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PHONICS and WHOLE LANGUAGE: Working Together to Accomplish a Common Goal

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ABSTRACT

Phonics-based reading instruction teaches children to break down unfamiliar words into smaller parts and blend them to form complete words, using letter-sound relationships as a decoding strategy. This approach builds on the understanding that 26 letters represent about 44 speech sounds, with roughly 70 common spellings for those sounds. Phonics instruction is considered one of the most effective ways to prepare children for reading by building foundational skills like phonemic awareness, letter recognition, and decoding. Mastery of phonics supports early reading success by helping students understand how written letters correspond to spoken sounds and how to apply rules to recognize words. While phonics is essential, effective reading instruction should also include whole language elements, as both are needed to develop reading comprehension and overall literacy proficiency. Curriculum Associates' I-Ready Reading Program is an adaptive, technological reading program that combines theory with practice to provide students in grades K-8 with reading intervention skills to develop and improve vocabulary and reading comprehension proficiency.

1. Introduction

Phonics-based reading instruction is grounded in children learning to break unfamiliar words into smaller parts and blend them to form whole words. By teaching letter-sound relationships, educators equip students with a decoding strategy they can use when encountering new or unfamiliar words. This decoding system comprises twenty-six letters that symbolize about forty-four English speech sounds. There are seventy most common spellings for these forty-four sounds. Even though this is not a set method for instructing reading, educators consider phonetic reading one of the best ways to prepare children for reading by teaching them letters and phonemic awareness. Phonics skill is a fundamental goal to aid beginning readers in achievement. Phonics rules are the generalizations about how letters in written words represent speech sounds in spoken words. For example, three phonics rules govern how the letter's s-i-t represents the speech sounds /s/ /i/ /t/. Phonemic approaches to reading provide a total understanding of phonetics. Using phonics approaches is essential if students are to develop an understanding of phonological and phonemic awareness, phonetic word recognition, morphology, alphabet principles, letter sounds, and fluency and decoding. Reading comprehension requires the coordination of phonics and whole language. Groff (1998) defined whole language as "whole word memorization linked to authentic literature books the children are required to read." Therefore, teachers must incorporate both into their reading instruction if a child is to become academically proficient.

This article provides a brief review of the implementation and benefits of phonics approaches in teaching reading to enhance comprehension.

2. What is Most Effective: Implicit or Explicit?

2.1 Phonics Instruction

Reading comprehension is viewed as one of the most challenging cognitive skills; however, students can achieve success with effective strategies and proper support. Phonics is a powerful tool in any child's preparation for reading readiness. Groff's (1999) letter to *Education Week* emphasized the crucial role of direct and systematic phonics instruction in helping children accurately recognize words. He points out that the real debate in reading education is not about choosing between literature and phonics, but rather about how children should learn to identify written words. The child will benefit significantly by learning forty-four sounds or at least half of those forty-four sounds (Groff, 1999). They will help children understand those bigger words when reading. Reading strategy instruction aims to help students actively check how they pronounce words and use suitable strategies to understand the word and the text's overall meaning.

Research contends that explicit phonics instruction is the most efficient method, stressing that children must recognize words precisely, without relying on guessing. The findings in Groff's (1999) research contrasted this with less structured methods that depend on using context to figure out words, an approach he believes results in unreliable and ineffective reading strategies. Structured phonics instruction offers a more trustworthy route to developing fluent and accurate reading skills. Groff's (1999) views were consistent with research that conveyed that a child's knowledge of letters and phonemic awareness relates closely to their later learning to read.

2.2 Implicit Phonics

The national debate over implicit and explicit phonics instruction in K–8 education focuses on the most effective way to teach children to read, especially in terms of how they develop decoding and word recognition skills. Hiskes (1998) investigated using explicit or implicit phonics as two essential ways to teach phonics that will correspond to developing good reading skills: implicitly and explicitly. Hiskes's (1998) *Right to Read* report, *"Explicit or Implicit Phonics: 'Therein Lies the Rub,'* explored the role and effectiveness of using either analytical (implicit) or synthetic (explicit) phonics in classroom instruction. Her analysis clarified the ongoing national debate about reading education by examining which phonics approach best supports children's learning. The report opened with a clear explanation of the differences between explicit and implicit phonics and then moved on to unpack the broader controversy surrounding phonics instruction in literacy education.

To clarify the debate, she explained that implicit phonics relies on pattern recognition, context, and word memorization. "Implicit" phonics is said to be the most commonly taught form of phonics in school. It moves the learner from the whole to the smallest parts; "blending-and-building" is not usually taught (Hiskes, 1998). Implicit (analytic) phonics begins with whole words and helps students indirectly recognize patterns rather than teaching individual letter-sound relationships separately. Furthermore, the research shows that implicit phonics encourages students to rely more on context clues and visual cues than on decoding, a method commonly linked to struggling readers. Groff (1999) concurred and was often critical of implicit phonics instruction. This way of teaching phonics is not practical. It should take the learner from the smallest part to the whole. Some limitations of the implicit phonics approach include:

- Relies on children having prior phonemic awareness—a skill many lack—so it may implicitly assume what it should teach
- Promotes use of context and visuals over decoding, a strategy often associated with poor readers (Hiskes, 1998).

2.3 Gradual release with Explicit Phonics

Explicit phonics instruction is a critical step leading to a balanced "whole language reading". This approach to phonics instruction gradually develops students' knowledge and application of both oral and written language. According to Hiskes (1998), explicit (synthetic) phonics introduces phonemes individually, then teaches blending to form words. This method transitions students first from letters and their sounds and then builds and recombines them into syllables and words. Scientific research has demonstrated that explicit phonics is the most effective for all students. Educators widely recognize explicit and systematic phonics instruction in grades K–3 as one of the most effective methods for helping children become proficient readers.

According to Ehri (2022), developing phonemic awareness—specifically the ability to manipulate sounds in words—must be taught directly in the early years to strengthen phonics instruction. This approach is crucial in preventing reading challenges and promoting equitable access to early literacy. Her research emphasized that explicit teaching of early phonemic awareness skills—such as blending and segmenting sounds—is crucial for helping students link sounds to letters, develop their sight-word knowledge, and decode unfamiliar words independently. It is especially beneficial for students who struggle with reading, including those with dyslexia and English language learners. Teaching children how to link letters (graphemes) to their corresponding sounds (phonemes) lays the essential groundwork for reading fluency. It is also best for those emergent learners because it builds from part to whole. Teaching reading and incorporating this type of phonics into a lesson will allow students to grasp the most common letters and sounds to make reading easier. It moves the learner from the smallest parts to the whole. Some benefits of explicit phonics

- Research consistently shows that systematic, explicit phonics is more effective, especially for English learners and struggling readers.
- Beginning with phoneme-level instruction helps children grasp the alphabetic principle efficiently (Hiskes, 1998).

The findings in Ehri's (2022) research revealed that to make connections and remember words, readers need specific essential skills. They must have phonemic awareness, especially the ability to segment and blend sounds, and understand the writing system's key relationships between letters and sounds. Teachers who promote explicit instruction throughout instruction build students':

- Foundational for reading by developing their phonemic connections
- Phonemic and grapheme–phoneme awareness by teaching them to recognize and manipulate sounds
- Automatic word reading through systematic phonics instruction (Ehri, 2022).

English is like technology; it is constantly changing, and there are many pronunciations for one word; therefore, phonics is a suitable way to decode a word. Phonics instruction offers several benefits, including improved pronunciation and word recognition. This method allows children to apply phonics formulas repeatedly, enhancing their spelling skills more effectively than the memorization and guesswork of whole language. Students can consistently apply phonics rules, which makes them far more effective for improving spelling than relying on memorization and guessing, as used in whole-language methods. Educators teach children strategies to help them sound out and decode unfamiliar words. "Ultimately, phonics instruction aims to equip children with knowledge and strategies to use generatively" (Piasta et al., 2018).

2.4 The Downside to Implementing Phonics

Still, phonics instruction is not without criticism. Some potential downsides to utilizing phonics are apparent when reading is taught solely through phonics; students may struggle with overall comprehension because they are too focused on breaking words into parts. Critics argue that phonics' structured rules and repetitive nature can make reading seem tedious and restrictive. In addition, instruction can sometimes become overly focused on repetition and drills. Furthermore, if students prioritize decoding over meaning, it may reduce their enjoyment of reading and disconnect them from engaging with literature.

In conclusion, teaching preschool children to recognize printed letters is crucial. Although most printed material is either upper or lowercase, a child must know how to identify and pronounce the letters. Phonemic awareness is vital

for every child to learn. Children consciously understand that spoken words consist of individual speech sounds. Therefore, children must develop phonemic awareness to learn to read more effectively and acquire phonics sounds.

3. All or Nothing

3.1 Whole Language Instruction for Improving Literacy

The whole language instruction emphasizes understanding a text's overall meaning and natural flow, focusing on reading as a meaningful activity connected to students' personal and cultural experiences. In whole language classrooms, the focus is on the reading process rather than the outcome. Unlike phonics, which relies on sounding out words, whole language encourages students to interpret unfamiliar words by using clues from the broader context of what they are reading. Approaches typically associated with whole language may include:

1. Three-Cueing System – Encouraging students to guess words based on:
    - Semantic cues (meaning/context of the sentence)
    - Syntactic cues (grammar or sentence structure)
    - Graphophonic cues (visual clues from letters)
2. Context Clue Reliance – Urging students to infer a word's identity by looking at the pictures, storyline, or the first few letters, rather than decoding it phonetically.
3. Memorization of Whole Words – Emphasizing the visual memorization of entire words instead of teaching students to decode them using sound-letter relationships (Groff, 1999).

Groff (1999) and Hiskes (1998) oppose these less structured methods. These methods encourage students to guess at unfamiliar words instead of employing phonics-based decoding strategies. According to Groff (1999), these strategies are unreliable and ineffective, particularly for students who struggle with reading, because they lack a consistent, repeatable approach for decoding new words. Unlike phonics, whole language is a professional and explicit theory in practice. Neither theory is divorced from practice, nor is practice blind to its theory. Whole language weaves a theoretical view of language, language learning, and learning into a particular stance on education. Its language and language acquisition beliefs are based primarily on recent research and theory building in linguistics, social linguistics, and cognitive psychology.

3.2 Misconceptions of Utilizing Whole Language Instruction

A key whole language belief is that reading and writing are learned through reading and writing, not through doing reading and writing exercises. Whole language teachers do not rely on materials written "for instructional purposes." They use genuine texts, such as children's literature, recipes, song lyrics, dictionaries, etc. Purpose and meaning are critical differences between reading or writing and going through an exercise. Whole language educators know that all oral and written language events have some purpose and meaning. "Another whole language premise is that process, product, and content are interrelated" (Manning, 1990). While whole language educators focus on the processes behind reading, writing, and understanding, they acknowledge that products—and the events that create them—primarily shape and influence those processes. Language use and learning are always about something; to the speakers and the readers, “some things" are essential. Therefore, whole language classrooms provide content-rich curricula where language and thinking can be about interesting and significant content, both traditionally accepted and newly created knowledge, but most importantly, about content subjected to critical analysis.

The whole language tenet is respect for and trust of teachers and learners. In the professional theory, learners and teachers can direct their educational lives (Gonzales, 1993). They are active, problem-formulating, problem-solving, social beings interacting in a particular cultural and historical milieu. They connect their teaching and learning to external communities, and the communities they build together, along with the curricula they create collaboratively, support their educational practices. Whole language educators try to connect with a learning context in which reading and writing become tools for learning about the world. The list below describes ways to discover the world:

- Language and language learning are social activities; they occur best in situations encouraging discussion and sharing knowledge and ideas.
- Language learning necessarily involves the risk of trying new strategies; error is inherent in the process.
- Reading and writing are context-specific; students' understanding of reading and writing reflects their learning situation.
- Choice is an essential element for learning; there must be opportunities for students to choose what to read and what to write about.

"Whole language" activities help students engage with all facets of language. They develop reading and writing skills through listening, learn about writing by reading, and deepen their understanding of reading through writing experiences (Salavert, 1988).

Achieving a whole language facility through a good school program is the shared responsibility of the community, parents, educators, and students themselves. A school program of whole language enables every girl and boy to move toward student-centered goals. It recognizes each student's need for identity, understanding, and appreciation, and provides proficiency in listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills. It offers relevant experiences in whole language and tailors instruction to the individual. It provides diagnostic and prescriptive teaching regarding assessed strengths and weaknesses involving teacher-made and standardized tests, encourages students to evaluate their progress, and provides a rich environment, friendly, orderly, and non-threatening, always accepting the student as a person of worth and dignity.

3.3 Grouping through Whole Language

Many educators and researchers believe that students achieve learning through active participation and hands-on experience. Whole language educators firmly believe that people learn by combining action with reflection and that learners actively engage in their learning process. When teaching, whole language grouping is essential. "The most important aspect of grouping in a whole language classroom is flexibility" (Yatvin, 1992). Groups will motivate and support children in their work only if they are suited to the members' tasks and personal needs. To maintain this delicate balance, teachers must be ready to make small changes, reconstitute entire groups, or go to a different grouping pattern at any time. Flexibility is significant considering children's previous experiences in traditional classrooms, where belonging to a group is emphasized. The size and composition of small groups vary in whole language classrooms, with ten people the maximum size, and heterogeneity is the most common type of composition. Educators can organize a heterogeneous group based on shared interests, social connections, complementary work styles, or even at random. The purpose is the deciding factor.

Whole class, small group, partnerships, and individual-child-like units are all effective learning groups in a whole language classroom. Teachers should use whole-class grouping for activities like sharing general information, holding class meetings, and conducting performances, not for teaching new concepts or processes.

Partnerships are a very productive grouping structure, but they demand much practice for children to know how to use them well. One child naturally tends to do most of the decision-making and work. Furthermore, since it is difficult for the teacher to monitor all the partnerships working simultaneously, inequalities may go unremedied and unnoticed. Like phonics, there are pros and cons to utilizing the whole language strategy for teaching reading. Some instructional benefits of using the whole language theory.

- Introducing literature early on helps make reading enjoyable from the beginning.
- Students encounter new words within meaningful contexts, aiming to build overall comprehension.
- Educators believe whole language learning enhances text comprehension while offering a more engaging and imaginative approach to reading.

However, the downside to implementing the whole language theory may include the following:

- Whole language learning may sacrifice precision and correctness in spoken language.
- A child may receive high scores for "overall language use" despite having numerous spelling errors.

- If they "skip" words, they may never learn them.
- When the teachers do not thoroughly teach students how to decode (phonics) the alphabet.

The educational theory known as whole language suggests that spoken language principles also apply to written language, including reading and writing (Steeley, 1992). A whole language view of learning also attends to the social and hypothesizing characteristics of learning and the importance of direct experience. As a professional theory, whole language incorporates and adheres to these theoretical perspectives, adapting as new knowledge emerges. Additionally, it is a deep-rooted commitment and requires innovative and creative teachers willing to travel into virgin territories and apply themselves vigorously.

Teachers must incorporate phonics and whole language into their daily instruction to adequately teach students how to read and comprehend. Together is the most effective way to improve students' reading and increase their proficiency levels. Whole language is an approach to reading that keeps language whole, not fragmented into 'skills', and even though phonics is not a complete reading program, it is a valuable aid to word recognition when used with other skills. However, it is only one valuable skill among many. More importantly, if beginning readers can attain an approximate pronunciation of a written word by applying phonics generalizations, they can go on to infer the proper pronunciation of the word.

4. Improving Literacy

4.1 The I-Ready Reading Intervention

Groff (1999), Hiskes (1998), and Ehri (2022) agree that phonemic instruction should follow a clear, systematic progression and be taught by educators knowledgeable in the science of reading. In addition to promoting reading proficiency, they emphasize that incorporating interactive and student-centered methods for word learning makes phonics instruction more engaging and suitable for young learners. Technology is a suitable way to enhance learning. I-Ready Reading is a technological, interactive form of instruction. It is an excellent way to provide tiered instruction, engage learners in word development, and build inferences from written text. This academic platform is immersed in student engagement and provides a comprehensive monitoring system guaranteed to spike student accountability.

The I-Ready Reading Program offers a combination of literacy instruction in its intervention program to enhance students' reading comprehension and improve their overall academic proficiency. Curriculum Associates designed this program in 1969, "To make classrooms better places for teachers and students" (Curriculum Associates, 2024). This textbook company's mission is to empower teachers with innovative and exciting products that give every student the chance to succeed academically.

Developing reading skills is a significant focus of a child's early academic life (Holzman et al., 2025). I-Ready is an all-in-one, adaptive digital reading program created to enhance literacy instruction, accurately screen, assess, monitor student growth, and predict student scores on a state assessment, while providing personalized learning based on student performance data (Curriculum Associates, 2024). I-Ready Reading reinforces core literacy skills and supports key literacy domains: phonological awareness, phonics, high-frequency words, vocabulary, literature and informational text comprehension, fluency, writing, and language skills. These foundational and advanced literacy skills are scaffolded and personalized based on the student's current level of proficiency.

4.2 Phonological Awareness

Speech development affects reading success. Raposo-Rivas, Halabi-Echeverry, Sarmiento, and García-Fuentes (2024) found that technology-based phonological awareness programs produce notable improvements in early literacy skills. The I-Ready Reading intervention program focuses on phonological awareness instruction, which aids students in recognizing and manipulating sounds in spoken language. Primarily targeted in K-1 but included for remediation in the upper grades are skills such as rhyming, syllable segmentation, onset-rime, and phoneme isolation. This skill is crucial for developing strong readers. An exploratory mixed-methods case study assessed the effectiveness of a parent-implemented phonological awareness program delivered at home with preschool children.

According to Bennett, H., Denston, A., & Arrow, A. (2023), the program consisted of easily accessible phonological activities centered on phoneme identification, blending, and segmentation. The study underscored the value of empowering parents as effective facilitators of early literacy development and demonstrated that focused phonological awareness training can yield meaningful gains in emergent reading skills.

Teachers do not explicitly teach accelerated early literacy skills such as phoneme identification and manipulation, blending, and segmenting. The findings in this study revealed that to ensure adequate implementation, parents facilitated following coaching and modeling provided by the researchers, which provided the explicit guidance of skills and support to parents during the intervention period (Bennett et al., 2023). In addition to enhanced engagement in literacy, as participation increased, children's interest in reading and writing increased. Children's speech enunciation also increased. According to parent reports, speech, confidence, and overall engagement positively impacted articulation (Bennett et al., 2023). Raposo-Rivas et al. (2024) conducted a meta-analysis demonstrating that technology-enhanced phonological awareness (PA) interventions significantly improve foundational literacy skills, particularly when they are adaptive, interactive, and consistently implemented. The I-Ready reading platform incorporates these evidence-based features through its adaptive diagnostic assessment and personalized lesson delivery, enabling targeted PA instruction that adjusts in real time to student performance.

4.3 Phonics

Phonological awareness and phonics are essential for children's ability to develop a strong sight word vocabulary, enabling them to recognize frequently used words quickly and automatically. These skills are critical for fostering reading fluency and supporting deeper comprehension. I-Ready is a program designed to develop students' reading fluency by providing explicit, systematic instruction rooted in the principles of the Science of Reading (Curriculum Associates, 2024). The key to reading fluency is phonics instruction. Skills such as blending, segmenting, decoding multisyllabic words, and word patterns are reinforced by this program. Understanding letter-sound relationships and decoding words is crucial for recognizing and pronouncing high-frequency words. In the early stages of reading development, decoding skills have a stronger link to reading comprehension than linguistic competence (Elleman & Oslund, 2019).

Phonological awareness and phonics, while closely related, are distinct yet essential pillars of early reading instruction. Their effectiveness hinges on teachers' strategic knowledge and implementation, supported by a deep understanding of how these skills work together to drive reading development. As Piasta et al. (2022) explain, these components form the critical bridge between decoding written words and accessing their meaning—an indispensable step toward fluent, comprehension-focused reading. To deliver this effectively, educators must possess strong disciplinary knowledge, including expertise in language structure (orthography, phonology, morphology), the processes involved in reading, and evidence-based instructional delivery grounded in the Science of Reading (Piasta & Hudson, 2018). Explicit and systematic instruction in phonological awareness and phonics is vital for students whose linguistic backgrounds differ from standard academic English, including English learners. When teaching is responsive to students' language experiences and integrates structured phonics instruction, it boosts literacy outcomes and promotes equity in the classroom.

4.4 Vocabulary

Vocabulary instruction plays a critical role in developing children's reading comprehension skills, with early vocabulary proficiency serving as a strong predictor of later reading success in school (Garden, 2022). Therefore, after mastering phonological and phonics awareness, the I-Ready monitoring system will transition the student to vocabulary instruction. Expanding students' understanding of word meanings across diverse contexts equips them to recognize and interpret synonyms, antonyms, word parts (prefixes, suffixes, roots), and the nuanced multiple meanings words can convey. Research consistently shows that vocabulary, inference skills, and background knowledge play direct and indirect roles in shaping reading comprehension from adolescence through young adulthood (Elleman et al., 2019). By the end of third grade, educators expect students to have mastered the foundational literacy skills needed to read grade-level texts; lacking these skills places them at significant risk for academic failure (Garden, 2022).

4.5 Comprehension

After children begin reading independently, their vocabulary growth relies primarily on exposure to written text rather than on oral language or direct instruction (Elleman et al., 2019). I-Ready introduces text to students to develop vocabulary skills and build on prior knowledge to enhance comprehension. Through interactive practice and exercises, the program reinforces vocabulary using everyday language and real-world connections (Curriculum Associates, 2025). I-Ready's adaptive interactive lessons are tailored to each student's skill level. Each lesson provides explicit instruction targeted to address their specific deficits.

These lessons provide strategies to assist students with understanding skills such as identifying themes, character analysis, plot structure, and making inferences while interpreting literary texts. The strategies that the program prompts students to employ require students to use context clues to decode the meanings of unfamiliar words. In the area of informational text, skills such as identifying main idea and details, text structure, author's purpose, and citing evidence are reinforced by analyzing nonfiction and expository texts. This stage in children's reading development is critical. Fluency is indirectly supported. Writing and language skills are embedded within comprehension and vocabulary lessons. These skills reiterate grammar, sentence structure, and the importance of including textual evidence while constructing text-based writing prompts.

4.6 Implementation

I-Ready's implementation requires careful planning and adherence to several key components to ensure effective use in schools. Educators must receive professional development to understand the platform's diagnostic assessments, individualized learning paths, and data interpretation features. Classrooms need reliable technology, including devices for each student and stable internet connectivity, since I-Ready is fully digital and adaptive. Schools should establish a consistent schedule for diagnostic tests, progress monitoring, and guided instruction to align with instructional goals. Administrators must develop systems for analyzing student data to inform differentiated instruction and targeted interventions.

Successful implementation also depends on ongoing teacher support, collaboration, and integration of I-Ready lessons with existing literacy curricula to reinforce skills rather than replace classroom instruction. For daily use, I-Ready recommends 20–45 minutes per student per day for personalized instructional lessons, with younger students requiring shorter sessions and older students able to handle longer periods of focused digital instruction. Weekly, schools often aim for 2–3 sessions per student, totaling about 45–90 minutes of instruction in addition to diagnostic assessments. Teachers must administer diagnostic tests three times per year—fall, winter, and spring—take 45–60 minutes per session, and help adjust the program while tracking student growth. By combining structured professional development, consistent scheduling, reliable technology, and data-driven instruction, I-Ready provides a balanced approach that supports both foundational literacy skills and higher-order comprehension. Careful adherence to these requirements ensures that I-Ready functions as an effective, personalized, and data-driven tool for promoting student literacy growth.

5. Federal Reforms

For over fifty years, the United States has been waging a war on literacy. Now, more than ever, educators and policymakers are seeking the most beneficial way of teaching and improving students' reading and comprehension skills (Hill, 2016). Developing knowledge and vocabulary takes time. Strategic vocabulary instruction must start as early as possible. Scrutinized by many yet utilized by policymakers, Coleman's (1966) Equality of Educational Opportunity Study has been the driving force behind many educational reforms designed to improve literacy.

5.1 Literacy Acts

Political reforms such as the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA) provided aid to impoverished schools through its establishment of Title I. The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) focused on literacy proficiency, funding, instructional resources, and professional development. This act mandated States to establish reading instructional programs that utilized proven research-based best practices to assess the effectiveness of

intervention instruction. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEA) addressed the implementation of special education and refers to RTI. Instead of relying on the traditional discrepancy model, the implementation of special education services increasingly follows RTI/MTSS protocols, which use systematic progress monitoring and data-based decision-making to determine whether a student has a learning disability (Addison & Warger, 2011). The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, 2015) governed K–12 education in the United States by guaranteeing that every student—including English learners, students with disabilities, and those from underserved backgrounds—has access to a high-quality education, literacy frameworks such as R.T.I./M.T.S.S. were developed to assist educators with providing an equitable education to all students.

To ensure that students' rates of learning are not reduced and do not exacerbate the achievement gap, public school systems must implement RTI/M.T.S.S. Response to Intervention (RTI) and Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) are "a comprehensive continuum of evidence-based, systematic practices to support a rapid response to students' needs, with regular observation to facilitate data-based instruction decision making" (Zirkel, 2020). They serve as structured models for providing tiered, data-driven interventions that address both academic and behavioral needs. Using a three-tiered model of interventions, teachers examine students, implement best-practice instructional strategies, assess progress, and remediate students' reading difficulties. Tier 1: the baseline level of universal interventions designed to meet the behavioral and emotional needs of most students in the school setting; Tier 2: Targeted support for struggling students in general education classrooms in addition to providing behavioral strategies and Tier 3: The most intensive behavioral support available in a school and is reserved for students with chronic and severe behavioral and academic problems (AIR, 2025).

6. Implications for Policy

6.1 Curriculum and Instruction

Integrate I-Ready Reading across all subjects to strengthen literacy skills in authentic contexts. Use adaptive lessons to differentiate instruction for phonics, vocabulary, and comprehension. Embed reading strategies in science, social studies, and math to support cross-curricular literacy. Provide professional development to help teachers combine phonics and whole language approaches effectively. Incorporate collaborative activities and discussions to reinforce comprehension and engagement.

6.2 Assessment

Leverage I-Ready diagnostics for universal screening, progress monitoring, and targeted intervention. Use assessment data to adjust lesson pacing and scaffold instruction for struggling readers. Employ formative assessments, such as quizzes and text-based discussions, to inform teaching decisions. Analyze longitudinal data to evaluate curriculum and implementation effectiveness and inform resource allocation. Ensure that assessment practices remain responsive to student growth and learning needs.

6.3 Research to Practice

Apply evidence-based strategies from the Science of Reading using I-Ready's adaptive tools. Regularly review assessment reports to identify high-impact instructional practices. Collaborate with literacy specialists to translate research into classroom research-based instructional strategies. Utilize I-Ready data to establish a feedback loop that connects research, instruction, and student outcomes. Embed literacy practices across the curriculum to ensure equitable, effective comprehension instruction.

6.4 Closing Remarks

Phonics is the act of teaching children how to decode letters into speech. It is of foremost importance in learning to read. In contrast, the whole language approach is an educational philosophy that integrates reading and writing instruction within rich, meaningful experiences. They represent two essential dimensions of literacy instruction. Phonics provides students with the systematic foundation for decoding and word recognition, while whole language emphasizes comprehension, meaning-making, and authentic engagement with text.

Combined, these approaches offer a balanced pathway to reading proficiency, addressing foundational skills and higher-order literacy development. A student's ability to comprehend text improves significantly when educators combine phonics instruction with word-level reading and spelling skills (Piasta & Hudson, 2018). Together, they effectively reinforce the skills and provide a range of supportive strategies needed to develop strong readers. The

integration of these skills, while teaching reading, is particularly critical for closing the achievement gap, as students from diverse backgrounds require both explicit skill instruction and meaningful opportunities to engage with texts.

I-Ready's adaptive intervention program supports this dual emphasis by delivering personalized, data-driven instruction that reinforces phonics and phonological awareness while embedding vocabulary and comprehension practice. By combining the strengths of both instructional philosophies within a Response to Intervention (RTI) or Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) framework, I-Ready enables schools to provide equitable, targeted interventions that foster literacy growth for all learners. The program is a diagnostic and instructional tool, offering universal screening, progress monitoring, and adaptive lessons tailored to individual student needs. Its design, grounded in the Science of Reading, ensures that instruction is explicit, systematic, and responsive to learners at different proficiency levels.

This approach aligns directly with the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, 2015), which emphasizes evidence-based practices to ensure all students—including English learners, students with disabilities, and those from disadvantaged backgrounds—receive a high-quality education. Within this policy framework, RTI and MTSS are structured models for tiered, data-driven interventions that address academic and behavioral needs. Schools fulfill ESSA's mandate for equitable, research-based literacy instruction by embedding I-Ready into these frameworks. Ultimately, I-Ready's adaptive technology, coupled with integrating phonics and whole language principles, provides a comprehensive solution for supporting literacy development, closing achievement gaps, and ensuring students reach grade-level proficiency.

Effective implementation of this intervention program is essential for academic success. Teachers can use the results to guide instruction and promote measurable academic growth by monitoring student progress and analyzing the data. As students gain a stronger grasp of word structures—such as sounds, patterns, and spelling conventions- their reading becomes more efficient, allowing them to process text more easily and ultimately enhance their overall understanding. Once students master decoding, linguistic comprehension becomes a stronger predictor of reading comprehension.

Key Points

- Phonics and whole language complement each other: Phonics builds systematic decoding and word recognition skills, while whole language emphasizes comprehension, meaning-making, and engagement with authentic texts. Together, they create a balanced approach to literacy.
- Integration addresses the achievement gap: Combining phonics and whole language is particularly important for students from diverse backgrounds, ensuring they receive explicit skill instruction and meaningful text experiences.
- I-Ready supports personalized literacy growth: The program delivers adaptive, data-driven instruction that reinforces phonological awareness while supporting vocabulary and comprehension development.
- Alignment with RTI/MTSS and ESSA: I-Ready functions within Response to Intervention (RTI) or Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) frameworks, providing tiered, evidence-based interventions that align with federal mandates for equitable, research-backed instruction.
- Comprehensive, science-based design: Grounded in the Science of Reading, I-Ready offers diagnostic assessments, progress monitoring, and adaptive lessons, ensuring explicit, systematic instruction tailored to individual student needs and helping students reach grade-level proficiency.

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