

FAQ Video Transcripts

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Question: *How do the Units of Study in Phonics support students as readers and writers?*

Natalie Louis:

We made the phonics unit of study different than other programs for a lot of different reasons. I think the biggest difference comes from this one principle belief that we have which is that phonics is only important because you read and write. I sort of feel like I should just hold there to say, period, because if phonics is not its own content area where you amass sort of tons of item knowledge, like lots of item knowledge and instead it's only important because you get to make books in writing workshop and you get to read books in reading workshop, then that means that the whole thing, the whole kabang, the whole package of phonics has to be written from a transfer standpoint. And sometimes phonics is taught as if first you teach phonics and then you think about transfer—almost like one comes first and then once phonics is known then you can start to think, how will we transfer that to reading and writing? Instead, we're starting with this idea that phonics only matters because people use it.

And so, another way to say that is, you can't know if the phonics is working unless children are using the phonics in reading workshop and writing workshop. So, in some ways that's also gonna end up affecting our assessment, too. It's gonna help us get big ideas about, is it okay to just have an assessment that says, this child is passing short vowels because we gave them a list of words where they are passing the short vowels, or do you also have to look if there are short vowels being used when they're writing a how-to book or when they're reading their leveled text, which is just right for them. In other words, you have to say to yourself "do they use the vowel principles that they've learned so far to help them attack tricky words?" That's really how you have to look at it.

So then, if you just start from that principle, that effects so much of how we made the units of study because built into every unit and almost every session, in a way, is a chance to use phonics—it's taught from a use standpoint. Sometime it's several times in a lesson, where we're looking at a piece of writing and we're trying to apply that principle to that piece of writing or we're pulling it out—in one of the units we pull out bloopers, so we look at writing and we pull out the oops or the bloopers and then we ask kids to use what they know about phonics to fix their oops. Or in reading, same thing, we study closely the mistakes that we're making and then we think to ourselves, "how does what we're learning about in phonics

Units of Study in Phonics, Grades K—2
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help us to fix up or to attack differently the words that are hard for us, the tricky words for us in our reading?"

There are a lot of other ways that the phonics is different too. Another big one is because they are tied to the reading and writing units so carefully, our hope is that teachers will understand even more deeply how to live with phonics in their minds too as their teaching already known reading units and already known writing units. So when kids are reading and writing the teachers are also feeling more and more comfortable with remembering what they're also working on in phonics and thinking "Okay, I've got one more thing that I can ask children to remember or to use." The storyline too is a huge difference. I don't know if I know of any phonics programs that are written with a storyline. What we know about storyline from our work with the reading and writing units of study is that when you ask the children, "what are you working on as reader?" the kids will be able to talk about it because there is a storyline. Even very small children can talk to you about what they're working on as readers and writers and it is amazing.

So that's the same idea in phonics then, if I come in and I say, "what are you currently learning about words, what is your obsession?" I know now because of what we know about reading and writing units that kids will be able to do that in phonics too, they can say, "well we're really trying to figure out what's the difference between CVCE words, like words with a silent E and words with vowel teams and sometimes there's like exceptions to those." That's what I'm imagining the kids will be able to do because of the storyline, which, in the example of the silent E, the kids are learning that that E that doesn't make a sound often turns the vowel to a long vowel sound and yet I'm imagining kids also saying, "you know, that's not always true" and it's all because of the storyline, it's all because that's written into this storyline that I think kids can hold onto, as opposed to, let me hold up a card that is an example of, that's often how things are sort of taught, explicit, which is nice but without this sort of storyline to hold it all together. I think for small children they don't grab onto why are learning phonics when it's taught in this way. They can't explain why they're learning it—it's sort of like being done to them as opposed to them being apart of phonics and discovery and inquiry. It was amazing, I didn't get to see it yesterday with the phonics cause we weren't doing the unit yet but it was around writing and I was watching these kindergartners explain to me (I hadn't seen them in a month) what happened in between and what they had learned and I thought to myself, wow, the power of that for phonics too could be a game changer.

And I'll tell you the other big things, I have three in mind. The other big thing because we teach writing workshop, most phonics programs, I think, are linked to reading more than their linked to writing because we've got kindergartners and first graders from the first day of kindergarten doing writing workshop and then all

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of first grade and their writing everyday, the kids have a chance to practice phonics transfer, it's built in. Marie Clay always talked about how writing is the first place to teach reading when children are small because they need phonics when they write. And yes, they need it in reading but it's different in writing because it's yours, right, when you're writing a story that's about your grandma, who you love so much. Then the need to write grandma becomes really a driving force for "what's the first letter that makes the sound in grandma, grandma, grandma?" As opposed to, "I'm reading a book and I don't really know what that letter is, I don't know what that sound it is and maybe I don't care that much because it's going to be hard to figure that out." It's different when it's like, I have to write this story about grandma, especially if I want to give it to grandma, right?

I think that our kids have motivation to learn phonics because of writing workshop in a way that is so different, I think they've got so much opportunity to practice using the letter sound, that you don't even need to come up with, in a way, extra practice opportunity—you don't have to think about how many more times in the day do I have to or do I need a really long phonics time because, we can have a shorter phonics program and that's what we've designed. We designed a 20-minute phonics workshop where the kids are learning something in whole class teaching and then they're practicing it quickly and then there's a little share, with the idea that then they get to go apply it because all of reading and writing workshop are chances to apply what they're learning.

Another way that our phonics units of study is different from other programs is that because we are trying to make sure that kids are able to use their phonics in reading and writing or in reading and writing workshop, I think in general the sequence and the pace of teaching principles goes faster than most programs go because by the end of first grade we are imagining that most kids will be reading chapter books. So, if by the end of first grade you're going to be reading chapter books, it means that you really need to have had exposure to all of the beginnings of phonics, sort of fast. That makes people uncomfortable I think because this notion of, I've got to first get kids to master one concept and then we'll move to the next one and then they'll master the next one and then we'll be ready to move to the next one. What happens then is, kindergarten only ends up covering a few and then first grade covers a few more and the problem is reading is going way faster than that and I think in writing too, if the reading is going faster, their writing is definitely going faster because the kids in their reading lives are being exposed to longer sentences and more complex thought and more complex structures and they often end up then with writing that looks exactly the same. They want more complex structures, they want more complex vocabulary and therefore, they need access to phonics strategies quicker. You can just look in those chapter books and say to yourself, whoa, in one sentence there is one of each of the different principles that we've taught across K1, in the same sentence and then times that times 40 pages of sentences like that. That's an important thing, that the pace sort of goes faster.

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