

Martin's Musings

Why Kids Can't Read, and What You Can Do About It

Imagine an epidemic of smallpox. If your child is not immunized, odds are 50/50 he or she will get smallpox and suffer life-long damage. Luckily, there's an effective vaccine. The Public Health Center in your town has the vaccine but the staff won't use it. Why not? Because everyone in the Public Health Center believes immunization is a bad thing.

They say, "Using the vaccine is against our philosophy."

You say, "But how will children become immune to smallpox!?"

They say, "Children naturally become immune to smallpox. They don't need a shot. In fact, the shot is bad for them—even if it gives them immunity."

You say, "But half the children who aren't immunized will get smallpox!"

They say, "Well, not everyone naturally becomes immune. Some children don't become immune because they don't get enough support from their families. And sometimes it's a cultural thing. In other words, if children get smallpox, it's not our fault."

This sounds bizarre to you, but you figure, "I'm JUST a parent. What do I know? They're the experts." So you put your child's life in their hands. And your child gets smallpox. Then you find out that Public Health Centers in other counties and other states DO immunize children, and almost NONE of these children get smallpox. In other words, YOUR Public Health Center has destroyed your child.

How does THAT make you feel? What are you going to do about it? It's too late, though, isn't it?

This is exactly the situation in reading. Anywhere from 25 to 50% of children do NOT learn to read well. In fact, children struggling at the end of FIRST grade continue struggling in fourth grade and in eighth grade. In other words, poor readers at the end of first grade are very likely to remain poor readers. And this means low self-esteem ("I'm a dummy."), shame ("Something's wrong with me. I have dyslexia."), and failure to learn other subjects that require skillful reading—math, science, history, getting into college, filling out job applications. Whole lives (and our nation) are damaged when children are not TAUGHT to read well.

I should say, they are TAUGHT to read poorly.

It would be a tragedy. It would be malpractice. And maybe it would be considered a crime, if children got smallpox because health providers didn't BELIEVE in immunization—when the data clearly say what happens when you don't give the immunization. The same way, it ought to be seen as a tragedy. It ought to be considered malpractice. And maybe it ought to be considered a crime, when children are MADE illiterate because teachers do not know (or refuse to use) the effective methods for teaching reading, even though 50 years of research show EXACTLY which methods—simple methods, commonsense methods—work with 99% of children regardless

of family support, income, ethnicity, or anything else.

So, I'm going to tell you what reading is and how properly to teach it. I'm also going to tell you how reading is USUALLY MISTaught—so that children end up damaged in all aspects of school—except maybe gym. I'm going to tell you how new teachers are MISTaught in schools of education—so that they do not know how to teach reading effectively. And I'm going to tell you some of the myths and false beliefs that enable teachers, administrators, and education professors to misteach reading while at the same time insisting they are right—although they are totally wrong.

But I want to make it clear that I do not blame most teachers! They care for your children. They try hard. They work endless hours at night and on weekends preparing lessons. But they have been MISEDUCATED at schools of education. They have been indoctrinated into the weird Alice in Wonderland world of "progressive" education (which dominates American education), with its fluffy "philosophies" of education, its false beliefs about how children learn, and its useless and wasteful "methods" for teaching (gluing beans on popsicle sticks to assist counting; writing "journals" when children don't even know how to read) that are entertaining to children, but leave them almost as ignorant at the end of the year as when they began. Teachers are victims, too.

Damaging Myth Number 1. Reading Is Very Complex.

A lot of teachers and education professors tell you that reading is so complex that it requires specially trained experts (guess who?) to teach it. Indeed, the education professors tell teachers to think of themselves more as artists and not as technicians who know exactly what they are doing. [Ask yourself, whom do you want to perform surgery on your child? A

physician whose aim is to be technically proficient (to do the job right), and who IS technically proficient, or a physician who sees himself as an artist, and strives to be creative?] This is nonsense! A car is very complex, but you don't need to know all about that to teach someone to drive! Sure reading is complex—a lot is happening in the eyes and brain—but you don't need to know all that in order to follow simple steps to teach reading.

You can teach almost any beginning reader the basic skills (so that the child goes from not reading to reading on a second-grade level) in 100 days (usually less) with only 15 or so minutes of instruction a day. In other words, if you teach reading right, and you start in September, your child will probably read greeting cards to you on Christmas. "Merry Christmas from all of us."

Hundreds of thousands of homeschooling families support that statement, and they don't have degrees in reading instruction. In fact, they haven't taken ANY classes at a school of education. Yet, tens of thousands of school teachers—who've been teaching for years and may have masters degrees (often in reading), can't teach 30 to 50% of children (who have normal intelligence and who try hard) to read in 4 or more years. That's 720 days!

A vast amount of serious research shows that skilled reading involves the following:

1. You learn to hear the different sounds in words. Run has three sounds: rrr, uuu, nnn. [This is called phonemic awareness.]
2. You learn that there are about 44 letters and letter combinations (a, m, s, sh, th, w, wh, r, e, etc.) and that each one goes with a certain sound. m says mmm. This is sometimes called phonics, or the alphabetic principle.
3. You learn to use knowledge of phonics to sound out unfamiliar words.

The sentence has the word "shift."
The new reader says, "shhhh iiiii ffff t. shift." This is called decoding.

4. You read the same words (shift, the, said, run) so many times that you no longer sound them out. You see the word; your eyes scan the letters rapidly; and you say the word. Reading words is now automatic. This is called fluency.
5. As you read, you pick up vocabulary. "The tires gained traction. Traction. Attract. Things pull together. Trac-

You have to learn the SOUNDS that go with the LETTERS in order to read the words.

tor. Tractors dig in and pull. Traction is like grabbing. I get it, the tires finally started to pull the car."

6. And you use different methods to make sense or to comprehend what you're reading. For example, you figure out who did what, when, where, and why; what came first and what came next; how characters changed; what lessons can be learned.

Does reading sound like something only an expert, only an artist, only someone trained at a school of education can teach? The fact is, if you teach all the above skills correctly (which I'll tell you about later), 99% of children will learn them quickly. Teach them wrongly (the usual way), and children still won't read in fourth grade. It's when you don't know what you're doing that the job seems complex.

Damaging Myth Number 2. Children Pick up Reading Naturally. [Oh, sure! Just as they pick up math naturally.]

Many education professors who MISeducate new teachers, believe that

learning to read is a "natural process"—as easy to learn as speaking. Therefore, just as parents and children usually don't have special language lessons in the home, so (it is argued—wrongly!) children usually don't need carefully crafted instruction on every reading skill. This is flat wrong—and destructive—in so many ways.

First, if learning to read is as natural and easy as learning a language, then how come 25–50% of children CAN speak but can't read?

Second, reading involves decoding completely meaningless squiggles (letters) on paper. These squiggles represent SOUNDS—not words. You have to learn the SOUNDS that go with the LETTERS in order to read the words. No one can learn which sounds go with which letters "naturally"—without instruction. Any more than you can learn math without instruction of some kind. Someone has to say "That letter says mmm." And they have to make sure the child is looking right at it and hears the sound. And they have to use different examples of "m"—to show that color and size and placement on the page don't matter—only the shape matters. And they have to show the child how to compare "m" and other letters—"n," "a," and so on—so that the child learns EXACTLY which squiggle says mmm and which squiggles do not.

But most teachers have been taught that you don't need to teach children which sounds go with which letters ("the alphabetic principle," or phonics) and that you don't have to teach children to sound out words using phonics knowledge. "rrraannn. Oh, ran!"

No, instead they believe that if you just read to children a lot, and occasionally point out the letters and sounds, and have children write "journals" (How can a child write if the child doesn't know how to spell?), and have lots of material for children to read (How can children learn to read by looking at books? Do books talk back and say the words?), then chil-

dren will eventually “construct” knowledge of reading and will, in their own time (by Grade 3 or 4) be good readers.

In fact, these teachers (who are the MAJORITY) and education professors (who DOMINATE schools of education) believe that children should NOT sound out words! Instead, children should (hold on to your seat!) PREDICT what a word says—based on (a) the shape of the word (“Gee, that looks like it says horse.”), or (b) based on what word seems to fit (“She.....on the ice...Uh, slammed. No, slapped...No, slipped. I guess it’s slipped.”), or (c) pictures on the page (“The...had big teeth...Uh...Oh, look. A lion. The lion had big teeth.”).

THIS IS NOT READING!! This is guessing? Would you call it “doing math” if your child didn’t know the strategy for solving problems, and instead used pictures to guess the answers? Sounding out (decoding) unfamiliar words is THE best strategy for solving the “problem” of what a word says. But most schools of education teach new teachers to teach children to guess and only (at most) to check their guess using knowledge of which sounds go with which letters (phonics). But since teachers hardly TEACH any phonics, and teach them INCORRECTLY, how can children use phonics to “check” their guesses? THEY CAN’T. Besides, if children KNEW phonics, why would they guess? They would just sound out the word and KNOW what it says.

This weird approach to MISTeaching reading is called whole language. But if you ask teachers what approach they use, they will say “balanced literacy.” “Balanced literacy” is code for whole language. Teachers know that many persons and groups finally realize that whole language is bunk. But many teachers like it. They believe in it. [That—not children reading—is what’s most important.] So, to avoid having to defend themselves or having to change how they teach, they disguise what they do. I mean, who could

be against BALANCED literacy? But it’s the same whole language baloney in a different package.

Here are some of the bizarre and false things education professors in whole language (the majority in education schools) believe—and then pass on to new teachers who (mistakenly) trust them. I have added comments in brackets to show how ridiculous and destructive these beliefs are.

“Children must develop reading strategies by and for themselves.” (p.

But what does the RESEARCH say? It says, if children don't know phonics, they will NOT read well and will HAVE to guess.

178). Weaver, C. (1988). *Reading process and practice*. Exeter, NH: Heinemann. [This is the basic weird idea in “progressive” education (which dominates public education) that teachers should not TEACH (transmit knowledge) but should merely be “guides” that help “learners discover knowledge” on their own. Of course, advocates of this so-called “student centered” notion would never allow physicians to discover brain surgery techniques by operating on their children. They would never toss their children into a rip current so their children could discover the strategy for not drowning. But somehow it’s fine to let other people’s children—YOUR children—discover how to read—which, in the long run, means to discover what life is like when you are illiterate.]

“Children can develop and use an intuitive knowledge of letter–sound correspondences [without] any phonics instruction [or] without deliberate instruction from adults.” (p. 86). Weaver, C. (1980). *Psycholinguistics and*

reading. Cambridge, MA: Winthrop. [What exactly would intuitive knowledge of letter–sound correspondence be? Does m look like it says /m/? Does “4” look like it means ////? There is NO intuitive knowledge of what letters “say.” You have to teach it DIRECTLY. “This sound (point to the letter) is mmm... Say it with me?... Your turn. What sound?...]

“Phonics is incompatible with a whole language perspective on reading and therefore is rejected.” Watson, D. (1989). “Defining and describing whole language.” *Elementary School Journal*, 90, 129–142. [In other words, they reject THE essential reading skill just because they don’t believe in it?! But what does the RESEARCH say? It says, if children don’t know phonics, they will NOT read well and will HAVE to guess. In other words, they will be using the strategy—guessing—that is used by persons who are illiterate. Terrific. So, whole language teaches children the strategy for becoming illiterate!]

“Reading without guessing is not reading at all.” Smith, F. (1973). *Psychology and reading*. New York: Holt, Rinehart, & Winston. [Are YOU guessing at the words you are reading? Or do you KNOW what they say because you know what sounds go with the letters? Do you know ANYONE who is a good reader who guesses? How these people can spout pure nonsense that is contradicted by common observation is beyond me.]

“It is easier for a reader to remember the unique appearance and pronunciation of a whole word like ‘photograph’ than to remember the unique pronunciations of meaningless syllables and spelling units.” (p. 146). Smith, F. (1985). *Reading without nonsense: Making sense of reading*. New York: Teachers College Press. [Of course it’s easier to memorize one word than to learn the sounds that go with each letter of the word. But you should know that if a child memorizes “the unique appearance” of 10 words, the child can read only those 10 words. However, if the

child learns the sounds of 10 letters, the child will be able to read 350 three-sound words, 4,320 four-sound words, and 21,650 five-sound words. Which do YOU think is best for your child? Moreover, if the child merely memorizes (but cannot sound out) “photograph,” what is the child likely to “read” when the child bumps into “phosphate,” “phonograph,” and “phony?”]

“Sounding out a word is a cumbersome, time-consuming, and unnecessary activity. By using context, we can identify words with only minimal attention to grapho/phonemic cues. The message then seems clear: we should help children learn to use context first.” Weaver, C. (1988). *Reading process and practice: From socio-psycholinguistics to whole language*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann. [Is this a good idea?! Teach children NOT to sound out words? Instead, teach them to guess using context cues—pictures! Then every youngster will be called “dyslexic” and will get special education—which won’t help, because many special ed teachers use the same weird ideas.]

“Accuracy, correctly naming or identifying each word or word part in a graphic sequence, is not necessary for effective reading since the reader can get the meaning without accurate word identification. Furthermore, readers who strive for accuracy are likely to be inefficient.” (p. 826). Goodman, K. S. (1974, Sept). “Effective teachers of reading know language and children.” *Elementary English*, 51, 823–828. [This is another example of whole language nonsense. In fact, readers who are taught—by whole language—to guess at words are inefficient readers—indeed, they are disabled readers—because they are often wrong. They mistake lion and lying, this and these, the and there, car and can, etc. I have tested thousands of poor readers, and that is exactly what they do—because that is what they have been TAUGHT to do. They are GOOD learners! And there’s the tragedy! Obviously, accurate read-

ing is necessary for getting the meaning. “The car is fast” does not mean the same thing as “The can is fat.” And “Caution. Toxic fumes” does not mean the same thing as “Cauldron. Box of tunes.”]

I hope you get the point. *Whole language and balanced literacy are crackpot schemes, snake oil, more theology than science, based on speculation and weird theories of reading that have nothing to do with reading and are discredited by serious research.* And they make your children

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illiterate. [But the professors get tenure and the authors get royalty checks.]

Here Is What You Want to See.

The following is supported by the vast majority of scientific research (not untested theories) on reading and is consistent with President Bush’s Reading First program that provides funds to states and school districts to improve reading curricula.

First, your child’s beginning reading curriculum works on the five main reading skills. Most of the early work is on phonemic awareness and the alphabetic principle.

1. Phonemic Awareness. The ability to hear and manipulate sounds in words. There are about a dozen ways to hear and manipulate sounds in words—a dozen examples of phonemic awareness. These are

best taught from easier to harder. For example,

- a. Identify words that sound the same and different. run, sit, fun
- b. Rhyme. can, man, fan, rrr__
- c. Count the number of words in a sentence.
The dog sat by the cat. = 6 words
- d. Count the number of sounds (phonemes) in a word.
sat = /s/a/t/ = 3 sounds
- e. Segment words by identifying the first, last, and middle (medial) sounds. “What is the first sound in rrrruuuunnn?”
- f. Identify what word it would be if one sound were removed (phoneme deletion). “Listen... sssaaat. Take out the ssss. What word now?...”
- g. Identify what a word would be if a sound were replaced with another. “Listen...ssssiiiit. Take away the ssss and put in fff. What word now?...”

Phonemic awareness helps children learn to read and do other literacy skills. How? A student who can hear and manipulate the sounds (phonemes) in words, can more easily: (a) remember which sound goes with which letter, (b) sound out words [cat. k/aaa/t.], (c) spell [How do you spell cat. kaaaat. /k/ is c. /a/ is a. /t/ is t.], and (d) detect and correct errors in reading and spelling.

Your child’s teacher should be able to tell you what phonemic awareness is and exactly why it is important, describe at least six kinds of phonemic awareness, provide about 15 minutes of instruction on it every day as a separate activity (not embedded in anything else), and should tell you exactly how she/he teaches it. See <http://reading.uoregon.edu/pa/index.php> for more information on phonemic awareness.

2. The Alphabetic Principle. The ability to associate sounds with let-

ters and to use this knowledge to sound out/decode words. Notice that the alphabetic principle (sometimes called phonics) has two skill-parts.

- a. The children know letter-sound or sound-symbol relationships: that m says /m/, i says /i/, and r says /r/.
- b. When the student sees an unfamiliar word (rim) in a story book, the student uses letter-sound knowledge to sound out or decode the word—perhaps letter by letter at first, and then quickly.

“The bike has a bent rrrrii-immm...rim.”

Using the alphabetic principle (shown above), the student knows exactly what the word says.

In contrast, children who are not taught phonics in a systematic way, or who are not taught to use phonics knowledge as the first and most reliable strategy for identifying words, have to guess or “predict” what words say using “context cues,” such as pictures or what seems to fit the meaning of a sentence. For example, instead of reading “The bike has a bent rim,” the student guesses...

“The bike has a be...be...bell...belt...ri...ri...rip. The bike has a belt rip.”

Often, these mistaught children never learn to read skillfully.

You want your child’s teacher to know the two sides to the alphabetic principle (letter-sound relationships and sounding out/decoding words). You want him/her to tell you why it is ESSENTIAL. You want him/her to show you HOW he/she will teach these. It should look something like this.

- a. “Boys and girls. Look. New sound. This sound (points) is rrr. Say it with me.... Your turn. What sound?..”

- b. “Boys and girls. I’ll show you how to sound out this word. [“ran” is on the board or is written in large letters in the teacher’s book.]

“Here I go.” [The teacher slowly moves her finger under the letters and clearly says the sounds.] “rrraaaannn.”

“Say it with me.” [The teacher slowly moves her finger under the letters as both she and the children say rrrraaannn.]

She clearly MODELS the information. She LEADS children to do it. Then she TESTS them (“Your turn”) to make sure they got it.

“Your turn. Sound it out.” [Teacher runs her finger under the letters.]

“What word? Say it fast!” [The teacher quickly moves her finger under the word and children say “ran!”]

“Yes, ran. You are SO smart.”

If a teacher teaches letter-sound relationships and sounding out as shown, or some version of it, then she knows what she is doing. The instruction is focused on ONE thing. She clearly MODELS the information. She LEADS children to do it. Then she TESTS them (“Your turn”) to make sure they got it.

And she CORRECTS every error. “That sound is rrrr. What sound?”

Also you want to see the teacher moving from teaching letter-sound relationships to sounding out words—like this.

1. Teach a says aaa and m says mmm.
2. Then sound out am and ma.

3. Then teach s says sss.
4. Then sound of sam and mas.
5. Then teach (for example) that t says t (not tuh) and r says rrr.
6. Then sound out sat, rat, mat.
7. Then sounds for e, d, i, f, and other high-frequency sounds and words.
8. Then read simple stories made from these words.

In contrast, *you do NOT want to see the teacher holding up a “big book,” reading the sentences and occasionally telling children the sound of a letter, and working on more than one or two letter-sounds during a lesson. This is called “embedded” phonics instruction. It is about 50% likely to result in poor readers.* There is just too much information for children to “get” which letters say what sounds. They will quickly become confused and stop paying attention.

And you absolutely DO NOT want the teacher to say, “Well, phonics is only one skill among many” or, “Phonics is just teaching meaningless associations. Reading is about understanding.”

Also, you DO NOT want to hear a teacher say, “There are multiple ways to recognize words” or, “There are several different kinds of cues—for example, pictures, the shape of words, and what fits in the sentence.” Or, “We teach children multiple strategies.”

Any teacher who talks that way does not know the research, is into whole language, and is VERY likely to damage your child. DO NOT BE FOOLED!

Direct, focused, and systematic instruction on letter-sound relationships and on sounding out words is for many children the difference between becoming proficient versus struggling their whole life. Remember, guessing or predicting using “context cues” is what POOR readers do.

3. **Fluency With Text.** The nearly effortless and automatic ability to

read words accurately and quickly in connected text. Fluency is reading with accuracy and speed. Fluency is important both for enjoyment and comprehension. If a person struggles with words (gu...qu...guil...quail...), the person will also struggle to figure out the meaning of sentences. In fact, dysfluent readers spend so much time and effort trying to figure out what the separate words say, they can barely pay attention to the meaning of the sentence. ("The ju...jur...jury found her gu...qu...guil...quail...") In other words, they learn very little from reading.

To help children read connected text (e.g., story passages) accurately and quickly, it is important to:

- a. Teach children to decode separate words (regular and irregular—"said," "the") accurately and quickly—which means (1) using knowledge of letter-sound correspondence (not guessing) and (2) blending the sounds into words.
- b. Teach children to self-correct.
- c. Provide practice on reading words enough times that it is almost automatic; that is, the words become "sight words." Note: sight words are not words a student memorizes. The student still knows how to decode them letter by letter. Rather, the student has read the words so often that decoding takes only an instant.
- d. Provide practice reading text with which children are already accurate, encouraging them to read faster and faster without making errors (i.e., more words correct per minute, or wcpm).

Read more about fluency here.
<http://reading.uoregon.edu/flu/>

4. **Vocabulary.** Understanding (receptive) and using (expressive) words to gain and express meaning. The three reading skills above—(a)

phonemic awareness, (b) the alphabetic principle (letter-sound correspondence and the strategy for sounding out or decoding words), and (c) fluency—have to do with the mechanics of reading. The last two skills—vocabulary and comprehension—have to do with making sense of the written word.

Vocabulary and comprehension cannot be taken for granted. Students need to be taught how to get and express the meaning of words and passages. This is

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especially important for children of low socioeconomic status. These children are read to less often, hear fewer vocabulary words, and therefore understand and use far fewer words than children born to working class or professional class families.

Following are some of the more important methods of vocabulary instruction.

1. Read storybooks to children.
2. Provide direct instruction of new vocabulary words by selecting important words in a story, giving explanations or definitions of the words, and giving children many chances to discuss and use the new words.
3. Teach older children to use morphemic analysis (analysis of word parts) to determine meaning. For example, "Bisect. Bi means two. Sect means part. So, bisect means divide into two parts."

4. Teach contextual analysis—inferring the meaning of a word from the context in which it occurs.

"The fan's oscillations cooled everyone in the room...Sometimes fans move back and forth. If everyone was cooled, it probably means the fan blew on everyone. So, oscillate probably means to move back and forth."

You can find more on vocabulary here.
<http://reading.uoregon.edu/voc/>

5. **Comprehension.** Reading and reflecting on a text to gain meaning. In other words, sentences don't tell you what they mean. You have to interact with the text—for example, ask questions, check to see if the text gives answers, reread, connect one sentence with a later sentence to get the flow of the argument or the flow of events in time. These comprehension strategies are learned best when they are taught explicitly. This kind of instruction includes the following.

1. Set comprehension objectives; for example, children will answer specific literal (who, what, when), inferential (why), and evaluative (can you think of a better way...?) questions.
2. Focus on main ideas in a story or informational text.
3. Preteach vocabulary words important for comprehending the material.
4. Read (with children) the material in manageable chunks, and ask literal, inferential, and evaluative questions on each chunk.
5. Have children think about and discuss what I know, what I want to know, and what I learned.

You can learn more about comprehension here. <http://reading.uoregon.edu/comp/index.php>

The second thing you want to see is systematic and explicit instruction. This is the most effective form

of instruction. But most reading teachers and most of the education professors disagree. They think that systematic and explicit instruction is too “directive,” stifles children’s creativity (as though being illiterate enables you to be creative!), and is not needed. “They will learn naturally.”

However, most reading teachers and most of the education professors that teach them are flat wrong! Respected scientific research in education and psychology shows clearly that instruction yields higher and faster achievement in more children (with and without learning difficulties) when it is systematic and explicit.

But what does systematic and explicit mean?

Systematic means that:

1. Instruction is given in a planned, logically progressive sequence of things to be taught. For example, certain letter-sounds (a, s, i, m, r) are taught before other letter-sounds (b, n, y, sh) because they are easier to learn and are used more often.
2. Instruction is guided and assessed with clearly defined objectives for everything taught. Objectives are stated in terms of what children will do.

Good objective: Students are given 2 minutes to read the assigned passage from “The bear and the hare.” They read the passage at a rate of at least 100 words correct per minute.

Poor objective: Students read story-books quickly and get most words right.

3. Instruction is focused precisely on the thing (knowledge unit) to be learned, as specified by the objective. For example, if children are to read a passage at 100 correct words per minute, then that is exactly what the teacher focuses on during the 10 minute fluency exercise during lessons. She does not work on fluency,

vocabulary, and comprehension at the same time.

4. Instruction provides planned practice to strengthen all of the skills worked on.
5. Instruction provides planned work on new examples (e.g., words, text) to foster application or generalization of previously taught knowledge.
6. Instruction includes assessments designed and used in a timely fashion to monitor the different phases of instruction, or mas-

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tery: acquisition, fluency, generalization, retention, and independence.

Explicit means that:

1. The teacher reveals in an obvious and clear way to children the knowledge she is trying to communicate. She does this through demonstrations (modeling) and running commentary to children. For example,
“I’ll show you how to sound out this word [man is written on the board]. Listen. I do NOT stop between the sounds. [Teacher touches under each letter as she says the sound.] mmm-maaaannn. Now, I’ll say it fast. [Teacher slides her finger under the word.] man.”
2. The teacher ensures children’s attention to important features of an example or demonstration.
“Look [points to the word ate] here is a vowel, then a consonant, and

then an e at the end [name]. So, we do NOT say the e at the end.”

Here is an example of instruction that is NOT explicit. It is implicit—or buried in the teacher’s talk. [You don’t want to see this!]

The teacher holds up a big book that has a paragraph from a story. The children cannot read most of these words. Also, they do not know which sounds most of the letters make. She reads the words slowly. Occasionally she points to the letter r and says rrr. She expects that this will be enough for children to get the connection between the letter and the sound. Of course, many children do not get it.

In contrast, explicit instruction would have the teacher hold up the big book and say,

“New sound. This sound (points to the letter r in ran) is rrr. Say it with me... And this sound (points to r in car) is rrr. Say it with me... And this sound (points to r in barn) is rrr. Let’s see if you remember our new sound. What sound is this? (points to r in ran)...What sound is this? (points to r in barn)... What sound is this? (points to r in car)...Now I’ll read the story. (Teacher points to each r as she reads and has children say rrr and then read the whole word.)

As you can imagine, this explicit instruction of letter-sound correspondence is more likely to teach most children quickly.

Perhaps the most important thing you can do—since you can’t be sure that President Bush’s Reading First (which provides powerful incentives for schools to teach reading correctly, according to the research) will produce change in your children’s school—is to teach your own children beginning reading skills or at least be prepared if they begin to struggle. This is not hard to do. In fact, it is a piece of cake. Just get *Teach Your Child to Read in 100 Easy Lessons* And your child will be reading in 100 easy lessons. [I have no financial interest in the book.] **ADI**