

Units of Study in Phonics, Grades K—2  
By Lucy Calkins and TCRWP Colleagues

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**Question:** *Why is student engagement so important in phonics instruction?*

**Natalie Louis:**

Engagement first of all is important in all, for all learners and all the time. So engagement is so interesting for phonics though because I would say that for most phonics, like if you watch a lesson, if you get a chance to sort of watch a lesson, which we're often doing in classrooms, I would say that teachers who aren't teaching our phonics Units of Study, lots of times I would say that they're pretty low on engagement, the lessons that they're doing. And I think it's in part because sort of like this is how phonics lessons go. They sort of go like hold up the principle on like a card and then they're sort of technical almost, most phonics lessons. And so almost because it feels like they need to be right, the teacher, so they need to teach it a right way. And I think phonics sort of has that aura around it that like you're not doing it correctly if you first don't do this and then next say this and then next show this. It sort of has a feel like that and I think that's how a lot of people learned, teachers in like teacher education courses or when they were watching their mentor teacher, that that's how you teach phonics, sort of dry. And I bet you if teachers thought back to how they learned phonics, it sort of has that feel of like here's the b, b says buh, right? But to learn people need to be first of all having fun. There's no research that disputes this idea.

We had Marc Brackett from Yale University come and he does social-emotional work with the government and schools all over the world around. He says when you lay out the research around how what role does feeling play in learning, there's never a study that disputes that feeling good while you're learning is a bad thing. As a matter of fact, the better you feel while you're learning, the more you learn. So sometimes that's actually not the message that people get. Sometimes it's like we have to be super serious and focused, that's how we'll learn the most. But it's actually the opposite. When people are laughing, when they're smiling, when they feel good, when they can't wait for it to happen again, when will phonics start again, that feeling is the feeling that then, there's something to have to do with like the chemicals, like the serotonin, the dopamine, that stuff, I think that stuff that's like the exercise stuff, that helps people to learn in the first place. And so I think these units are so high on fun. There's chanting and there's singing and there's moving. There's phonics in the lesson and then there's also phonics like as we're walking down the hall. There's our mascots Mabel and Rasheed that the kids, you bring them to schools, they co-teach lessons. And then when you leave or when the kids see you in the hallway, it happened as they saw me in the hallway later I didn't have Mabel with me, and they were asking when is Mabel coming back to teach phonics? Well Mabel didn't actually teach the phonics. I taught the phonics. Mabel's just a stuffed animal. But it's the fun part that makes it super

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engaging.

As an example, let's just think about saying to kids who are struggling that Mabel is struggling with learning. Well, I mean it's not really Mabel that's struggling, right, it's your kids that are struggling, but they can believe it because of their age. That's part of the engagement—at their age they can believe that like Mabel was writing a book yesterday. And she actually does write some books. We have text that some, they're writing true stories from their lives. Mabel writes a true story from her life about like how she jogs. Who knew that Mabel, an elephant, could jog in her spare time, why not? First grade has Rasheed, so in one of the units Rasheed is, he's a construction worker. So the kids are at that age they're really like whoa, what's he doing? So Rasheed has an outfit, he gets dressed, he's got a hard hat. He's got a little neon colored vest that he wears for the unit. And so already it's almost like you don't even need to do anything if you dress the stuffed animal. Basically the kids are in. Right because they, that's sort of like, they're willing to go on the journey of learning because of this thing that could feel cheesy. I get that from the outside people could say, "oh well they have animals that are teaching phonics." But it's really more about, it's the engagement part that is so important.

When I think about engagement, I think about three kinds of engagement: cognitive, emotional, and behavioral. And behavioral is the one that it's like how kids are acting during learning that often teachers can get very lulled into. It's easy to say like they look engaged because they're well behaved. They're sitting still, they're quiet, they're looking at the teacher. But we know it's true that people can be disengaged and still look good. Yes they could be sitting still and looking at you and it's the emotional that's really important, which I already said. That it's the animal, the stuffed animal, the storyline that you sort of get invested in. How's the story going to turn out, the story of this unit? The mystery of the silent E, how will it turn out? What will we discover? What will, in the end, what will the mystery be? You get emotionally engaged. And then also cognitive or intellectual engagement, this idea that we're sort of inviting kids in to figure it out while really we have, we kind of have it all figured out, but that's not how the unit feels for the learner because of how we design it.

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