

RESEARCH TOPIC

The impact of definitions of phonemic awareness on professional content knowledge



Researcher Profile

Jennifer O'Sullivan is a lecturer in the area of literacy and English methodology in Marino Institute of Education, an associated college of Trinity College Dublin. She lectures to both undergraduate and postgraduate students. Prior to this, she worked as a primary school teacher in a designated disadvantage school where she also mentored newly qualified teachers. She has been on the executive committee of the Literacy Association of Ireland, which is affiliated to the International Literacy Association, since 2013.

As part of her PhD study with Trinity College Dublin, Jennifer is researching the impact of socio-economic background on Irish children's phonemic awareness development. She will implement a phonemic awareness initiative in schools as part of her research.

She has a special interest in children's literature - particularly wordless picture books - and, in the recent past, she has been on the judging panel of the Children's Book Ireland Book Awards and the Literacy Association of Ireland Book Awards. She is also a regular reviewer for *Inis*, the magazine of Children's Books Ireland.

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Since the 1980s, there has been strong interest in the significant and predictive role that phonemic awareness plays in early reading development (Adams, 1990; Ehri et al., 2001; Gillon, 2004; Lonigan, 2003, Yopp, 1995). It is an area of reading that has seen some of the greatest input in terms of research over the last four decades; yet, some teachers remain unaware of the importance of explicitly and systematically teaching this foundational skill to emergent readers.

Numerous researchers have argued that the lack of a clear and accurate definition of phonemic awareness may have caused confusion for some teachers – in some cases, phonemic awareness has become synonymous with phonics, despite the two terms encompassing very different skills. Definitions of phonemic awareness, in the literature, are wide ranging: from the very broad to the very vague. This could be due to the fact that the concept crosses numerous disciplines from speech pathology to education, from linguistics to psychology. However, Wilson (2005, p. 73) argues that 'without attention to definitions, we literally do not know what we are talking about, leaving much theory and practice disconnected from the real world'.

This paper will argue for the need to find a shared definition for the term phonemic awareness and will build on the work of Walsh (2009) and Scarborough & Brady (2002). It stems from my own research, which attempts to lower the gap in reading deficits between those children attending schools in areas of socio-economic disadvantage and those in more advantaged settings. It aims to achieve this by providing teachers with professional development in phonemic awareness and implementing an intensive phonemic awareness intervention programme within disadvantaged schools.





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Marino Institute of Education (MIE) is a Dublin-based teaching, learning and research community committed to promoting inclusion and excellence in education. It has a long and proud involvement with education, specifically initial teacher education (ITE), dating back over 100 years.

MIE's academic programmes are validated, quality assured and accredited by Trinity College Dublin, the University of Dublin. MIE is an Associated College of Trinity, and this relationship has deepened through the development of a joint academic strategy to promote closer and more extensive collaborations in teaching and research, including joint activities between the two institutes. Through the implementation of this joint academic strategy the strengths of Trinity will be leveraged with those of MIE, to enhance existing relationships and promote new synergies.

In the last decade, the academic mission and scope of MIE's activity has been re-envisioned to encompass a deeper understanding of education in and beyond the classroom, to incorporate the continuum of teacher education and the education of specialist education practitioners at early years, primary and further education levels. This is allied with a commitment to education studies encompassing non-traditional education settings and the wider education environment in a pluralist context.

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MIE will be a centre of global consequence, in teaching and research in the field of education. Through collaboration and technology, it will extend its geographic boundaries and create momentum for the delivery of new, high quality, innovative programmes in education. MIE will build critical mass for world class research in partnership with others, and will foster university-school-community links that contribute to sustainable improvement and renewal across the entire education system.

MIE will extend its commitment and expertise in the area of inclusion by continuing to conduct research and providing education programmes to empower the socially disadvantaged. MIE will lead national and international dialogue regarding the opportunities and challenges pertaining to pluralism and diversity in education settings.