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Incorporating Phonics Within a
New Zealand Whole Language Programme
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Incorporating Phonics Within Whole Language

Abstract

Literacy teaching in New Zealand generally follows a whole language approach that emphasizes the teaching of letter-sound knowledge within the context of meaningful text related activities. This article discusses how a New Zealand teacher changed her classroom programme to incorporate more explicit instruction on phonics. The classroom programme was organised to provide a combination of whole class and individualized activities that focused on phonic skills and the reading and writing of text. The rapid gains seen in the children's reading and spelling skills indicate that there may be benefits in providing a greater focus on phonics in whole language classrooms.

Keywords: Reading Instruction, Phonics, Whole Language

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New Zealand Whole Language Programme

Reading and writing programmes in New Zealand primary schools have long been identified with the whole language approach to literacy. The development of the programmes was strongly influenced by early advocates of whole language such as Marie Clay and Don Holdaway (see Smith & Elley, 1994). There is variation in how literacy programmes are implemented in different schools and classrooms but most programmes are consistent with key principles of whole language such as the use of real texts, the integration of reading and writing, child-centred instruction, and the teaching of phonics in the context of reading and writing experiences rather than as separate lessons.

Guidelines on the teaching of reading and writing are contained in a number of teacher handbooks published by the New Zealand Ministry of Education (1996, 2002, 2003a, 2003b). The handbooks provide general descriptions of a range of classroom literacy activities but do not prescribe what content should be taught to children in particular grades. The handbooks state that effective literacy programmes are made up from the combination of the following approaches:

1. Reading to children

The teacher reads aloud to a group or the class.

2. Shared reading

The children look at the text as the teacher reads aloud. Children may join in with the reading as they look at individual copies or an enlarged version of the book.

3. Guided Reading

The teacher introduces a new book to a group of children and helps them to progress through the text. The emphasis of the lesson is usually on exploring the meaning of the story, rather than developing word identification skills.

4. Independent reading

Opportunities are provided for children to select their own books and read independently.

5. Writing

Children engage in shared, guided, and independent writing on a daily basis.

Structured lessons that focus on the systematic development of word identification or spelling skills are not included in the Ministry of Education's descriptions of effective literacy teaching. The Ministry notes that knowledge about phonics is valuable for learning to read but suggests that children's knowledge of letter-sound relationships is best developed in the context of book reading and story writing (Ministry of Education, 2003b; Pitches, Thompson & Watson, 2002). The Ministry cautions against a pre-planned sequence of instruction about phonics and instead emphasizes the importance of the incidental teaching that can occur when a teacher responds to a child's interest or difficulty with reading or spelling a particular word.

A problem with incidental teaching, however, is that although it may provide some useful opportunities for examining specific letter-sound relationships, it cannot be relied upon to ensure that all children will gain adequate knowledge of phonics. Incidental teaching, by its very nature, will be somewhat haphazard and will rely on the teacher being present to assist when a child encounters a challenging word (see Villaume & Brabham, 2003).

Although the New Zealand Ministry of Education does not recommend the use of systematic phonics instruction, a number of New Zealand teachers and researchers have reported positive effects from the use of structured phonics programmes (see, e.g., Greaney, 2002; Parr, Aikman, Irving, & Glasswell, 2004; Tunmer, Chapman, & Prochnow, 2003). One phonics programme that has been adopted by some New Zealand teachers is Jolly Phonics. This programme was developed by Sue Lloyd and Sara Wernham on the basis of their teaching experience in English schools. Lloyd and Wernham have produced teacher guidebooks for each of the first three years of primary school. The first book, "The Phonics Handbook" (Lloyd, 1998) focuses on teaching the

graphophonic connections for the 42 separate sounds of English. Children are taught not only the alphabet sounds but also digraphs (where two letters make one sound, e.g., “oa” and “th”) and alternative spellings of vowels. The Grammar Handbook 1 (Wernham & Lloyd, 2000) is designed for the second year of primary school and focuses on increasing children’s knowledge of spelling patterns and written grammar.

This article will describe how one New Zealand teacher, Mary Carter, (name has been changed) incorporated Jolly Phonics into her classroom programme while still continuing with many aspects of a whole language approach to literacy. Information about the programme was obtained through interviews with Mary and through examination of her written notes and plans for her teaching. The article will also report classroom assessments of reading and spelling that show Mary’s students made rapid gains in literacy skills during the first years at school.

Mary was originally trained in the whole language approach to literacy and had used this approach for over ten years. She enjoyed the flexibility of a whole language programme and the opportunities it provided for incorporating a wide variety of literature into children’s reading. Mary believed that many children made good progress when she used a whole language approach. She also found, however, that a significant number of children struggled with learning to read and write. Mary’s observations fit with the findings of recent international surveys of reading achievement in New Zealand. (Caygill & Chamberlain, 2004; Caygill & Chamberlain, 2005) These surveys have found that New Zealand children show high average levels of literacy but that the gap between high achievers and lower achievers is large in comparison to other countries. A desire to provide additional help to low achieving children was one of the reasons that Mary became interested in incorporating more explicit teaching of phonics within her classroom programme.

Mary has taught two classes since she started to incorporate phonics in her programme. Both classes were in a school located in a high-socioeconomic area (Decile 10 according to the Ministry of Education rating). The first class was a Year 1 class consisting of 24 children who began school in June to October of one year and were taught by Mary

until mid-December of the following year. (New Zealand children begin primary school on their fifth birthday. The school year runs from February to mid-December but children who start school in the second half of the year usually remain in Year 1 for the remainder of that year and for the following year. The school year is divided into 4 terms of 10 or 11 weeks, separated by two-week breaks.) The second class taught by Mary was a different group of 22 Year 2 children who were taught from February to Mid-December in the year after she had taught the Year 1 class. One child in each of Mary's classes left during the school year. These children have not been included in the above numbers or in the results for this study.

Overview of Class Programmes

Year One Class

The Phonics Handbook (Lloyd, 1998) recommends that letter sounds be taught at the rate of one a day. This would mean that all sounds could be taught within a period of about 8 weeks. Mary decided, however, to begin at a slower rate of two letter sounds a week because she was new to teaching explicit phonics, and because new children were continuing to join the class in the first months. Mary followed the sequence in The Phonics Handbook which introduces sounds according to their frequency and utility for word building, rather than in alphabetical order. For example, the first sounds taught are for the letters s, a, t, i, and p. Mary introduced nearly all of the sounds for individual letters in the term that children were arriving in the class. Because children started school at different times within that term, Mary repeated her coverage of the sounds of individual letters during the children's second term at school.

Digraphs were introduced to children in the first term of the following year, and alternative spellings of vowels were covered in the second term. By the end of the second term, many of the children had been at school for nearly a year and Mary had completed The Phonics Handbook programme. She therefore progressed to using The Grammar Handbook 1 (Wernham & Lloyd, 2000) for the third and fourth terms. This programme required children to focus on one spelling pattern and one grammatical feature, (e.g.,

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parts of speech, sentence construction) each week. By the end of the year the class had completed the first half of the lessons in *The Grammar Handbook 1*.

Year Two Class

The following year, Mary began with a new class of Year 2 children. These children had not been involved in a structured phonics programme in their first year but did have some knowledge of letter sounds. In order to rapidly advance the children's knowledge of phonics, Mary decided to go through all 42 sounds from *The Phonics Handbook* in the first 2 weeks of the term. The sounds were reviewed and reinforced in subsequent weeks. Extra attention was given to ensure that lower achieving readers knew all the sounds. After the sounds had been introduced, the class followed the programme in *The Grammar Handbook 1*. They were taught one spelling pattern and one grammatical feature each week.

Daily Timetable of Reading and Writing Instruction

Mary followed the same basic timetable for both classes. Reading and writing activities occupied most of the morning class time while mathematics and other subjects were mostly taught in the afternoon.

8.50 – 9.00

Roll and Administration Tasks.

9.00 – 9.10

Revision of Sounds / Spelling.

Mary believed that starting the day with a revision of letter sounds and spelling helped children to be aware of the central importance of this learning for reading and writing. Revision included the use of flash cards to reinforce letter sounds, class singing of a song that had lyrics about particular sounds, and the examination of sounds within words that were written on the whiteboard. Children were also asked to suggest words that contained particular sounds. Once children were secure in their knowledge of letter

sounds (including digraphs, alternative vowel spellings, and blends) more emphasis was given to revision of the spelling of common irregular words.

9.10 - 9.20

Oral Language – Sharing of news between children in groups.

9.20 – 9.35

Physical Fitness Activities.

9.35 – 9.45

Introduction or Revision of Sound, Spelling Pattern, or Writing Feature.

On two days a week (usually Monday and Wednesday) children were taught a new sound, spelling pattern, or writing feature. On the other days, this time was used to revise the material.

New sounds are introduced in the Jolly Phonics programme by first telling children a short story that includes the letter sound and requires children to make an action with their hands (For example, the story for 's' is about a boy seeing a snake. Children make an "sssss" sound as they move their arm like a snake. The story for 'a' is about ants at a picnic. Children repeat the short vowel sound "a a a" as they move their fingers up their arms as if ants were crawling on them). The Phonics Handbook (Lloyd, 1998) provides a picture to illustrate each "sound story".

After each sound was introduced, Mary spent a few minutes discussing examples of words containing the sound. Mary made use of the relevant lists in The Phonics Handbook as well as words sourced from other books (e.g., Hope, 2001). The children were also asked to provide examples. Words were written on the whiteboard and the featured letters were underlined. As children moved through the programme, words were also analysed according to sounds that had been previously covered. Children were encouraged to identify the sounds in words and to blend together component sounds to form words.

Mary produced a large chart for each new sound that was introduced. This featured the letter or digraph in large font at the top of the chart, with words containing the sound printed below. The charts were hung in prominent positions in the classroom so that children could use them as a reference when required.

Once the classes had progressed to The Grammar Handbook 1, children were taught one spelling pattern and one writing feature each week. The spelling patterns featured in The Grammar Handbook 1 include vowel digraphs, alternative spellings of vowels, plural endings, short vowels and consonant doubling, and consonant blends. The writing features focus on the use of different parts of speech in written language.

On Mondays, children were provided with weekly spelling lists that were glued into their notebooks to take home. This practice began after the Year 1 children had been at school for two terms. The Year 2 class began taking spelling lists home after several weeks at school.

The spelling lists consisted of words that included the sounds or spelling patterns that were currently being taught. (The words were sourced from lists in the Jolly Phonics handbooks and from The Complete Phonic Handbook (Hope, 2001). In addition, high frequency irregular words were included in the spelling lists. These words are known as “tricky words” in the Jolly Phonics programme. Tricky words were discussed with the class and children were encouraged to look for parts of the word that may have regular spellings.

In contrast to a common whole language approach of individualised spelling lists, the children in Mary’s classes were all given the same words to learn. The Year 1 class were provided with 10 words a week while the Year 2 class covered 20 words a week.

9.45 – 10.00

Shared Writing.

Shared writing began with a short discussion that focused on a particular topic and, when applicable, the writing feature for the week. Children were asked to suggest possible sentences for writing on the whiteboard. Mary would select a sentence,

sometimes adding words that related to the sounds or spelling pattern being taught. She would repeat the sentence to the class, ask different children to attempt to spell each word, and write the children's suggestions on the whiteboard. Mary would then ask children to point out words that were not spelt correctly and would underline these words. Each correct letter in the words was marked with a tick and Mary engaged in discussion with children about how to spell the incorrect parts of the words. Links were made with the sounds and spelling patterns that had been covered in the classroom programme. The children were encouraged to look at the charts of sounds and words that were displayed in the class. Irregular spellings or "tricky words" were pointed out. Discussion also took place about the grammatical features of the sentence. Once the written sentence was completed in its correct form, the whole class would read the sentence together.

10.00 – 10.30

Independent Writing.

(a) Year One Class.

The class was divided into three mixed-ability groups for independent writing. A three-day roster system was organised whereby the children worked with Mary on one day, "published" their stories on the second day, and worked independently on the third day.

When working with Mary, children used their draft writing books to write about a topic of their choice. Often they would write about a recent experience at home or school. Mary would begin by getting each child to think of a sentence. Children could then begin by attempting some words or by drawing a picture of their story. Mary would then move around the group, providing individual instruction to each child. If the child had attempted some words, Mary would check these and write the correct spellings if required. Mary provided individual instruction on hearing the sounds in words, focusing on the sounds and spelling patterns that children had been taught in the class

programme. Children were encouraged to make use of the sound charts and lists of high frequency words that were displayed in the classroom.

In preparation for the second day of the writing group roster, Mary copied the children's stories from the first day into their "publishing" books. On the second day, the children would read these stories to the teacher, copy over the words with felt pen, and illustrate the text. Copying over the text provided children with useful practice at handwriting and enabled them to produce clear text. Each time a new story was completed, the publishing books were sent home for children to read to their parents.

On the third day of the roster, the children wrote independently in their draft books. If parent helpers were available at this time, they would assist the children with their spelling.

Once the class had progressed onto *The Grammar Handbook 1*, a spelling quiz of the week's spelling words was held each Friday. Rather than being conducted as a formal test, the quiz was used as a time to provide additional teaching to children who required support. Mary circulated amongst the class as children wrote the words, observing children whom she knew may be having difficulty. She would provide prompts for particular sounds, reminding children of actions associated with the sound, and directing their attention to the wall charts of sounds and spelling patterns. This ensured that the quiz was regarded by the children as a positive activity where they were able to spell all or most of the words correctly. Following the word quiz, Mary also gave the class the weekly dictation sentences that were provided in *The Grammar Handbook 1*.

(b) Year Two Class.

Children were divided into four mixed-ability writing groups. The mixed-ability composition of the groups meant that higher achievers were able to provide assistance with spelling to lower achievers in their group. On Mondays all of the children wrote sentences that included the words from their weekly spelling lists. On Tuesdays the whole class was provided with motivation and guidance to write about a particular topic. Word banks were often created and Mary would make use of the beginning part of the lesson to link examples with particular spelling patterns and grammar points. Once the

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class was underway with their writing, Mary would focus attention on individual children within the groups. On Thursdays, writing time was held in the school computer room and children were given assistance to publish and edit stories using word processing. A spelling quiz and dictation task was conducted on Fridays, using the same supportive procedures that were noted above for the Year 1 class.

10.30 – 10.50

Interval.

10.50 – 11.00

Handwriting.

For the Year 1 class, handwriting for the first two terms at school was related to the letter sounds being studied. The class then followed the sequence set out in *The Magic Caterpillar* (Brann, 2002) handwriting programme. The Year 2 class also followed this programme.

11.10 – 11.20

Shared Reading

Shared reading usually began with Mary and the class jointly reading several poems that were printed on large sheets of card. Individual poems were selected to match particular sounds and spelling patterns that were being taught in the phonics programme. A large format book would then be shared and the children's attention directed to particular words and sounds.

11.20 – 12.00

Instructional Reading.

Each class was divided into four to six achievement based groups for instructional reading. The number and composition of the groups varied in accord with changes in

children's text reading. Mary was careful to ensure that children in each group could read their new books with 90 – 94 % accuracy.

Children in each reading group received a new book each day from Monday to Thursday. Mary worked with each group for about 10 minutes on these days. On Friday, reading time was held in the library and children were assisted to select and read books independently.

When working with a group, Mary would introduce a new story and children would volunteer to read aloud. Mary selected books from two reading series that are commonly available in New Zealand Schools (i.e., the Ready to Read series, published by Learning Media, Wellington, NZ and the PM Readers, published by Nelson Price Milburn, Wellington, NZ). These books are graded into reading levels and often contain predictable text at the early levels. Vocabulary in these books is not specifically restricted according to its decodability.

Mary made use of opportunities during instructional reading to discuss new vocabulary and strategies to decode words. Words would often be written on the whiteboard and analysed in relation to the sounds and spelling patterns that had been taught in the phonics programme. Mary would also use flash cards, especially with lower achieving groups, to develop fluency in recognition of sound patterns and high frequency words. Some discussion was directed to the meaning of the story but the emphasis was on developing word identification skills. Mary believed that it was appropriate to focus on word identification because the books consisted of relatively simple stories that could be readily understood by children once they could read the words. The new book that was introduced at group reading time was taken home by the children each day to read to their parents.

When not working with Mary, children usually spent time completing a worksheet from The Phonics Handbook or the Grammar Handbook 1. The worksheets provided activities to reinforce the children's current learning of sounds, spelling patterns or features of grammar. The same worksheet was used for all children in the class. Mary would introduce the worksheet at the start of the Guided Reading time and children were

encouraged to help each other when assistance was required. Once children completed the worksheet, they sometimes worked on an activity related to their group story. They were also able to continue with independent writing in their draft writing books.

Assessments of Children's Progress in Reading and Spelling

Mary made regular assessments of the children's reading and spelling skills. Running records of oral reading were made to ensure that children were reading instructional books at an appropriate difficulty level. Mary's school used a collection of graded passages for taking running records. For reading ages from emergent to 8 ½ years, passages were sourced from the Price Milburn early reading series. Books were assigned ordinal levels from 1-22 according to the *Ready to Read* grading system (see Ministry of Education, 1991). The Probe reading test (Pool, Parkin, & Parkin, 1999) was used for reading ages above 8 ½ years. To be placed on a particular reading level, children needed to score above 90% for text accuracy and above 80% on comprehension questions for that passage. The comprehension questions that were used for the Price Milburn series were designed by a senior teacher at Mary's school. Comprehension questions for the Probe are supplied with the test.

Running records of oral reading are used extensively in New Zealand classrooms and can provide indicative information about children's reading. However, the reliability and validity of running records has not been established for the teacher-made and Probe tests that were used in Mary's classroom (see Blaiklock 2004). Mary also assessed the children's word reading with a standardised test, the Burt Word Reading Test (Gilmore, Croft & Reid, 1981). Although the Burt test does not assess comprehension, studies have found a high correlation between word recognition and comprehension in the early years of reading (see Hoover & Gough, 1990).

Children's spelling was assessed with weekly spelling quizzes but as previously noted, Mary used these quizzes as an opportunity to provide additional instruction to children who needed support. Hence the results of the spelling quizzes do not provide a

measure of the children's independent spelling skills. The children's spelling was also assessed with a standardised test, the South Australian Spelling Test (Westwood, 1999).

The Progress of the Year One Class

Children's entry level reading skills were assessed with a test of high frequency words that was given within two weeks of starting school. (The test consisted of the following 16 words: we, a, the, to, on, up, my, and, look, see, I, is, am, in, me, can). The mean score of 3.8 on this test indicates that reading levels were generally low at school entry.

Table 1 reports data for running records of the children's reading levels in March and November of Year 1. These results show that near the start of Year 1, the children's average reading level was what would be expected for their age. From this time on, progress appeared to be very rapid during the rest of the year. By November, when the children's mean age was 6 years, 3 months, the average reading age was 7 years, 2 months.

Reading and spelling were also assessed with standardised tests in November (Table 2). Children's scores on the Burt word recognition test equated to an average reading age of 7 years, 2 months. Their mean score on the South Australian Spelling Test was provides a spelling age of 7 years, 5 months.

In addition to the tests administered by Mary, other tests were given as part of the "Six-Year Net" (also known as the Observation Survey – see Clay, 2002). The tests that make up the Six-Year Net are widely used in New Zealand schools as a check on children's progress once they have been at school for one year. The tests were administered by an associate principal at Mary's school and provide corroborative data about the rapid progress of children in Mary's class. Most children were at ceiling levels for most of the tests (Concepts About Print, Letter Identification, Clay Word Test, Hearing and Recording Sounds in Words). The Burt results for the Six-Year Net showed an average score of 30.3 (SD = 12.9) which equates to a reading age of 7.0 years.

The Progress of the Year Two Class.

Running records of children's reading were made regularly throughout the year. Full results for children in the Year 2 class were available at four time points. Table 3 shows the mean text reading levels and reading ages for these times. In March, the children's average reading level was assessed as being 7 months above their chronological age. By November, when the children were aged 6 years, 11 months, their average reading age was 8 years 11 months.

Children's word reading skills were assessed with the Burt Word Reading Test on a number of occasions (see Table 4). The children began the year with word recognition levels that were an average of 3 months higher than expected for their chronological age. Word recognition levels increased rapidly during the first months of the Year Two class. Average scores on the Burt test showed an increase of 14 months within the first 5 months of school. By the end of the school year, children's word recognition levels were an average of 15 months above what was expected for their chronological age.

In October the children were also assessed on the South Australian Spelling Test (Westwood, 1999). The average score was 30.3 (SD = 6.1) which gives a spelling age of 8 years, 5 months.

Discussion of the Progress of Children in Mary's Classes

Overall the results for both classes for measures of text reading, word reading, and word spelling, indicate that children made at least twice the amount of progress that would be expected during the time they were in Mary's classes. The reading ages for text level need to be treated with caution as the tests are not standardised. Nevertheless the text reading assessments would appear to suggest that children were gaining not only in word level skills, but also in text reading and comprehension.

The Burt test scores show that children in both classes made rapid progress in their word recognition skills for both regular and irregular words. Although word recognition is only one part of reading, it is a fundamental component, especially in the early years of learning to read (Pressley, 2002). Studies have found a high correlation

between word recognition and comprehension during this time (Hoover & Gough, 1990). The reading comprehension of children learning to read in their first language is much more likely to be limited by word recognition than by difficulties in understanding the vocabulary and language structures of early reading texts (see Nicholson, 1999).

The pattern of results for both classes showed that children achieved at high levels for reading and spelling. It is possible that the high socio-economic level of the school was a factor in the children's achievement but it is unlikely that this provides a full explanation. Although some studies have found a strong association between socio-economic levels and word reading (e.g., Nicholson, 2003), a recent large scale NZ study found no correlation between Burt Reading scores at age 6 and school socio-economic level (Wylie & Thompson, 1988). Another indication that the socio-economic level of the school is an inadequate explanation for the children's achievement is the rapid progress that children showed in the Grade Two class. These children entered Mary's class with average word reading levels 3 months higher than expected for their age, but then showed further accelerated gains that resulted in their Burt scores being 15 months ahead of what was expected by the end of the children's second year at school. Running record results indicate that the children's reading was an average of 7 months ahead of their chronological age after a month at school, but this gap increased to 2 years ahead towards the end of the year.

If it is accepted that children made higher than expected gains during their time in Mary's classes, the next question to ask is did the nature of Mary's literacy programme contribute to the higher progress? The case study nature of the evidence reported in this article does not permit conclusions about causal connections between the type of programme and the children's progress. It is possible, for example, that it was Mary's enthusiasm for teaching, rather than programme content, that was a significant influence on the children's success. Nevertheless the positive outcomes for the children in Mary's classes are congruent with research studies supporting the benefits of explicit phonics programmes for teaching children to read and spell (e.g., Foorman, Chen, Carlson, Moats, Francis, & Fletcher, 2003; Johnston & Watson, 2004; Stuart, 1999).

Three main features of Mary's literacy programme that may have contributed to the high achievement of the children are (1) The emphasis of the classroom programme on literacy, (2) Incorporating structured synthetic phonics within the class literacy programme, and (3) A balance of individualised and whole class instruction. Each of these features will be discussed below.

1) The Emphasis of the Classroom Programme on Literacy.

The description of Mary's daily classroom programme showed that most of the school day focused on literacy. Curriculum time for particular subjects is not specified in the New Zealand education system and varies between teachers and schools. It is common, however, for reading and writing instruction to make up most of the morning programme in early level classes in New Zealand. Some teachers may also include mathematics in the morning programme, resulting in less scheduled time for reading and writing. However reading and writing activities also occur during the "topic" studies that make up much of the afternoon classroom time in New Zealand primary schools. Topic studies include the curriculum areas of science, art, music, and social studies.

The emphasis on literacy in Mary's class programme was extended to involve the parents in the work that children took home. This included the daily reading books, the spelling lists, and the "published" stories that children had written. "Time on task" is known to have a positive effect on learning and may have contributed to the success of the children in Mary's classes. However, it is not just time on task that can make a difference. The type of instruction that children are given about the task will also impact on their learning.

2) Incorporating Structured Synthetic Phonics Within The Class Literacy Programme.

Mary's classroom programme included many aspects of a traditional New Zealand whole language programme. Children listened to stories and engaged in shared reading, guided reading, independent reading, and writing. These learning experiences were key parts of Mary's programme but she went beyond these activities to also include

systematic instruction in synthetic phonics. Although the New Zealand Ministry of Education cautions against a pre-planned sequence of phonics lessons (Ministry of Education, 2003; Pitches, Thompson & Watson, 2002), Mary commented that she found it was valuable to use a systematic approach. A structured sequence of lessons meant that Mary could ensure that all children had been taught about particular sounds and spelling patterns by particular points in their schooling. Mary believed that this ensured a much more comprehensive coverage of phonics than would have been possible by relying only on incidental teaching. Mary still made use of many incidental opportunities for making links with phonics when children were reading and writing. Indeed, she found that she was better able to recognise and utilise opportunities for incidental teaching because her own knowledge of the English spelling system had increased as a result of teaching the phonics programme.

In a synthetic phonics programme, such as the one used by Mary, children are first taught the sounds of letters and then learn how to blend these into words. The programme guidelines (Lloyd, 1998) recommend that children not be given books to attempt to read until after they have been taught all of the letter sounds, which takes 8 to 9 weeks if following the suggested schedule. Mary, however, used a modified form of the programme for her classes. As described above, she introduced letter sounds at a slower rate for the Year 1 class. She also provided children with books, containing simple predictable text, to read from the time they first started at school. Although Mary's programme differed from the guidelines, the Year 1 class still made rapid progress. It may be that the Jolly Phonics programme is reasonably robust and can be implemented in a variety of ways that each produce positive outcomes. It is also possible that there are special benefits from combining phonics with a whole language emphasis (see Xue & Meisels, 2004). Alternatively, it could be that the children would have shown even greater gains if the programme guidelines had been followed more closely.

Research on phonics has often found that it is particularly valuable in the early stages of learning to read at school (National Reading Panel, 2000). However the results for Mary's Year 2 class indicate that a structured phonics programme can still result in

rapid gains in reading when it is first introduced to children in their second year of school. The children in this class had not been exposed to a structured phonics programme in Year 1. After they were involved in the Year 2 phonics programme for 5 months they showed an average increase of 14 months in the level of their word recognition scores.

3) A Balance of Individualised and Whole Class Instruction

Mary's literacy programme combined individualised instruction with lessons directed at the whole class. Individualised instruction occurred mostly during group reading lessons and during independent writing. Organising the reading groups according to reading achievement helped to ensure that each child was reading books at an appropriate level and enabled Mary to target guided reading lessons to the needs of each group. During independent writing time, Mary provided guidance and feedback to individual children each day.

Although important parts of the literacy programme were individualised, whole class instruction made up significant parts of Mary's teaching. Even though children had a wide range of achievement levels, Mary found it was effective to provide whole class lessons on sounds, spelling patterns and grammar points. The worksheets that followed on from these lessons were the same for all children in the class, as were the weekly spelling lists.

Delivering whole class instruction would appear to go against the recommendations of some literacy educators who have noted the value of differentiated instruction (see e.g., Juel & Minden-Cupp, 2000; McDonald Connor, Morrison, & Katch, 2004). However, it may be that whole class teaching can be valuable when it is balanced with individualised literacy activities. Mary commented that in the past she had individualised teaching to a greater extent (e.g., individual or group spelling lists, group based instruction on word analysis skills) but considered this had been less effective. The more groups that the class was divided into, the less teacher time that was available for each group. Mary found that having the whole class work on the same phonics and spelling patterns at one time facilitated the revision of this material. It also allowed her

to make relevant links with phonics and spelling knowledge when working with the whole class on other curriculum activities that involved reading and writing.

Mary endeavoured to cater for the range of achievement levels by providing differential support during whole class lessons. Her knowledge of the class allowed her to ask individual children questions that were appropriate to their level of understanding. She also provided differential guidance in the spelling quiz, giving additional prompts to the lower achieving children.

Although high achievers may have already known some of what was taught, they were probably still able to make gains in how well they knew the material. Overlearning would have helped these children to achieve automaticity in their knowledge of phonics and spelling patterns.

Low achievers, by being exposed to the same phonics content as high achievers, would be less likely to suffer the consequences of the differentiated curriculum that can occur where children in different achievement groups in the same class are exposed to very different content. Such differentiated curriculum can lead to an exacerbation of achievement differences (see Stanovich, 1986).

It may be that whole class instruction would be less appropriate for older children because the range of the children's achievement levels is likely to be considerably greater than in the first years of school. At the Year 1 and Year 2 level, however, Mary's results suggest that whole class phonics instruction can be a valuable part of an effective literacy programme.

Conclusion

The progress of children in Mary's classes indicates that it is possible to successfully incorporate structured phonics within a New Zealand whole language programme. Mary's literacy programme retained many important aspects of a whole language approach, including the integration of reading and writing, the use of authentic texts for beginning readers, and grouping children to ensure they were reading books at an appropriate level. Although the inclusion of structured phonics may be contrary to

the tenets of whole language, it is possible that the use of phonics contributed to the rapid progress of the children in reading and spelling.

The case study nature of this investigation does not permit conclusions about the causal effects of phonics instruction but the results indicate that structured phonics certainly does no harm. The positive findings for structured phonics in recent reviews of research into the teaching of reading in Australia, America, and the UK (National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy, 2005; National Reading Panel, 2000; Rose, 2006) suggest that it would be valuable for New Zealand educators to further examine the potential benefits of incorporating structured phonics within traditional whole language programmes.

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Table 1
Text Reading Levels and Reading Ages for Year 1 Class

Time	Mean age (years, months)	Mean reading level and standard deviation	Mean reading age (years, months)
March	5.7	7.6 (5.1)	5.7
November	6.3	19.0 (5.9)	7.7

Note. March, n=24; November, n=23 (Text reading results unavailable for 1 child).

Table 2

Burt Word Reading and SAST Spelling Scores in November Year 1

Test	Mean age (years, months)	Mean score and standard deviation	Equivalent reading or spelling age (years, months)
Burt word reading	6.3	33.4 (14.5)	7.2
South Australian spelling test	6.3	24.6 (6.6)	7.5

Note. n=24

Table 3

Text Reading Levels and Reading Ages for Year 2 Class

Time	Mean age (years, months)	Mean reading level and standard deviation	Mean reading age (years, months)
March	6.3	15.5 (5.5)	6.10
June	6.6	20.5 (4.5)	7.11
September	6.9	22.1 (3.3)	8.6
November	6.11	23.7 (3.3)	8.11

Note. n=22

Table 4

Burt Word Reading Scores for Year 2 Class

Month	Mean age (years, months)	Mean score and standard deviation	Equivalent reading age (years, months)
February	6.2	23.7 (10.0)	6.5
May	6.5	31.6 (10.3)	7.1
June	6.6	37.5 (9.5)	7.7
October	6.10	42.8 (10.6)	7.11
December	7.00	46.2 (11.4)	8.3

Note. n=22