest-achieving readers is wider than most other top-performing countries. Despite research showing the crucial role of explicit phonological-based instruction for children at risk of reading failure, the New Zealand education system continues to emphasise whole language teaching methods at the expense of explicit phonological instruction. Children from low socioeconomic backgrounds are at high risk of reading failure and are over-represented among New Zealand’s under-achieving readers. The current study investigated the extent to which teachers of beginning readers in low socioeconomic communities placed an emphasis on explicit phonological-based instruction. The relationship between teacher emphasis on phonological instruction and student progress in reading-related skills was also examined. Results demonstrated a significant relationship between teacher emphasis on phonological-based instruction and student progress in word reading whereby students receiving explicit phonological-based literacy instruction made superior progress in word reading skills over children receiving implicit phonological-based instruction. Moreover, analysis of standard deviation in class word reading scores over time demonstrated that a strong emphasis on explicit phonological instruction was associated with a reduction in class variation of word reading scores, while minimal emphasis on explicit phonological instruction was associated with increasing variability of class word reading scores. Correlation results indicated a relationship between word reading skills and phonological ability that strengthened over time. The study findings support previous research demonstrating that phonological awareness and decoding skills play a crucial role in the development of word reading ability and that explicit phonological-based instruction can attenuate differences in word reading development. Implications for teachers and policy makers are described.
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Dedication

Dedicated to my past new entrant students, all of whom were eager to learn to read but some of whom did not, despite - no, because of - my best efforts to provide them with a whole language literacy programme.
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