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The Status of Phonics Instruction: Learning From the Teachers

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Abstract

Increasingly alarmed by instructional mandates more founded on journalistic rhetoric and popular opinion than on research findings or practitioner expertise, researchers gathered survey data from teachers to better understand the status of K–2 phonics instruction. Data demonstrate that the overwhelming majority of these K–2 teachers teach phonics, rely on a published curriculum, and teach phonics in systematic and explicit ways. These findings contradict media assertions that reading classrooms are largely devoid of phonics instruction and that teachers fail to include phonics as an important element of their reading instruction. Implications include calls for researchers to explore what teachers can share that helps us better understand what happens in the name of classroom phonics instruction and for decision makers to assume an informed stance before mandating instructional practices based on a narrow understanding of the needs of young readers and the teachers who support them.

Keywords: *phonics, reading instruction, early literacy*

The abiding controversy surrounding how children learn to read and how teachers support that learning remains a hot topic in popular media. Journalists are raising alarm bells about a national reading crisis and criticizing schools across the nation for a purported lack of phonics instruction. For example, Hanford (2019), who has remained at the forefront of science of reading journalism for the last several years, claimed that U.S. elementary schools are failing to correctly instruct young readers, arguing that science has shown that systematic and explicit phonics instruction is the key to learning how to read. Further, Hanford (2018) has berated teacher education programs, contending that university instructors either are ignorant of the “reading science” (para. 9) or dismiss it. Other journalists (e.g., Ambrose, 2020; Sohn, 2020) have agreed and gone even further to suggest that when phonics is addressed in classrooms, the inconsistent or faulty way it is

taught has harmed students or stalled national reading progress.

The science of reading movement, defined by some as “settled science” (Renaissance, 2021, para. 1) about how to teach reading, relies heavily on a view of explicit and systematic phonics instruction as the key element in learning to read. Others (e.g., Thomas, 2020) have argued against the notion of settled science and the application of a narrow view of science to prescribe instructional decision making. Hanford (2018) stated that “decades of scientific research has revealed that reading doesn’t come naturally” (para. 6) and therefore phonics must be explicitly taught to young learners. However, Hanford argued that “this research hasn’t made its way into many elementary school classrooms” (para. 8); popular media would have us believe that few classrooms include phonics in their reading instruction.

Media depictions of reading instruction have contributed to “the new reading wars” (Hood, 2019), particularly attacking educators who use balanced literacy or whole-language practices in their classrooms and eroding trust in teachers and public education more broadly. The media’s messaging has become normalized, even lacking substantive evidentiary backing for the claims, resulting in a “mushrooming cloud” of state legislation that will mandate intensive phonics as the “secret weapon” in the reading wars (MacPhee et al., 2021, pp. S149, S148).

Illinois, where the current study was conducted, adopted the Common Core Standards for English Language Arts in 2010 (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010). This state expectation for reading instruction included numerous mentions across grade levels that students “know and apply grade-level phonics and word analysis skills in decoding words” (p. 16). In 2018, Illinois drafted the *Illinois State Board of Education Literacy Framework* “to provide administrators, educators, and other literacy leadership a guide for planning an effective, comprehensive literacy program” (p. 2). Expectations outlined in this document, which has since been archived, explained that “phonics instruction and materials should provide a systematic sequence (the letter sound relationship is taught in an organized and logical sequence) and explicit teaching focus (the instruction provides teachers with precise directions for teaching letter-sound relationships)” (p. 25).

Contentious portrayals of reading instruction and mandates in state, national, and international contexts (Gewertz, 2020; Wyse & Bradbury, 2022) appear to be the result of narrow viewpoints that fail to include any systematic attempt to include teacher perspectives in the discussion. The media articles often include stories from individual teachers or parents, but such anecdotes lack the convincing evidence that might allow teacher voices to provide on-the-ground knowledge to guide decision-making about classroom reading instruction. As Nogueron-Liu (2020) contends:

It matters who is at the table making decisions about curriculum and assessment and looking closely at data—across languages, across perspectives, and across research paradigms. . . . [P]ushing a single science or method is not enough. The goal should be building an evidence-informed action plan for every reader, amplifying the voices of those who navigate multiple spheres and can bridge understandings and whose perspectives may be missing. (p. S315)

As a result of our concern over the voices that are largely absent in this conversation, we designed a study to learn from teachers themselves about the status of phonics instruction in their classrooms.

We gathered data from primary classroom teachers in one state, Illinois, to respond to the following overarching research question: What is the status of phonics instruction in K–2 classrooms? We sought specific information from K–2 teachers about whether they provide phonics instruction, what methods and curricula they use, how much time they spend providing phonics instruction, and how they acquired their current knowledge and beliefs about phonics and phonics instruction. Importantly, the aim of this study was not to address the differing views on how phonics instruction should occur for young readers. Rather, the goal was to add teachers’ voices to understandings about how phonics instruction does occur in classrooms, to support the evaluation of media claims about what teachers do, as such messaging has demonstrated the power to alter education policy in states and districts across the country.

Review of Research

To better understand the ways primary teachers provide phonics instruction and how their instruction links to their knowledge and beliefs and to their professional backgrounds, we first examined past findings on teachers’ use of phonics in their reading instruction and mandates that impacted the instruction they provided. Further, we explored scholarship on teachers’ understandings and perspectives regarding phonics instruction, along with background factors that may have influenced them. We accessed EBSCO, ERIC, Education Full Text, Google Scholar, and APA PsychInfo databases to locate sources for this topic, including articles from 2000 to 2020. We also investigated key references cited in other articles to identify resources relevant to the topic. For popular media accounts, we did a Google search.

Despite extensive critique in recent popular media, scholarly studies on teachers’ knowledge of phonics and implementation of phonics instruction are far fewer, making an examination of past research unexpectedly challenging. For example, we examined how phonics instruction is conducted in general education classrooms, while much past research studied special education populations. In addition, widely divided perspectives on phonics instruction are sometimes evident in studies’ methodologies or conclusions, rendering an impartial review difficult, and few studies of classroom phonics instruction have been published in recent years. With these parameters in mind, in the following sections we share some representative scholarly perspectives that provide context in which to situate current findings.

Classroom Use of Phonics

Despite its prevalence as a highly contested media topic (MacPhee et al., 2021), there is a surprising lack of recent peer-reviewed research about how teachers provide phonics instruction. In one of few studies exploring this topic, Dahl and Scharer (2000) examined phonics instruction provided by eight elementary teachers operating under whole-language principles, which are typically portrayed as devoid of phonics. The researchers explained that in spite of the common misconception, they “saw no evidence of children being denied access to phonics instruction. Quite the contrary, instruction about letter-sound relationships occurred in a wide range of contexts on every visit” (p. 593).

The discrepancy between media portrayals and the limited available studies on phonics in classrooms may result from the form phonics instruction takes. Proponents of explicit, systematic programs may fail to recognize phonics instruction embedded within

a broader swath of other reading components. Wide variations of phonics instruction are evident in the range of published curricula in classrooms, though again, research is scant. We describe below some past scholarship on common phonics instruction methods.

Phonics curricula. School districts and individual classrooms employ a wide range of phonics curricula, often consisting of published, structured programs. Reading and phonics curricula are usually marketed as evidence or research based; the publishers typically expound the positive impacts of their programs for students' reading growth. However, past studies have called into question some publishers' claims. For example, Altwerger et al. (2004) compared the effectiveness of several reading programs: scripted direct instruction programs Open Court Reading (OCR) and Reading Mastery and a guided reading approach. The researchers found that explicit phonics instruction employed by the programs did not improve children's graphophonic knowledge or comprehension and in fact inhibited children's focus on constructing meaning.

The OCR program was the focus of a study of 1,200 K–4 teachers and their 4,500 students by Vaden-Kiernan et al. (2016), who argued that the widespread use of OCR warranted more objective studies. Based on their findings, the researchers stated, "This study provides preliminary evidence that the impacts of OCR are not significant on overall students' reading performance when implemented at scale in a large sample of schools after one or two years relative to other core reading curricula" (p. A4).

In another study, Campbell et al. (2014) interviewed five early childhood teachers about their use of three scripted phonics programs: *Ants in the Apple*, *Letterland*, and *Jolly Phonics*. Findings pointed to teachers' preferences for ready-made lessons that were easy to teach and provided tangible evidence to parents. The researchers noted, "The reasons given by early childhood teachers in this study for using commercial phonics programs were pragmatic rather than pedagogical, and focused more on the needs of teachers and parents than on children's learning and development" (p. 47).

Although not a specific reading curriculum, Orton-Gillingham, a structured literacy approach, and programs designed on this approach, such as *Wilson Foundations*, are regularly promoted by advocates of the science of reading movement and by organizations such as the International Dyslexia Association. A recent meta-analysis (Stevens et al., 2021) of Orton-Gillingham-based intervention methods for students at risk of word-level reading disabilities found that such methods did not significantly improve students' foundational skill, vocabulary, or comprehension outcomes.

These studies demonstrate that, in spite of publisher claims and their popularity among advocates of scripted or explicit phonics programs, it appears some of the most widely recommended curricula have failed to demonstrate their value in improving reading skills over other instructional methods. Despite this lack of evidence, federal, state, and local requirements increasingly compel teachers to use specific types of reading instruction, often with added focus on phonics programs. In the next section we describe some of these mandates and some outcomes.

Mandates for phonics instruction. Nationally (Gewertz, 2020) and internationally (e.g., Wyse & Bradbury, 2022), teachers are increasingly required to adhere to specific reading programs or curricula with an emphasis on explicit phonics, in spite of widespread questioning of such mandates. Torgenson et al. (2019) described a decades-long governmental push in England to require synthetic phonics instruction and phonics screenings for early learners and the ongoing concern (e.g., Darnell et al., 2017)

over the efficacy of such an approach. In the United States, mandates spawned by the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, in the form of Reading First subgrants awarded to 1,809 school districts, required instructional focus on phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension (Gamse et al., 2008). Findings of a congressionally commissioned study of 28 school systems working under Reading First mandates suggested that while teachers spent more class time engaged in explicit phonics instruction and guided practice, “the program did not increase the percentages of students in grades one, two, or three, whose reading comprehension scores were at or above grade level.” (Gamse et al., 2008, p. xiv).

In the Altwerger et al. (2004) study, in which scripted phonics-focused programs did not support publishers’ claims for student growth, the researchers suggested that a critical approach to curricular decision making was warranted. They identified a misalignment for the teachers and teacher candidates with whom they worked, explaining that the teachers “are discouraged at their schools to be independent decision-makers and creative thinkers and are, instead, expected to be passive recipients and translators of a script, teacher’s manual, or curriculum guide” (p. 126).

Beyond requirements for specific programs, another expectation for some teachers is to implement phonics programs with fidelity, which includes the requirement that “teachers deliver instruction and assessment through the use of specified resources provided in a curriculum” (Nevenglosky et al., 2019, p. 31). Nevenglosky and colleagues (2019) interviewed eight teachers and two administrators to identify concerns and barriers experienced when implementing a new phonics program with curriculum fidelity. The researchers found that lack of training, lack of administrative support, and unclear expectations were the major challenges and recommended more effective professional development and ongoing program evaluation if the expectation is scripted phonics instruction.

Overall, a review of the limited research on classroom phonics instruction appears to indicate that phonics instruction occurred in classrooms that were investigated, in spite of journalistic claims that phonics instruction is not happening. Mandates for scripted and/or explicit phonics instruction are increasing, and teachers often feel compelled to rely on such programs despite a lack of research demonstrating their benefits over other methods. These findings, including how phonics instruction is implemented in primary classrooms, is necessarily influenced by teachers’ knowledge and beliefs about phonics instruction and how these develop across teachers’ careers; these topics are addressed below.

Teachers’ Perspectives and Knowledge

Findings reveal the considerable importance of the knowledge and beliefs of teachers when it comes to student learning experiences (e.g., Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005; Rowan et al., 2002), particularly in the early literacy classroom (Kindle, 2013). Below, we provide a brief summary of past scholarship on teachers’ knowledge and perspectives related to phonics instruction, which has important implications for classroom reading instruction.

Teacher beliefs. Findings from several studies demonstrate that teachers generally recognize the benefits of phonics instruction on learning to read, though perspectives and practices vary and findings have been scarce in recent years. One study (Shaffer et al., 2000) found that elementary teachers viewed phonics as a necessary component of literacy and supported more emphasis on phonics in the classroom. This was confirmed by Baumann et al. (2000), whose study included a participant pool of 1,207 Prekind-

garten through Grade 5 teachers: 99% of their K–3 participants indicated that phonics instruction was *essential* or *important* and two-thirds of the K–2 teachers used a synthetic phonics approach to instruction. Mesmer and Griffith (2005) surveyed primary teachers about their preferred approaches to phonics instruction, and most participants in their study indicated a preference for an explicit, systematic approach. In a study of more than 500 preservice and in-service teachers (Bos et al., 2001), participants had positive views of explicit phonics instruction, though they reported an overall lack of phonics knowledge.

Teacher understandings. Findings across a number of studies point to a lack among teacher participants of basic phonics knowledge that the researchers deemed important for phonics instruction, though researchers varied in their determination of understandings teachers should hold. A study by Arrow et al. (2019) of 27 New Zealand teachers found that the teachers, while having high levels of phonological knowledge and a medium amount of phonemic knowledge, had low levels of phonics knowledge and even less morphological knowledge. These findings are consistent with a study by Bos and colleagues (2001), who also reported low levels of phonics knowledge by preservice and in-service teachers. Other studies have shown that teachers tend to overestimate their phonics and other reading knowledge. Cunningham et al. (2004) found that K–3 teachers lacked knowledge about phonemic awareness and phonics even though they rated their knowledge as high, a finding echoed by Bell et al. (2004).

A recent literature review by Tortorelli et al. (2021) examined 27 studies that had explored preservice elementary teachers' understanding of code-based literacy skills. The authors found several patterns across these studies indicating that preservice teachers struggle with the identification and construction of phonemes, that pedagogical knowledge was not emphasized in the studies, and that there was no unified standard on which researchers in the studies based their conclusions. Tortorelli and colleagues concluded that although the studies emphasized issues that should be addressed in the preparation of preservice teachers, they found gaps in the research, pointing to a need for further examination of teachers' code-based knowledge.

Teachers' education backgrounds. Studies have explored connections between prior phonics knowledge and phonics instruction, including research with in-service teachers (e.g., Podhajski et al., 2009), preservice teachers (e.g., O'Callaghan, 2001), and teacher educators (e.g., Joshi, Binks, Hougen, et al., 2009). Teachers point to their own experiences as K–12 students, their education as preservice teachers, and their work in classrooms as forces that shape their knowledge and beliefs about phonics instruction.

Studies with teacher candidates have provided information regarding phonics-based knowledge at the onset of educators' careers. O'Callaghan (2001) studied four teacher education students, each of whom was asked to construct a philosophy of literacy instruction. Analysis of this data revealed the emergence of various themes resulting from participants' education backgrounds and cultures, suggesting that the life histories of preservice teachers impacted their approaches and philosophies regarding literacy instruction, including approaches to phonics instruction.

Teacher preparation programs and their instructors appear to also impact phonics knowledge among educators. In two studies (Joshi, Binks, Hougen, et al., 2009) conducted with teacher education faculty, many instructors struggled to identify phonics terminology and definitions and demonstrated gaps in their knowledge of phonics instruction. The researchers explained that since most instructors in the study identified with a

balanced literacy approach, the instructors may have lacked focus or interest in explicit phonics instruction, resulting in coursework that does not readily boost teacher candidates' pedagogical knowledge centered on phonics concepts.

The instructional materials used in teacher education programs also provide insights into the phonics knowledge to which teacher candidates are exposed. Joshi, Binks, Graham, et al. (2009) examined a sample of 17 textbooks used in teacher education departments nationwide for components of reading instruction recommended by the National Reading Panel (2000), including phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. Their findings suggested that 13 of the 17 textbooks covered all five areas named by the National Reading Panel, but not all topics received equal coverage. Joshi et al. noted, "In general, phonemic awareness, phonics, and fluency, which are considered to be foundations of reading, were given less attention compared to vocabulary and comprehension" (p. 460).

Possibilities for teacher growth in phonics-based knowledge continue through professional development opportunities. Podhajski et al. (2009) utilized data from five primary teachers to consider participants' knowledge of phonics-based instruction and to examine the role of phonics-centered professional development. Results showed the experimental group who received explicit phonics training made significant gains in pedagogical and assessment knowledge.

This review of research on teachers' understandings and beliefs about phonics instruction suggests that, generally, teachers believe in the importance of phonics instruction but their knowledge levels vary, though this conclusion is complicated by a lack of consistency in the components of reading instruction that researchers considered worthy of investigation. For example, numerous studies compared teachers' reading instruction to elements named by the National Reading Panel or by advocates of heavily phonics-based curriculum, despite widely varied perspectives (Castles et al., 2018) regarding the essential components of early reading instruction. Clearly, knowledge and beliefs about phonics concepts and instruction continue to develop across the lives of educators, both before and during their teaching careers, and teachers' phonics instructional practices influence how young children learn to read. Therefore, a deeper understanding from teachers' perspectives of the status of classroom phonics instruction and the background influences on that instruction have important implications for efforts to support reading at macro and micro levels. This compelled us to examine the status of phonics instruction in one state in order to contribute to scholarship that can help filter contentious and potentially damaging media portrayals of teachers' reading instruction.

Methods

In this study, we gathered survey data from teachers in K–2 classrooms to better understand how they teach phonics and how their instruction links to their beliefs and professional backgrounds. We emailed more than 2,150 principals in Illinois a request to distribute our survey to teachers in their schools, and 178 principals agreed to send the survey to over 1,650 of the state's approximately 11,000 K–2 teachers. The survey was constructed in Qualtrics, and a link to the survey was distributed to teachers by principals who responded to our invitation. Survey questions are included in Appendix A.

More than 400 teachers from across the state responded to the survey (see Figure 1), for a response rate of 29%. Survey data were downloaded, cleaned, and moved to SPSS for analysis. We ran descriptive statistics for all variables and t-tests to explore relationships between categorical variables (e.g., grade level, published curriculum, level

of satisfaction with instruction) and the amount of time each week teachers reported spending on phonics instruction. To analyze qualitative responses to survey questions, we began with in vivo coding and then used descriptive coding to apply a word or phrase that summarized basic topics of participants' responses. In a second cycle of coding, we grouped our descriptive codes into categories that allowed us to view patterns evident in the data and use this information to respond to our research questions.

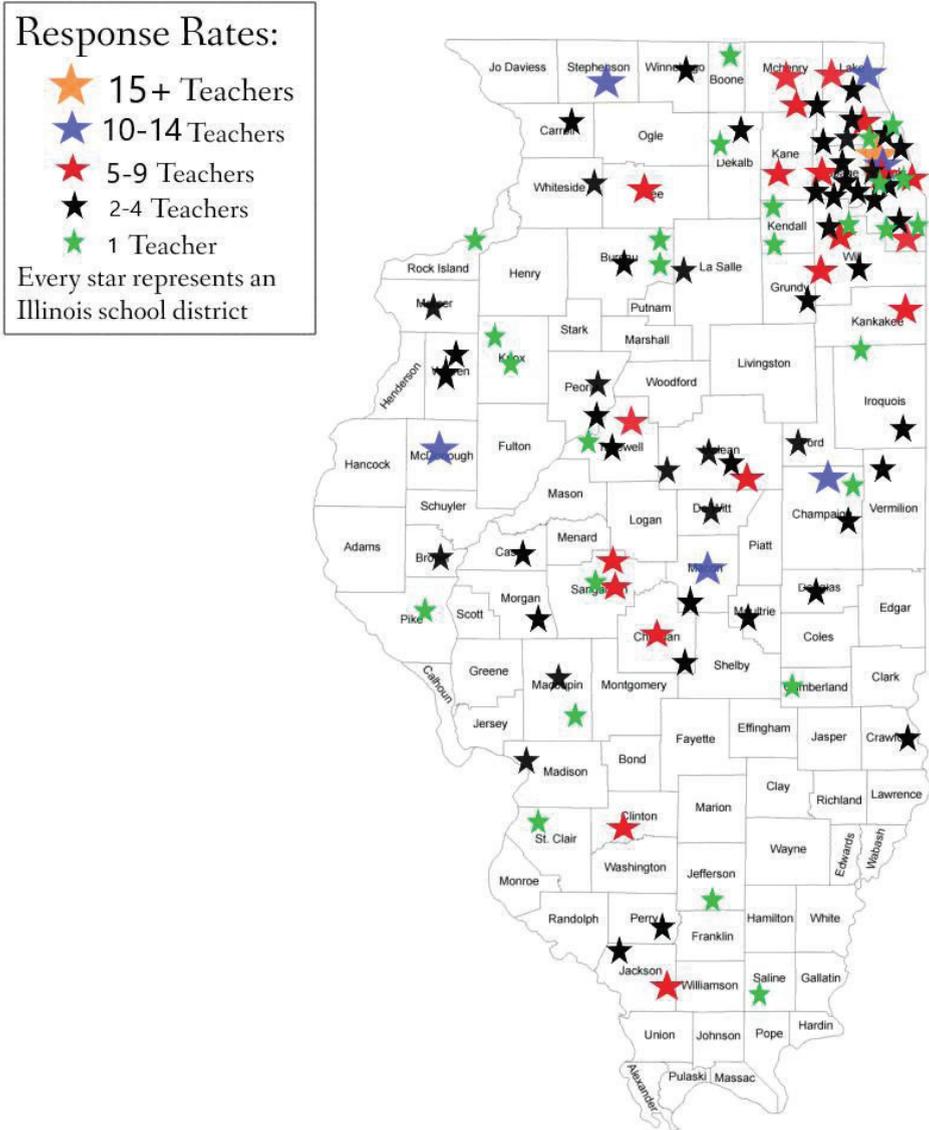


Figure 1. Survey Response Rates

they use a published curriculum to guide their instruction; 78% of those reported that the curriculum they use is mandated by their school district, and 69% received training to implement the program. Of participants who use a published curriculum, 85% reported that they follow the publisher's scope and sequence and 88% supplement with additional instructional materials. Teachers reported spending an average of 119 minutes per week teaching phonics in their K–2 classrooms. T-tests revealed no significant relationships between variables when compared to the amount of instructional time spent on phonics (see Table 1).

Table 1

Status of K–2 Phonics Instruction in Illinois

Survey question	Number of responses	% yes	% no
Do you teach phonics?	424	97	3
Do you use a published curriculum to provide phonics instruction?	403	80	20
Is the curriculum mandated by your school district?	316	78	22
Did you receive training in how to implement the published curriculum?	315	69	31
Do you follow the publisher's recommended scope and sequence of the curriculum?	314	85	15
Do you supplement the published curriculum with other materials?	316	88	12

Published curricula. When asked whether they use a published curriculum to deliver phonics instruction, 323 participants (80%) answered yes, naming 30 publishers and 41 specific programs. (Responses to the question “What kinds of things do you use to supplement the published curriculum?” were calculated separately.) Programs representing the highest reported main source of phonics instruction include Heggerty and Wilson's Foundations (13% each), Jolly Phonics/Grammar (10%), and Fountas and Pinnell (7%). Table 2 includes all published curricula named by participants as their primary or supplemental instruction. (Table 2 includes all published program names to provide a clear picture of published curricula reported by study participants.)

Table 2

Published Curricula Used by Participants

Publisher/company/program	Category	Total mentions
Heggerty	Published curricula/supplemental materials	92
Jolly Learning/Grammar/Phonics	Published curricula/supplemental materials	71
Wilson Foundations	Published curricula	53
Jan Richardson	Published curricula/supplemental materials	41
Fountas and Pinnell	Published curricula/supplemental materials	36
Pearson Words Their Way	Published curricula	30
McGraw Hill Wonders/ConnectEd	Published curricula	16
Benchmark Advance	Published curricula	15
Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Journeys	Published curricula	15
Zaner Bloser Superkids	Published curricula	14
Saxon Phonics	Published curricula	9
Lucy Calkins	Published curricula	8
Orton-Gillingham	Published curricula	8
Reading Horizons	Published curricula	8
A to Z	Supplemental materials	7
Pearson Reading Streets	Published curricula/supplemental materials/online	7
Pearson Ready Gen	Published curricula	6
McGraw-Hill Open Court	Published curricula	5
Char-L Intensive Phonics	Published curricula	3
Deanna Jump	Supplemental materials	3
Estrellita	Published curricula/supplemental materials	3
Macmillan Treasures	Published curricula	3

Supplemental materials. The 314 participants who use published programs were asked if they supplement with other materials, and 266 (88%) reported that they do. Of note, some of the materials used as supplements are considered published curricula in

their own right. The two published programs most used as supplements are Jan Richardson and Heggerty, both reported by 12% of respondents. Of participants who supplement their published curriculum, 21% reported that they use Teachers Pay Teachers and 19% noted that they supplement with hands-on or self-created activities. Other top-named supplemental materials included games (14%), online materials (9%), and videos 23 (9%). Table 3 contains a list of materials or strategies not included in Table 2 that participants named as supplements to their phonics instruction.

Table 3

Supplementary Materials

Title	Category	Total mentions
Teachers Pay Teachers	Published curricula/supplemental materials - online	58
Hands-on activities	Supplemental materials - activities	51
Games	Supplemental materials - other	38
Online materials	Supplemental materials - online	25
Videos	Supplemental materials - online	23
Small group	Supplemental materials - activities	14
Poetry	Supplemental materials - other	7
Worksheets	Supplemental materials - teacher created	7
Guided reading	Supplemental materials - activities	4

Teacher Satisfaction with Phonics Instruction

Teachers were asked to indicate the elements of their phonics instruction with which they were satisfied and/or dissatisfied. Patterns identified in their responses revealed five categories: (1) support for instruction, (2) support for student learning, (3) attention to phonics or fundamental skills, (4) cohesion with other curricular areas, and (5) support for teacher needs. Beyond these categories, few patterns were evident in teachers' responses about satisfaction or dissatisfaction with aspects of their instruction; components praised by some teachers were criticized by others. Descriptions and representative data from the top three categories are included below.

Support for instruction. By far, the greatest number of teacher responses about their satisfaction or dissatisfaction related to the support the materials provided for their instruction. Responses included, for example, numerous mentions of the scope and sequence of a published program, activities and materials provided or required, the preparation and ease of use, and the amount of time required for instruction. Responses were fairly evenly divided between satisfaction and dissatisfaction with these elements. One teacher remarked, "I like that it's very systematic and follows a consistent structure and routine," while another said:

The lack of a coherent set of materials and the uncertainty that the system I've developed through the last 15 years is really good are my main concerns. I use a variety of materials from various sources and have found a system that seems

to work well through trial and error. It works well for most students, but I'm not sure it's best.

Clearly, the tendency for phonics instruction to support their teaching needs was of primary importance to these participants.

Support for student learning. The second most prevalent number of responses fell in the category of support for student learning; in this category, teachers mostly indicated satisfaction with their phonics instruction. This included elements such as growth in their students' abilities, instructional materials, or activities that were developmentally appropriate or actively engaged students. For example, one teacher noted:

It really builds on the students' knowledge. The phonics instruction is included in a Daily Routine portion of the curriculum so the students get instruction in small chunks on a daily basis. I think this helps them to use their skills and remember the concepts.

One common pattern of responses in this category with which teachers indicated dissatisfaction was instruction that failed to keep students' attention. One teacher expressed dissatisfaction "with the drill; it is very teacher-led and not very engaging for students," while another complained that the phonics instruction "can get boring for students." The ability of their instruction to support their students' learning was obviously important to these teachers.

Attention to phonic or fundamental skills. The third most common responses were in the category labeled *attention to phonic or fundamental skills*, in which teachers expressed their satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the way the curriculum suggested teaching phonics elements and/or other foundational skills. Some teachers mentioned a general desire to increase the focus on phonics: "Our program doesn't go in depth, more of just a review and even in second grade I feel they still need direct instruction with phonics." While others were generally satisfied: "I feel that between all of those resources, my phonics instruction is hitting what's most important." Other teachers commented on specific phonic elements: "I like the rigorous concepts of the program. I do not like the order. I would prefer the digraphs to come earlier in the program"; "The Jolly Phonics curriculum focuses on the 42 sounds in the English language, not just the 26 letter sounds of the alphabet." Overall, findings appear to demonstrate that components of instruction that teachers were most concerned with are those that support their teaching and their students' learning about phonics principles.

Teacher Knowledge and Beliefs About Phonics

Teachers provided information about how they developed their knowledge and beliefs about phonics instruction and six themes were evident in their responses: experience, coursework, professional development, curriculum, independent learning, and collaborating with a colleague. Although we list themes individually, participants most often referred to some combination of influences on their knowledge and beliefs. Each theme is described below.

Experience. The most common way teachers reported developing their knowledge and beliefs about phonics instruction is from experience. This theme included codes such as experience, working with students, trial and error, and practice. For example, one teacher reported that their knowledge and beliefs about phonics instruction "has evolved over the years through my experiences of working with a variety of students with a variety of needs." Similarly, others acknowledged their experience with different resources

and curricula, “experience in teaching many different resources that have been cycled through school districts,” and experience with students having difficulty learning to read influenced participants’ understanding of phonics instruction. One teacher noted, “My experience with lower readers has shown me how crucial phonics instruction is to critical reading and comprehension.”

Another teacher acknowledged that their transition in grade levels shifted their thinking about phonics instruction:

I started my career teaching kindergarten before moving to 2nd grade. That transition really opened my eyes to how important of a role phonics skills play in a child’s journey as they learn to read. My 2nd grade students that did not receive phonics instruction generally struggle to learn and retain new words more than my students with strong phonics backgrounds.

For these teachers, classroom experiences clearly contributed to their knowledge and beliefs about phonics instruction.

Coursework. Second only to experience, participants acknowledged coursework as influential in the development of their knowledge and beliefs about phonics instruction. In addition to general comments about coursework, such as “I had a very strong reading course in college,” it was common for participants to articulate a particular institution, course, or clinical experience, such as student teaching, as particularly relevant in their developing knowledge. For example, one participant reported, “I attended Illinois College and they have an amazing education department where we had multiple phonics and literacy based classes we had to take.” Others recognized how in their undergraduate program they learned the importance of phonics instruction in relation to other aspects of reading: “I developed my knowledge and belief system in my undergrad program. Participants really stressed the importance of phonics development helping students with their reading fluency and comprehension. They taught about how it was all interconnected.”

Although many teachers acknowledged undergraduate and graduate coursework as influential in their learning, some recalled phonics being minimized in their early education and teacher education programs:

A lot of it was done through research and learning on my own. I received some phonics instruction as an undergraduate and some as I was getting my master’s degree. That instruction did not motivate me to teach phonics regularly. It taught me that it was indeed important, but it did not hit home just how important it is.

Another participant noted:

I was not taught explicit phonics when I was in school. I was not trained in college to teach phonics. I was trained in Reading Recovery early in my teaching career and phonics was almost like saying a curse word. This year I applied to tutor at the Dyslexia Center in Rock Island, IL and I was trained in the Orton-Gillingham method. This is my first experience (I am 34 years old) in explicit phonics and I LOVE IT!

Interestingly, although broad media claims have been made about a lack of attention to early reading skills in teacher education programs, teachers largely (though not unanimously) reported coursework at both undergraduate and graduate levels as important to their understanding of phonics and phonics instruction.

Professional development. Participants acknowledged professional learning as an important contributor to their knowledge and beliefs about phonics instruction. The theme professional development is inclusive of school-based, or internal, learning opportunities such as training on specific phonics curriculum or external workshops and conferences that teachers attended with or without school district support. One participant reported that their knowledge and beliefs about phonics instruction was influenced by “nine to ten years of our district engaging in professional development.” Others articulated that attending workshops and conferences influenced their understanding of the importance of phonics instruction and provided strategies for effective phonics instruction. One teacher responded, “Workshops and conferences. I’ve seen amazing increase in reading and writing skills when phonics instruction is strongly incorporated.” Participant responses indicated that they took advantage of learning opportunities offered in and out of their district settings to support development of their phonics instructional knowledge and beliefs.

The final categories participants recognized as impactful on their learning were their work with particular phonics curricula, self-initiated learning about phonics through independent research, and collaboration with colleagues. Overall, they reported learning about phonics and/or phonics curriculum across the range of their careers, in university classrooms and in the schools where they teach. The few participants who did not acknowledge formal learning opportunities sought out information about effective instructional practices from colleagues and experts in their schools. In seeking to understand how K–2 teachers developed their knowledge and beliefs about phonics, we learned that, overwhelmingly, the teacher participants in our study believed that phonics instruction is important for young readers and they took advantage of opportunities across a number of settings to learn more.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to bring teachers’ voices into the ongoing debate about reading instruction, based on our concern that there has been little effort to systematically gather information from teachers themselves about their phonics instruction. This will enable us to view through the lens of classroom teachers recent media claims about phonics instruction in elementary classrooms. An evaluation of the quality of phonics instruction was not attempted in this study. Instead, we chose to gather information about what is being taught, relying on teachers in Illinois K–2 classrooms to inform our understanding about what and how phonics instruction is occurring, as well as what has informed the teachers’ knowledge and perspectives. In the sections below, we juxtapose our findings with messages from the popular press to enable the teachers’ input to provide more clarity about the status of classroom phonics instruction. Allowing teacher voices to inform our understanding about the status of phonics instruction will support credible and practical implications for classrooms and learners as well as for education policy.

Classroom Phonics Instruction

Our highest priority in this study was to determine teachers’ perspectives on whether phonics is taught in their K–2 classrooms. This concern stemmed from our confusion over numerous media stories lamenting the paucity of phonics instruction in primary grades. For example, Illinois journalist Jay Ambrose (2020) argued, “A major part of the problem is that too many schools and teachers say no to phonics, or relegate it to something insufficient, and thus it is that we haven’t had much progress in reading for decades” (para. 3). Not only do teachers’ voices appear largely absent from such broad claims, but

these assertions are also in direct contrast to the reading instruction we regularly witness in Illinois classrooms and in our work with Illinois teachers. Our findings from this study, based on teachers' perspectives, provide evidence that confirmed our observations: Over 97% of these participants reported that they teach phonics. It appears clear that information provided by individuals actually implementing reading instruction paints a different picture than views portrayed in the popular press.

Media reports go on to claim that when phonics instruction does occur, it usually isn't of the kind those authors believe will benefit young learners' reading growth. Popular media accounts stand firm in endorsing reading instruction that journalist Emily Sohn (2020) called "a phonics-first approach" (p. 25) that prioritizes the systematic instruction of phonemic awareness, phonics, and spelling, even lacking clear evidence of its promise over other practices (Wyse & Bradbury, 2022) and in the face of current scholarship (e.g., Duke & Cartwright, 2021) that points to reading science as a continually evolving field. As previously stated, it was beyond the scope of this study to evaluate the quality of the teachers' instruction. However, 80% of participants who teach phonics use a published curriculum, and 85% of those follow the publisher's scope and sequence. Therefore, consideration of the published curricula these teachers use may provide some insight into foundational principles on which their phonics instruction is based, if not how they individually facilitate their curriculum.

Published curricula. The two publishers most commonly named by these teachers were Heggerty and Wilson Foundations. The Heggerty website includes numerous resources mentioning "science of reading," "the reading rope," and other terms commonly used by advocates of the so-called science of reading approach. According to its website, Wilson Foundations "is a multisensory and systematic phonics, spelling, and handwriting program" that offers "explicit and systematic" phonics instruction aligned "to Orton-Gillingham principles of instruction and the science of reading." The third most commonly named publisher was Jolly Phonics. The research basis for Jolly Phonics is not specifically described on the website, but the program claims to use a synthetic approach to teach five key skills: letter sounds, letter formation, blending, segmenting, and "tricky words."

Of interest, the top two publishers named by teachers include *science of reading* and related terms in their foundational principles, and the third most-named publisher focuses on foundational phonics skills. While media often decry classroom reading instruction that fails to prioritize systematic and explicit phonics instruction or adhere to what is referred in those circles as the "reading science," the top curricula named by this large group of teacher participants are based in phonics-centered approaches, often with direct connection to science-of-reading philosophies. While research has failed to demonstrate the superiority of phonics-centric reading instruction over other methods (Wyse & Bradbury, 2022), it appears that many of these teachers rely on published programs that align with phonics-centered approaches.

We noted with curiosity that Heggerty, the program most often named by these teachers as the basis of or supplement to their phonics instruction, specifically states on its website that it provides "phonemic awareness lessons," not phonics instruction, an important distinction. This discrepancy leads us to question if teachers are misinformed about the curriculum or about the distinction between phonemic awareness and phonics or if they adapt the materials in some way to provide phonics instruction. These teachers' responses cause us to speculate about a lack of consistency in the field regarding how

terms are applied to phonics instruction.

Overall, our findings provide evidence of phonics instruction across Illinois K–2 classrooms, often in systematic and explicit ways and with programs that adhere to commonly held beliefs about some branches of reading science. Some participant responses indicated a lack of clarity around phonemic awareness and phonics terminology, some misapplication of curricula for purposes it was not intended for, and a wide range of published and supplemental materials used in the name of phonics instruction. Findings from this study, while in direct contrast to many claims in popular media, shed light on some pedagogical inconsistencies that prompt further investigation to truly understand the content of phonics instruction in these contexts.

Support for Teaching Phonics

The foundation for learning to teach phonics begins even prior to formal teacher preparation as individuals engage as novice readers themselves, and learning continues throughout years of schooling, through university coursework, and across teachers' own classroom instruction. In this study, this developmental process was evidenced by participants' descriptions of the ways they developed their knowledge and beliefs about phonics instruction, mostly discussing experiences as preservice and in-service teachers that supported their learning about phonics instruction.

Preservice learning. Multiple media sources have claimed that future teachers fail to adequately learn how to teach reading in their undergraduate education courses, especially related to the kind of phonics instruction that science of reading advocates promote. Data from participants in this study demonstrated that university coursework was a significant influence on teachers' learning; information shared in university courses followed only their teaching experiences as the most common ways teachers developed their knowledge and beliefs about phonics. It is clear that in their preparation to teach reading, most of these teachers learned about phonics instruction.

Of course, journalists have been specific with their complaints: It's not just that teachers aren't learning about phonics; it's that teachers aren't learning about phonics in the way popular media has come to believe phonics should be taught. Hanford (2018), for example, stated, "Most teachers nationwide are not being taught reading science in their teacher preparation programs because many deans and faculty in colleges of education either don't know the science or actively resist it" (para. 8). These media sources have very specific criteria for phonics instruction that is systematic and explicit, linked to information promoted by science-of-reading advocates. For example, LETRS training, published by Voyager Sopris Learning (2022), is often mentioned by these journalists as an example of excellence in reading instruction. Information on the LETRS website states that their program is "passionate about the science of reading." The strong recommendations for this approach are especially curious in light of studies (e.g., Garet et al, 2008) that failed to find support for students' reading achievement based on their teachers' training in the LETRS program.

While most participants in the current study learned about phonics in their university programs, this information may fail to satisfy expectations for phonics instruction through the limited science of reading lens. Tortorelli and colleagues (2021) conducted a literature review on previous studies of teacher preparation related to code-based reading instruction and concluded:

The research base privileges technical, linguistic content knowledge over pedagogical knowledge of how to teach code-related skills and situated practice in engaging and supporting real students. The research was constrained by narrow definitions of science and knowledge, repetition across studies in methods and data sources, and limited samples that overlooked linguistic, cultural, and racial diversity in both preservice teachers and elementary students. (p. S334)

Tortorelli and colleagues cautioned against considering settled the notion that teacher preparation programs neglect code-based reading skills for preservice teachers. A popular press that relies on this narrow research base to draw conclusions about preservice reading education may indeed fail to recognize the foundation for phonics instruction provided for many teacher candidates, as was indicated by participants in the current study.

In-service learning and support. Beyond their teacher preparation, many participants noted the significance of learning about phonics pedagogy in their roles as practicing teachers. In fact, experience was the top category of listed learning opportunities, with organized professional development and work with curricula also top-named categories. As previously noted, preservice education clearly provided a basis on which these teachers learned to teach phonics, but their practical experiences also obviously contributed to the ongoing development of knowledge and beliefs about phonics pedagogy, a conclusion that has been demonstrated in previous studies (e.g., Podhajski et al., 2009).

Teachers in the current study also evidenced concern about appropriate supports for their instruction. When asked about elements of their phonics instruction with which they were satisfied and dissatisfied, their responses demonstrated recognition of the significance of phonics teaching and learning. The top two categories of responses to this question related to support for their phonics teaching and for student phonics learning, belying a common contention in the popular press that phonics instruction fails to receive adequate attention by classroom teachers. Their responses indicated concern over program components that would better enable their teaching capabilities and their students' ability to learn.

The even distribution of satisfaction and dissatisfaction in these categories makes clear that although they considered them important, not all teachers were satisfied with the learning and support they have been provided. So, while teachers valued the learning and support options that were available to reinforce their phonics instruction, those possibilities were obviously not equitably distributed, and many indicated a desire for increased support and learning opportunities.

Implications

Our primary motivation for this study was a concern over the exclusion of teacher voices in the popular narrative about classroom reading instruction. Discrepancies, sometimes alarmingly wide, exist between media portrayals of phonics instruction and perspectives on phonics in K–12 and university classrooms. This polarity is not surprising considering the differing motivations and philosophies on which various narratives are based, but the result is an often-confrontational divide that fails to establish shared norms for successful reading pedagogy.

We limited the scope of this study to examining the status of phonics instruction based on the perspectives of a sample of K–2 teachers from a single state, which may or may not accurately represent the views of all teachers. However, it does represent the

views of these teachers, and we believe the findings have important implications for how to understand phonics instruction beyond the limited narrative provided in popular media accounts, which lack any systematic inclusion of teacher perspectives.

Our findings demonstrate that the overwhelming majority of these K–2 teachers believe phonics instruction is important for children who are learning to read and that they provide phonics instruction in their classrooms. They have pursued and engaged in learning opportunities related to phonics and/or phonics instruction. Most participants rely on a published curriculum for at least some portion of their instruction, and many teach phonics in systematic and explicit ways. These findings appear to contradict assertions by the media that primary reading classrooms are largely devoid of phonics instruction and that teachers are generally unwilling or unable to include phonics as an important element of their reading instruction. On the other hand, some of the teachers' responses lend credence to media concerns about whether standardization of phonics instruction or conformity to science of reading pedagogy are the evaluating criteria.

Opinions about phonics teaching and learning are currently being formed and shared based on information of sometimes questionable trustworthiness, limited viewpoints, or obvious bias. For example, the largely unsubstantiated claims about teachers' failure to provide appropriate phonics instruction appear to be based primarily on hearsay, yet they have made their way into the mainstream narrative about reading instruction across the United States. A seemingly reasonable resolution would be to gather and disseminate trustworthy information that integrates the significant concerns and understandings of those to whom these important decisions matter. This includes, especially, families and educators but also researchers, legislators, and the general public, all of whom hold a significant interest in positive reading outcomes for all students. Of course, the highly charged nature of the stance taken by most individuals in this recent iteration of the reading war may make this simple solution the most challenging, but certainly all voices must contribute to establishing common ground.

Findings from this study, then, cause us to issue an urgent call for additional research that accesses data from multiple perspectives in order to support informed and even-handed answers to questions about beneficial reading instruction. As Shanahan (2020) points out, "High-quality research reduces uncertainty, and a confluence of high-quality empirical data from multiple sources should go far in increasing our confidence that certain policies and practices will be effective and beneficial" (p. S236). Systematic information collected from those most impacted—students, families, and teachers—can supply on-the-ground perspectives. Current and carefully conducted studies of instructional approaches and of learning processes, encompassing multiple methodologies and education contexts, will supplement wide-ranging views of reading pedagogy to support diverse reader populations. Finally, the priority must be on finding answers rather than confirming previously held views and on creating instructional opportunities that support teachers and learners at local, state, and national levels. Creating unbiased opportunities to better understand phonics instruction will contribute to possibilities for consensus on the role of phonics in reading instruction and allow well-grounded conclusions by the public, educators, and decision makers.

Conclusion

As educators, we are increasingly alarmed by instructional mandates that appear more founded on journalistic rhetoric and popular opinion than on research findings and practitioner expertise. Decisions about reading instruction that fail to rely on systematic

examination of classroom teachers' perspectives will always be woefully inadequate in responding to the practical requirements of real students in real classrooms. Specifically, we must know what teachers know and believe about phonics instruction and how they implement it in their classrooms. It is insufficient to rely on hearsay or anecdotes; systematic efforts must be undertaken to discover what emphasis classroom teachers place on phonics in their reading instruction, how they implement it, and how they developed their knowledge about it. At the very least, casting aspersions on educators' daily efforts to support future teachers and student learners requires a much more concerted effort to understand whether those doubts are warranted. Only with all the information in place can we begin to consider how to support educators and learners in our reading classrooms.

In gathering the perspectives of one group of teachers in one state, we don't presume to have accomplished all that is required to address the significant need for data that will stop the reading war. We urge other researchers to take up the call to discover what teachers can say that helps us better understand what happens in the name of classroom phonics instruction. More importantly, we urge those in decision-making positions to assume an informed stance before mandating instructional practices that may have as their basis a narrow understanding of the needs of young readers and of teachers' efforts to support them.

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Appendix A

Survey Questions

- What is your highest degree attained?
- How many years have you been teaching?
- What grade level do you currently teach?
- Do you teach phonics?

If YES:

- On average, how many minutes per week do you provide phonics instruction?
- Do you use a published curriculum to provide phonics instruction?

If YES:

- What is the publisher/title of your published curriculum?
- Do you follow the publisher's recommended scope and sequence of the curriculum?
- Is the curriculum mandated by your school or district?
- Did you receive training in how to implement the published curriculum?
- Do you supplement the published curriculum with other materials?
- If YES:
 - What kinds of things do you use to supplement the published curriculum?

If NO:

- What materials do you use to teach phonics?
- Do the materials include a systematic or ordered plan to teach phonics?
- Indicate your level of satisfaction with the phonics instruction you provide. (very satisfied/somewhat satisfied/somewhat dissatisfied/very dissatisfied)
- What aspects of your phonics instruction are you satisfied and/or dissatisfied with?

If NO:

- For what reason(s) do you not teach phonics?
- How did you develop your knowledge and belief system about phonics instruction?