

Listening Guide for *A Novel Idea*

Episode 2: “Noah Webster Loves Phonics”

This listening guide is for caregivers interested in learning more about literacy instruction and educators who want to facilitate discussion within their higher education classroom or professional development setting. In this episode, we explore the history of educational reform and phonics instruction. Visit [our website](#) for the transcript and sources for this episode.

Before You Listen

What You’ve Heard So Far

Previously on *A Novel Idea*, Host Meg Mechelke spoke with educators of the Spencer Community School District about their experiences shifting to a teaching approach aligned with the science of reading. Mechelke described the outcomes of the National Reading Panel, highlighted the impact of podcasts on literacy instruction, and discussed the growth of the science of reading movement.

Pre-Listening Discussion Questions

Before you listen, consider the following questions. This can be a self-guided or discussion-based activity. Activating your background knowledge and considering your thoughts about these topics can help you connect the information in the episode to your own experiences.

1. What do you already know about phonics and phonics instruction? What other disciplines inform these ideas?
2. What approaches to vocabulary instruction are you familiar with? How do you teach children to make sense of unfamiliar words?
3. *For educators:* Reflect on the training you've received to become a teacher. How was that training shaped by historical events and important issues at that time?

4. *For caregivers:* Reflect on the literacy instruction that your children have received in school. What instructional language and activities are used? Does this differ from what you remember about your experience learning to read?

Press Play

Break It Down

Here, you can find the key points from the episode, organized with thematic headings and time stamps. Key terms related to literacy instruction are italicized and defined.

John Hart and the Alphabetic Principle

(00:00 - 5:12)

In episode two of *A Novel Idea*, Host Meg Mechelke describes how Enlightenment-era education reform shifted instruction methods from English Educator John Hart's early *alphabetic principle* to today's *explicit instruction* in *phonics* and *phonemic awareness*.

The *alphabetic principle* is the knowledge that words are composed of letters and there is a predictable pattern between specific letters or letter combinations and the sounds they represent.

In *explicit instruction*, a teacher directly states what students are expected to know and do. Skills and strategies are taught to, rather than discovered by, students.

Phonics is a teaching and learning process based on applying knowledge of letter-sound correspondences and spelling patterns to learn to read written text.

Phonemic awareness is the ability to isolate and manipulate individual sounds within spoken language.

Tools for Early Phonics Instruction

(5:12 - 8:54)



Mechelke recounts the use of hornbooks during the 17th century to teach students the alphabet and other basic phonics skills such as spelling and identifying syllables. These hornbooks were later replaced with battledores and primers.

Noah Webster and Structured Literacy

(8:54 - 14:05)

Mechelke explains the belief that language should be broken down and taught in a logical sequence, which is a core concept of *structured literacy*. One proponent of this approach was American Lexicographer Noah Webster, who was an advocate for phonics instruction and produced the 18th century's most popular primer.

Structured literacy refers to the explicit, systematic teaching of literacy skills, with particular attention to phonological awareness, word recognition, phonics and decoding, spelling, and syntax at the sentence and paragraph levels.

Understanding English Orthography

(14:05 - 20:58)

In conversation with IRRRC Literacy Research and Program Coordinator Kate Will, Mechelke explores the history of human speech and writing. Since English has a deep *orthography*, *graphemes* may represent multiple sounds, making phonics rules, such as the "*r-controlled syllable*," important for early readers to learn.

Orthography refers to the conventional spelling system of a written language, including rules for capitalization and punctuation.

A *grapheme* refers to one or more letters used to represent a single sound or phoneme. For example, the sound /k/ could be represented by any of the following graphemes: "c," "k," "ck," "ch," or "que."

An *r-controlled syllable* is a syllable with a single vowel followed by the letter "r." The "r" gives the vowel a different sound that is neither long nor short.

The Whole Word Approach

(20:58 - 25:10)

In conversation with Education Journalist Natalie Wexler, Mechelke describes alternatives to phonics instruction, such as the "*whole-word approach*," that were championed by Swiss Philosopher Rousseau and other notable writers.

Through the *whole-word approach* to reading, students are expected to implicitly learn spelling patterns through repeated exposure to whole words in context. This is often contrasted with phonics instruction, in which students are explicitly taught letter-sound correspondences and spelling patterns in order to sound out unfamiliar words.

Horace Mann and Education Reform

(25:10 - 32:50)

Mechelke and Wexler discuss the impact of Educator Horace Mann and the whole-word approach on education reform. Mechelke details the related philosophies of Francis Parker and John Dewey, both of whom followed Mann in prioritizing meaning-making over phonics instruction.

McGuffey Readers

(32:50 - 35:30)

Mechelke describes McGuffey Readers, a popular series of instructional books whose authors tried to appeal to both phonics and whole-word advocates.

Thorndike and Meaning-First Literacy

(35:30 - 39:34)

Mechelke introduces Educational Psychologist Edward Thorndike's ideas on meaning-first literacy. Although his methods face criticism today, these ideas are formative to the literacy education debate.

After You Listen

Post-Listening Discussion Questions

Continue the conversation with the following questions. This can be a self-guided or discussion-based activity. Considering these post-listening questions can deepen your comprehension of the episode's key ideas and allow you to connect the episode's topics to your own experiences.

1. In this episode, Natalie Wexler talks about Rousseau's *Emile*, saying "So, this was fiction, but it was taken as a model, really, for how education should proceed." Besides fictional work (and podcasts!), what other historical or cultural resources can we use to support our understanding of literacy instruction?
2. Whole-language advocates often claim that phonics instruction causes children to dislike reading. Do you agree? What activities or methods can be combined with phonics instruction to support student motivation and interest?
3. *Looking ahead*: How do you think the books chosen for a literacy curriculum affect methods of instruction?

Go Beyond the Episode

Want to learn more? The following list contains resources and studies that were mentioned in the episode as well as further reading materials on key topics from the episode. For a full list of sources, visit [our website](#).

["The Importance of Phonics Instruction for All Students"](#): In this blog post by Dr. Deborah K. Reed, former director of the Iowa Reading Research Center, learn about five common misunderstandings about phonics instruction.

[Confronting Anti-Black Racism in Education](#): In this webpage from the Harvard Library, read about the history of racism in education and access a variety of articles on anti-Black racism for educators.

["How Literacy Became a Powerful Weapon in the Fight to End Slavery"](#): In this article from History.com, read about how enslaved people learned despite legislation to limit Black people's access to education.