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Opinion

We Know How to Teach Kids to Read

Shelve the fad methods. There's one tried-and-true way,
and it works for children of all races and classes.

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It was great to see Zaila Avant-garde become the first Black American winner of the Scripps National Spelling Bee in July. But in broader view, it'd be better if there were no such thing as a spelling bee.

To wit: Spelling bees exist because English's spelling system is such a catastrophe. In most languages, spelling is much easier, and it's much easier to teach children to read. Comb, tomb, bomb: Why are the same three letters pronounced differently in each word? Or cough, tough, bough, through — really? I pity foreigners having to deal with this sort of thing when they're old enough to understand how bizarre and ornery it is.

As such, there are always earnest people agitating for spelling reform in English, insisting that words should be spelled the way they are pronounced. And that seems so sensible, but to adapt a line of Lady Bracknell's in "The Importance of Being Earnest," spelling reform is "like an exotic fruit; touch it and the bloom is gone."

For example, how "should" we spell *know*? How about "no," assuming that context will take care of the homonymy with *no* as in *not*. But then, how would we spell *knowledge*? Something like "nalidj," maybe. But then, you can't see that it's related to *know*, and that would rankle those

who say that our spelling system nicely preserves etymological relationships that pronunciation has come to hide.

Then, how would we do *knew*? Presuming that not only the *k* but the *ew* spelling have to go, how about "nu"? OK, but then, notice that most Americans actually pronounce it less as "noo" than as something like "nih-oo." Why not spell it that way? And let's not even get into how we would spell *known*. "Non"?

And think about it: Would you really want English to look like that on the page? There is linguistic conservatism in all of us. The International Phonetic Alphabet that linguists use actually does have a symbol for each sound, making spelling simple and straightforward. And in it, "The Great Gatsby" comes out as *ðə grejt gætsbi*. That looks less like something to read than to step on.

It's one thing to want to fix English's spelling, and another thing to imagine just how it would be done. We may just be stuck with what we have, and one of the saddest things about it besides the pitiless disorder of it is that it conditions a massive misfire in how children are taught to read.

A popular strain in the education world has it that English's spelling is so bad that there's no point in teaching children how to sound out words letter by letter. Rather, they should learn to recognize whole words at a time by the general look

of them: the whole word method.

And that may be the way you learned to read. It tends to work for children from book-lined homes where reading is taught almost by osmosis by family members because print is so deeply embedded in the home culture. But for other children, the whole word method is a big gamble; they learn better by being, well, taught: sounding out words letter by letter.

In a word, phonics. About one in four words is spelled in an illogical way, and the phonics teacher stirs these words into the curriculum gradually, like little Sno-Caps into ice cream. But the ice cream itself is learning what sounds the letters stand for.

Scientific investigators of how children learn to read have proved repeatedly that phonics works better for more children. Project Follow Through, a huge investigation in the late 1960s led by education scholar Siegfried Engelmann, taught 75,000 children via the phonics-based Direct Instruction method from kindergarten through third grade at 10 sites nationwide. The results were polio-vaccine-level dramatic. At all 10 sites, 4-year-olds were reading like 8-year-olds, for example.

Crucially, the method works well with poor as well as affluent children. Just a couple decades ago, the method was still kicking serious butt where it was implemented. In Richmond, Va., the mostly Black public school district was mired

in only a 40 percent passage rate on the state reading test until the district started teaching the phonics way, upon which in just four years passage rates were up to 74 percent.

However, there is a persistent disconnect between the world of reading science and the world of people teaching children to read. Only 15 percent of programs training elementary-school teachers include actual instruction on how to teach children to read. There remain people who favor the whole word method, or a combination of whole word and phonics, or even no particular “method” at all.

One idea has it that the focus should be less on teaching children how to decode letters into sounds and words than on something titled “literacy” in a more abstract sense, fostering children’s interest in books and story lines with a dash of multicultural awareness as well. (Since the 1990s an influential strain of this approach has been called “Balanced Literacy.”) Once, way back, a graduate student of anthropology told me he was studying “literacy,” sharing with me a certain knowing look. But I didn’t know what he assumed I did until years later. He meant fostering this “holistic” and ethically oriented conception of reading over the mere “dry” business of just teaching children how to read words. While that mystery was revealed to me with time, I remain puzzled by the fact that he, although not British, pronounced it “lit’racy.”

But the fact remains that phonics, and especially the Direct Instruction method pioneered by Engelmann, works. With all children. You have children say the letters’ sounds in sequence — “b,” “ih,” “g” — and then tell them to “say it fast.” After a little while, they catch on that the three sounds are to be run together as

“big,” that word that they already know. I’ve seen that light go on for children — it is nothing less than a magical moment. True lit’racy on your lap.

There is a racial angle to this. It has now been 25 years since a media dust-up in Oakland, where the school board proposed to increase Black children’s reading scores by presenting them with lessons and materials in their home dialect, Black English, using it as a bridge to standard English by starting them with what they knew.

The whole country almost willfully misunderstood this as a call to teach classes “in jive,” and the school board itself could have been more careful in how it presented and defended the proposal once the media came a-knocking. But the whole episode was actually but one of many over the past 50 years, with many Black educators thinking that Black children are done in by encountering an English in school that they aren’t raised in.

A few studies have shown that giving Black students Black English materials helps them read a little faster; we would expect that finding the material more relatable would have some benefit. Plus, just as the dedicated Marxist argues that Communism was never given a real try, fans of this “Ebonics” pedagogy can say that it has never been tried on a large, sustained scale.

But overall, this approach has never yielded anything close to the dramatic victories of the Direct Instruction method. We have known how to teach Black children, including poor ones, how to read since the Johnson administration: the Direct Instruction method of phonics. In this case, Black children don’t need special materials; districts need incur no ex-

tra expenses in purchasing such things. I consider getting Direct Instruction to every Black child in the country a key plank of three in turning the corner on race in America (the other two are ending the War on Drugs and sharply increasing funding and cultural support to vocational education).

In our moment, as our children go back to school, pandemic-related issues are a clear priority for all of us. However, school boards should be pressured as much as possible to teach reading via the Direct Instruction method of phonics. And if they won’t, there’s what I call the magical book: “Teach Your Child to Read in 100 Easy Lessons,” by Engelmann with Phyllis Haddox and Elaine Bruner. I’ve seen this method work in my own home, having used it with both of my children and watched that light go on.

Because my favorite animal is the okapi, my youngest recently drew me a picture of one labeled “O’Copy.” (“Well, that’s how some people spell ‘o!’”) Charmingly mistaken, but clearly evidence of someone who is now engaging print well. She’s 6. Lit’racy for real — and this level of ability is normal for kids who learn the Engelmann way.

By the way, while we’re on kids and spelling and spelling bees, the very first winner of a national spelling bee in America was another Black girl, Marie Bolden. That should be better known.

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