

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

Master of Educational Psychology

at Massey University, Manawatu  
New Zealand.

Tamara Ann Senior

2013

## 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.

## **Acknowledgements**

This thesis could not have been completed without the help of many people. Firstly, I would like to thank my supervisors Dr Alison Arrow and Dr Keith Greaney for their extensive advice and support throughout the year. I have realised many times over how vital their contribution has been to the project, and I am extremely grateful.

I would also like to thank the children for their participation and their parents for allowing it. I thank the school principals for their enthusiastic support of research into effective teaching methods. Most especially, I would like to thank the teachers who allowed me to interview them, to observe their instruction practice, and to withdraw their students for testing. The dedication and energy of every teacher was obvious; they truly do an amazing job.

Finally, I would like to thank my ever-loving family for their continual encouragement and support, including my Nana, who took me in after our house fire.

## **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.

# Table of Contents

<b>Abstract.....</b>	<b>iii</b>
<b>Acknowledgments.....</b>	<b>iv</b>
<b>Dedication.....</b>	<b>v</b>
<b>Table of Contents.....</b>	<b>vi</b>
<b>List of Figures.....</b>	<b>ix</b>
<b>List of Tables.....</b>	<b>x</b>
<b>Chapter 1: Introduction.....</b>	<b>11</b>
Rationale.....	13
Overview.....	13
<b>Chapter 2: Literature Review.....</b>	<b>15</b>
<i>Theories of Reading and Reading Development.....</i>	<i>15</i>
<i>Theories of Reading: Searchlights and the Simple View of Reading.....</i>	<i>15</i>
<i>Reading Development.....</i>	<i>17</i>
Children at Risk of Reading Failure: Instructional Requirements.....	25
<i>Children at Risk of Reading Failure.....</i>	<i>25</i>
<i>Impact of Schooling.....</i>	<i>28</i>
<i>Explicit and Systematic Instruction.....</i>	<i>30</i>
<i>Intensity of Instruction.....</i>	<i>32</i>
<i>Skills in Isolation and Practice in Context.....</i>	<i>32</i>

Reading Instruction in New Zealand.....	36
<i>Whole Language Heritage</i> .....	36
<i>Reading Recovery</i> .....	38
<i>Assessment of New Entrant Children</i> .....	39
<i>Multiple Cues Theory and Ready to Read Texts</i> .....	41
Conclusion.....	43
<b>Chapter 3: Method</b> .....	<b>45</b>
Research Design.....	45
Participants and Setting.....	46
Materials and Procedures.....	49
<b>Chapter 4: Results</b> .....	<b>56</b>
Systematic Teacher Observations.....	57
Teacher Interviews and Narrative Observations.....	61
<i>Literacy Programme Emphasis</i> .....	61
<i>Planning</i> .....	65
<i>Reading Cues</i> .....	68
<i>Assessment</i> .....	69
Student Progress in Reading-Related Measures.....	71
Instruction over Time: Effect on Student Progress.....	74
Instruction and the Development of Reading-Related Skills.....	76

Reducing the Gap between Low- and High-Achieving Students.....	77
Summary.....	80
<b>Chapter 5: Discussion.....</b>	<b>83</b>
Teaching Practices.....	84
Student Progress in Reading-Related Skills Development.....	87
Summary.....	93
<b>Chapter 6: Conclusion.....</b>	<b>95</b>
Implications.....	95
Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research.....	98
Further Recommendations for Research.....	101
Final Statement.....	102
<b>References.....</b>	<b>104</b>
<b>Appendices.....</b>	<b>110</b>
Appendix A.....	111
Appendix B.....	115
Appendix C.....	118
Appendix D.....	121

## List of Figures

Figure 1: Multiple cues diagram.....	16
Figure 2: The simple view of reading.....	17
Figure 3: The embedded mixed methods design (taken from Creswell, 2008, p. 557)... ..	45
Figure 4: Standard score deviations within Class A at Time 1 and Time 2.....	79
Figure 5: Standard score deviations within Class I at Time 1 and Time 2.....	81

## List of Tables

Table 1: Experience and training of participating teachers.....	47
Table 2: Demographics of participating class groups.....	49
Table 3: Combined groups mean percentages of time spent using different instructional methods.....	58
Table 4: Explicit Group percentages of time spent using different instructional methods.....	59
Table 5: Implicit Group percentages of time spent using different instructional methods.....	60
Table 6: Group scores on reading-related measures at Time 1 and Time 2.....	73
Table 7: Inter-item correlation matrix for Time 1.....	76
Table 8: Inter-item correlation matrix for Time 2.....	77