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Research-Based Reading

EXPLODE THE CODE **Nancy Hall and Rena Price**

By Beth Davis

In January 2002, President Bush signed into law the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, mandating that states formulate reading standards for each grade with the goal of having all children reading proficiently by the end of third grade. Federal money, through Reading First funds, is available to help achieve these goals for states adopting reading programs that explicitly teach the early reading skills of phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. *Explode The Code* meets these standards.

Systematic, Direct Teaching of Phonics

Jeanne Chall's *Learning to Read: The Great Debate*, an extensive review of classroom, laboratory, and clinical research, revealed the efficacy of a direct, explicit, systematic teaching of decoding skills. Chall concluded that code emphasis programs produced better results "not only in terms of the mechanical aspects of literacy alone, as was once supposed, but also in terms of the ultimate goals of reading instruction—comprehension and possibly even speed of reading" (Chall, 1967, p. 307).

Even as new understandings about learning and teaching have evolved in the years since 1967, these findings have been repeatedly reconfirmed (Bond and Dykstra, 1967; Chall, 1983; Adams, 1990; National Reading Panel, 2000). In studies published since 1970 comparing phonics instruction with other kinds of instruction, the National Reading Panel (2000) found that for children from kindergarten through sixth grade, systematic phonics instruction enhanced children's ability to read, spell, and comprehend text, particularly in the younger grades. These results were especially evident for the word-reading skills of disabled readers and low socioeconomic children and for the spelling skills of good readers.

Chall and Popp (p. 2, 1996) write of "two kinds of meaning—meaning of the medium (the print) and the meaning of the message (the ideas)." Knowledge of phonics gives students the ability to decode print, which in turn reveals the message

The *Explode The Code* program for beginning readers includes three books that teach the sounds for the consonants and how to write them (*Get Ready for The Code, Get Set for The Code, Go for The Code*), eight books that teach students to recognize and combine phonetic sounds in order to read (*Explode The Code Books 1–8*), and six books that provide further practice for students who need it (*Explode The Code Books 1½–6½*). Picture-Letter Cards and Code Cards accompany the books. The four books of *Beyond The Code* extend the series with comprehension and reasoning activities. They have longer stories that follow the same phonetic pattern as the first four books of *Explode The Code*.

The *Explode The Code Wall Chart and Explode The Code Wall Chart Activity Book* help students remember the key words for each letter sound and offer over thirty games to reinforce letter sounds.

The *Explode The Code Placement Test* helps teachers place students in the appropriate *Explode The Code* student book. Five Teacher's Guides accompany the student books. *Explode The Code for English Language Learners* helps teachers meet the needs of ELLs.





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ideas. The more words early readers can recognize, the more accessible meaning becomes. Children who have difficulty identifying words lack the fluency needed to concentrate on meaning (Rasinsky, 2000). Conversely, children who are given direct, systematic instruction in decoding skills have the tools for developing fluent, meaningful reading. Furthermore, they have the tools to produce print and consequently express their thoughts in writing, which in turn reinforces their word identification skills (Ehri, 1998).

Explode The Code offers a complete systematic phonics program for the elementary grades. Phonetic elements and patterns, carefully sequenced to consider both frequency of use and difficulty, are practiced in a series of instructive workbooks. Teacher's Guides with answer keys accompany all of the books.

The first three books, *Get Ready for The Code*, *Get Set for The Code*, and *Go for The Code*, focus on visual identification of consonants, their written lowercase letter forms, and their sound-symbol relationships. An engaging, colorful wall chart with felt objects that serve as key words for the 26 letters of the alphabet may be used to introduce children to the names and sounds of the lowercase letters and/or to reinforce lessons in these books. An activity book with instructions for 35 games comes with the wall chart. Key word picture and letter cards are also available.

The remaining eight books progress through the vowel sounds and patterns, consonant clusters and digraphs, syllables, and suffixes. Post-tests are found at the end of each workbook. If a need for extra practice is indicated, additional workbooks for reinforcement (Books 1½, 2½, 3½, 4½, 5½, and 6½) accompany Books 1–6.

When systematic, direct teaching of phonics occurs through the use of *Explode The Code*, these criteria for successful reading and writing are present:



- The alphabetic principle is firmly established.
- Phonological awareness skills are fostered along with the phonics teaching.
- Understanding of how sound/symbol correspondences permit words/text to be decoded and encoded is fully developed and practiced to achieve fluency and automaticity.
- Students of varying language and skill needs are accommodated in vocabulary and concept building through exposure to different approaches to teaching phonics and through flexible grouping and use of the materials.

The Alphabetic Principle

Adams (1990) and Stahl (1998) discuss the importance of the alphabetic principle, which is the relationship of the 26 letters in the English alphabet to sounds in spoken words. This concept is a difficult one because English words use over 40 sounds with only 26 letters. In addition, the alphabetic principle relates not only to the individual letters, but also to combinations of letters known as consonant clusters, consonant and vowel digraphs, diphthongs, and phonograms.

Furthermore, both the graphemes used to represent sounds and the sounds a grapheme represents may vary. The long *e* sound is spelled differently in *he*, *seed*, *peal*, *cookie*, *cede*, and *deceit*. The sound of the letter *c* differs in the words *cake* and *city*. Helping children to grasp the alphabetic principle is a challenging task for their teachers.

To help children understand that connection, it is most practical to teach the consonants first. Most consonants have a one-to-one correspondence between letter and sound. In addition, the names of most consonants are similar to the sounds they represent in words. Initially, it is knowing the names of the letters that appears to predispose children to success with word recognition and which has been a predictor of beginning read-

Explode The Code offers a complete systematic phonics program for the elementary grades.



ing ability (Chall, 1967, 1983). Adams (p.63, 1990) speculates that one reason letter name knowledge predicts word recognition success is because the letter name often relates to its sound and “mediates . . . [children’s] ability to remember the sounds.”

Short vowels also tend to have a one-to-one correspondence between letter and sound within words, whereas long vowels usually are represented by more complicated patterns. Teaching the consonants and short vowels first, as in *Explode The Code*, reflects beginning readers’ knowledge of the alphabetic principle. Later, with more reading experience, children can better deal with the exceptions and variation in the alphabetic principle.

Ehri (1991, 1998) describes the four stages—prealphabetic, partial alphabetic, full alphabetic, and consolidated alphabetic—children go through in learning to recognize words as they acquire command of the alphabetic principle.

In the first, or prealphabetic, stage children use some kind of visual or logographic cue to identify a word, such as the color and octagonal shape of the stop sign to identify the word stop.

As they begin to identify beginning and/or final letters and sounds, they enter the partial alphabetic, or phonetic cue, stage. At this stage, a child may recognize the word *black* using the beginning and ending letters as cues; however, the word might easily be mistaken for *book*, *back*, or *break*.

In order to decode new, unfamiliar words and/or similarly spelled words, children need familiarity with vowels as well as consonants, enabling them to “fully analyze” the word, an indication that they are at the full alphabetic stage.

When children can recognize familiar chunks of words, reading new words by relating to the onsets, rimes, and/or affixes, they are at the consolidated alphabetic stage. At this stage the



ability to relate to patterns enables them to read polysyllabic words with relative ease (Ehri, 1991, 1998; Gaskins et. al., 1996/7).

The *Explode The Code* wall chart and *Get Ready* primer books introduce and reinforce the sound-symbol relationships of the alphabetic code through the consonants. Children are taught to visually identify and discriminate one consonant at a time, to associate the sound it stands for both in isolation and at the beginnings of words, and to trace, copy, and print the lower-case letter in isolation and in relation to the initial sounds of words (pictures). In tracing, copying, and printing the letters, children gain automatic recognition of the letters. Through varied activities in the student books and the accompanying Teacher's Guides, the skills are repeatedly practiced for each letter. The letters that are introduced first are those whose names most closely resemble the sounds they represent in words. Picture-letter cards that accompany the *Get Ready* books and the activity book for the wall chart may be used for drills or games to reinforce the sound-symbol relationships of the initial consonants.

Explode The Code Books 1–8 continue student exposure to the alphabetic code with the introduction of short vowels and CVC words, helping students to discover how the letter sounds map onto the written letters to produce spoken words that can be read and spelled. As students proceed through the phonetic elements noted earlier, they develop the skills that move them through the full alphabetic stage to the consolidated alphabetic, or fluent reading, stage. Written text that helps them apply the alphabetic code combines isolated words with more and more sentence, paragraph, and short story text.

Phonological/Phonemic Awareness

A second component of an effective phonics program calls for attention to skills that promote phonological awareness (NRP, 2000; Stahl, 1998; Yopp, 1992; Stanovich, 1991; Adams,

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1990; Juel, 1988)—the ability to identify and manipulate spoken language features, such as rhymes, words, syllables, onsets and rimes, and phonemes, which may be taken apart, put together, deleted, and substituted to form new words. Phonemic awareness, a subset of phonological awareness, focuses specifically on the sequences of phonemes or sounds comprising spoken words and the ability to identify and manipulate these features. Children often need training in differentiating sounds within words. Sounds, contextually influenced, run into one another, often blurring their distinct phonological features. Whereas phonics is concerned with sound-symbol correspondences (the relationship between phonemes and graphemes in print), phonemic awareness is concerned only with the spoken word.

Phonemic awareness has been shown to be a strong predictor of success in learning to read (NRP, 2000; Juel, 1991; Adams, 1990; Chall, 1967). Muter and Snowling (1998) found that phonemic awareness was a significant predictor of reading accuracy in the first year of school as well as at age nine. Stanovich, citing studies that have shown better reading success in children trained in phonological awareness, finds it plays a causal role “because phonological awareness is a foundational ability underlying the learning of spelling-sound correspondences” (p. 284, 1993/4). Although children can be taught to associate specific letters and sounds, if they lack an inherent understanding of oral language structure where sounds blend into one another, they may experience difficulty learning to read and spell words (Gaskins, 1996/7). The National Reading Panel (2000) found phonemic awareness training particularly benefited at-risk children in terms of transfer to both reading and spelling.

Yopp (1992) identifies six kinds of aural manipulation skills that facilitate the abilities needed for reading and writing. Children who can perform these tasks at an aural level will be much more receptive to phonics instruction where children combine print with sound. The six aural tasks that may apply to words, syllables, and onset and rime as well as phonemes include:



Matching (Identity)—recognizing elements in words or word parts

Isolation—hearing beginning, middle, and ending sounds/word parts

Substitution—changing the word by replacing a beginning or other sound/word part with a different sound/word part

Segmenting—separating individual phonemes/word parts within words

Blending—putting together phonemes/word parts to form new words

Deleting—saying the word/word part without a specified sound/word part

Although teaching phonemic awareness involves the tasks described above as applied to spoken language, these skills may also be acquired using letters. When this occurs, the instruction qualifies as both phonics instruction and phonemic awareness instruction. Building phonemic awareness facilitates children's ability to benefit from phonics instruction and some kinds of phonics instruction may in turn enhance the acquisition of phonemic awareness. The National Reading Panel (2000) found that training was most effective in building phonemic awareness skills when children were taught to manipulate sounds with letters.

Explode The Code develops phonological and phonemic awareness skills throughout the series. *The Get Ready* books and the wall chart games help children to match and isolate beginning and ending sounds with letters. Books 1–8 match written and spoken words and have children segment, blend, substitute, and delete words and word parts. Exercises in every lesson segment ask children to look at a picture such as a fish, circle the three graphemes that correspond to the sounds heard in the word, and then write the word. As the children fully analyze the words, they enhance their spelling and word recognition abilities (Ehri, 1998; Gaskins, 1996/7).



The ultimate goal of skilled reading is comprehension of the written text.

The *Explode The Code* Teacher's Guides provide a number of oral activities to help students recognize and manipulate individual phonemes in spoken words. Because "phoneme segmentation of English words is particularly difficult for those with little prior experience listening to English speech sounds" (The Education Alliance at Brown University), *Explode The Code for English Language Learners* provides strategies for children to distinguish and pronounce English language phonemes. These skills are reinforced as children begin to recognize and use these new sounds in English conversation.

Sound-Symbol Relationships

Freebody and Byrne (1988) concurred with the correlation between reading ability and phonemic awareness yet found it is not enough for the development of proficient decoding skills necessary for achievement in reading, especially beyond grade 2. Recent research on eye movements as reported by Pressley (2002) shows fluent readers process every letter, and because they recognize familiar letter combinations/chunks, they can read nonsense words with speed as well. It is important for many children to have instruction and reinforcement with the full array of sound-symbol relationships encountered at the full alphabetic and consolidated alphabetic stages.

Phonics instruction may occur according to the following definitions:

Synthetic Phonics—Individual sound/symbol correspondences are taught and blended to read words. (The word *cat* is sounded /k/ /a/ /t/ and blended to form the word.)

Analytic Phonics—To avoid distortions, sounds are not pronounced in isolation. Instead, letter sounds in known words are analyzed. After the words *cat*, *cake*, and *cup* are recognized/known, the letter *c* is taught as the sound we hear at the beginning of these words.

Analogy Phonics—Students learn to read new words by relating to known words, usually in terms of rimes (phonograms) and onsets. The word *slight* is read by relating the *-ight* to the known word *night* and the onset *sl* to the known word *slip*.



The findings of the NRP (2000) endorsed systematic phonics instruction but found that there was no statistical gain in choosing one type of phonics instruction over another. Children have different learning styles and may respond differently to the contrasting ways in which phonics instruction may be presented.

Explode The Code lessons on each of the phonics elements span a number of pages that teach and reinforce. Over the space of these pages, various approaches are utilized; often individual sounds are blended, often elements are practiced within whole words, and often word chunks are related, resulting in a thorough treatment of the skills needed for decoding new words, accessible to children's differing learning styles. In the *Explode The Code* Teacher's Guides, new phonics skills are taught by calling attention to sounds in familiar words. Then students are taught the letter or letters that represent that sound. Students then practice the skill, working with other words that include that phonic element.

However, phonics without meaning is useless to an English Language Learner. "For ELLs, as with all students, it is important to pronounce and distinguish auditorily, as well as to place into a meaningful context. It is therefore necessary for ELLs to have knowledge of the English vocabulary words within which they are to understand phonemes" (Antunez, 2002). During explicit phonics instruction, *Explode The Code for English Language Learners* provides strategies for children to discover and acquire new English vocabulary as they develop phonemic awareness, pronunciation, decoding, and encoding skills. In one strategy, the teacher introduces a new word orally. Students segment the word and provide the sounds for the teacher to write the corresponding letters. Students read the word aloud. The teacher asks what the word means, then draws a picture of the word to communicate the meaning. Then, as students connect meaning to the word, they read the word several times.



Explode The Code builds automaticity through multiple exposures to the words that illustrate the many decoding elements.

Automaticity

The ultimate goal of skilled reading is comprehension of the written text. To achieve understanding, the skilled reader's decoding skills are automatic, occurring instantly and without effort. Teaching children the alphabetic code is a means of enabling them to recognize words to comprehend the message. At first, decoding takes up a great deal of one's short-term memory, leaving not much room for comprehension. As word recognition becomes more automatic, however, space frees up. Pressley (2000) speaks of shortterm memory as a limited resource with decoding operations and comprehension processing competing for a small area of capacity. Poor readers whose decoding skills are labored also show low comprehension. The goal, therefore, is to give children the tools to build automaticity. As children move into the consolidated alphabetic stage where they are decoding via sight words and word chunks that require little attention, capacity is freed to focus on comprehension (Rasinsky, 2000; Ehrlich et al, 1993).

Explode The Code builds automaticity through multiple exposures to the words that illustrate the many decoding elements. In each lesson group, opportunities are provided for students to read the words in isolation and in varying amounts of text that range from sentences to paragraphs to very short stories. In addition, children write the words, again in a variety of formats, sometimes after segmenting and identifying the sequence of sounds or chunks within the words. Words may be written in isolation, to complete sentences/paragraphs, or in answers to questions.

The Explode The Code Teacher's Guides present children with additional opportunities to develop skills in reading words, sentences, and passages accurately and quickly. In addition, *Explode The Code for English Language Learners* provides high utility word (HUW) tables for children to read repeatedly and eventually recognize words automatically. This repeated exposure improves automaticity of sight words and other very common words during reading. It also encourages ELLs to begin using these words in their English speech and writing.



Adams (p. 410, 1990) writes, “It is their overlearned knowledge about the sequences of letters comprising frequent words and spelling patterns that enables skillful readers to process the letters of a text so quickly and easily.” As words are initially processed, readers make connections between graphemes and phonemes, which form access routes to memory. Continuous encounters reinforce the access to memory and meaning until simply seeing the word accesses pronunciation and meaning (Ehri, 1991).

Stanovich and West (1988) also discuss the melding of accurate decoding skills with the visual or orthographic form of the word, which when repeated produces automaticity. Adams (pp. 206, 207) speaks of the importance of connecting printed word forms with their sounds, contexts, functions, and meanings so that these associations are established and strengthened each time the printed words are encountered. When decoding skills are automatic and words are identified, meaning is triggered as well. Meaning depends on accurate, efficient decoding skills.

Concept and Vocabulary Building through Context

As with its treatment of letter/sound development, *Explode The Code* utilizes context in a sequential manner that builds in difficulty level. In the beginning, context appears at the word level, relating word to picture. It builds to the sentence level, to short paragraphs, and finally to denser text. All of the text for a lesson uses numbers of words that pertain to the element or elements taught in the lesson. Students have the opportunity to apply what they have learned to meaningful text, which can facilitate the ease with which these words will be recognized in the future.

In its pictures and illustrations of the targeted elements and words, *Explode The Code* builds vocabulary concepts. Words like *bass*, *hut*, *gull*, *snare*, *shed*, *jolted*, *bolted*, and *quiver* from Books 1, 3, and 5 are examples of words to which children may attach little meaning. The pictures and the contextual text, in a concrete manner, help to build meaning. If, when children attempt to decode words, the words are not part of their listening/speaking vocabularies, they will have no means of



confirming the accuracy of their attempts. Vocabulary knowledge and concepts are crucial not only for comprehension but for word recognition as well. *Explode The Code* offers vocabulary enhancement opportunities for all levels of students. *Bass*, *shed*, *bolted*, and *quiver* have alternate meanings that may be explored with students who are able to benefit from expanded instruction.

In addition, the *Explode The Code* Teacher's Guides provide definitions of phonics words from the lesson. The comprehension-building activities in the guides expand students' understanding of words and concepts by having them answer questions, work with synonyms and antonyms, use words in oral sentences, explain the meaning of words in context, and draw pictures.

Because "it is easier for students to comprehend their reading when they can personally relate to the reading materials" (The Education Alliance), *Explode The Code for English Language Learners* builds students' background knowledge through interactive vocabulary development during phonics lessons. But ELLs must often put forth much greater effort to achieve meaning. Therefore, *Explode The Code for English Language Learners* also provides explicit comprehension strategies through which children progress from visualization of words to visualization of sentences and stories. These strategies can and should be extended throughout reading in all genres and subject areas.

Books 7 and 8 focus on vocabulary building through an emphasis on syllables and morphemes. As students learn to recognize polysyllabic words, the likelihood of these words not being a part of their listening/speaking vocabulary increases. Consequently, it is essential that word meaning be stressed. Most exercises in these books ask for definitions, using a variety of techniques including crossword puzzles, syllable scrambles, and interesting short vignettes followed by questions. Instructions on several pages ask children to verify words and word meanings with the dictionary.



Flexibility

Finally, good phonics instruction does not conform to the theory that one size fits all. Children come to school with very different skill levels of phonemic awareness, phonics knowledge, or word recognition ability. Moreover, as children progress through the grades, they acquire these skills at differing rates. An effective phonics program accommodates these issues.

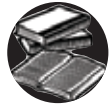
Explode The Code offers the classroom teacher a program with the level of flexibility that is needed to meet the varying demands of most classrooms. The *Explode The Code* Placement Test assesses specific reading and spelling skills taught in the series. Results can determine entry level, placement within the series, or specific skills intervention. Pre- and post-tests in the student books can also help teachers determine appropriate placement levels for the students in the program. If a need for further practice on a particular skill is indicated, an extra practice book is available for levels 1–6.

Explode The Code allows the teacher flexibility in presenting and practicing concepts. The books may be used for whole class teaching, with small groups, or individually. Whole lessons may be used or selected pages within each lesson may be taught and assigned. Children may work individually or as partners. Different levels of the series may be used within one classroom. Systematic, explicit teaching does not mean that everyone moves ahead in lockstep. Rather it means assessing a child's skills as well as acknowledging individual pace needs in proceeding with a sequence of concept development. The *Explode The Code* Teacher's Guides expand on the skills presented in the student books, providing teachers with numerous options for instruction and reinforcement. *Explode The Code for English Language Learners* provides teachers with classroom-tested techniques and strategies for teaching English Language Learners.

Research findings cited above recommend systematic direct teaching of phonics as one part of the total reading program. Cunningham (2000) and Pressley (2002) are among those who

Explode The Code

offers the classroom teacher a program with the level of flexibility that is needed to meet the varying demands of most classrooms.



advocate a balanced literacy program. In Cunningham's four-block program, word study constitutes one block. *Explode The Code* works most effectively when it is used along with a curriculum filled with connected reading and writing experiences where students may apply the skills they are learning.

Villaume and Brabham (2003) comment on the success with which seasoned teachers create flexible, multidimensional reading programs. They propose that their ability to do so may stem from the foundation of systematic instruction that structured commercial phonics programs provide. *Explode The Code* offers this foundation and provides a crucial part of the scaffolding needed for the successful teaching of reading and writing.



Authors

An experienced teacher, tutor, and educational consultant, **Nancy Hall** has degrees from Middlebury College and Lesley College as well as Language Therapist Certification from Children's Hospital, Boston, Massachusetts. Her work has focused on both teaching and assessment, with a specialty in reading, writing, and spelling. She operates an independent testing service to evaluate private and public school students experiencing learning problems.

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