

REASONING TO READ:
MAKING PHONICS MEANING-CENTERED
IN A CULTURALLY AND LINGUISTICALLY-DIVERSE CLASSROOM

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August 6, 1997

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Rationale

How do you teach reading to 27 inner-city first graders, keeping in mind that 23 are low income, minority children and about half speak English as a Second Language? Could it be reasonably expected that these children will all read close to grade level by June? Are there culturally sensitive methods to reach these youngsters so as to build onto their "impoverished literacy backgrounds"?

In my Seattle Public School classroom, I have been answering both questions with an unequivocal yes -- year after year for the past decade. The point of this article is to describe how I do it. Much of what I do is not new, but what is unique is the integration of cognition and comprehension with the reading prerequisites of phonemic awareness, alphabetic principle, print insights and language development.

In a nutshell, my methods can be characterized as systematic, direct instruction in synthetic blending with an emphasis on methods that engage the learner authentically by incorporating learning styles and thinking skills. Yes, phonics can be cognitively entertaining and even comprehension-centered. It does not have to be rote rules, mindless workbooks, disjointed skills and endless frustrations. Hopefully my classroom descriptions will

illustrate ways to encourage students to think, and to respond or act on their learning (e.g., drawing as an integral part of the reading lesson). That is to say, sequenced, lucid instructions in "how to break the reading code" can be done in a motivating fashion, without the traditional loss of students through boredom or confusion. The data presented in this article provides a demonstration that even the most challenging students to teach can learn to break the code and develop their thinking skills simultaneously.

Why phonics? For one thing, I want to work off of the student's knowledge base, their strengths. They come to school knowing oral language and it only makes sense to use their knowledge of sounds as the springboard to reading. Most of my ESL students have at least limited English proficiency from a semester in an orientation center. Phonics is the vehicle between oral language and written text; this relationship must be made clear to them. Furthermore, evidence points to phonics (and direct, explicit instruction) as more effective with low-achieving populations. (Chall 1983, Adams 1990, Chall, Jacobs & Baldwin 1990).

In the phonics/whole language debates, it is not uncommon to characterize whole language positively (developmental, natural, joyful, meaning-driven, child-centered) thereby making phonics, its so called opposite, appear negative. This is a false dichotomy since they share some important end goals. All reading programs stress comprehension, whether for pleasure or information. All reading programs seek to provide the learner with a wide variety of reading and writing experiences. All reading programs want to motivate and support children on the path to lifelong literacy.

That's what every teacher wants and these obviously excellent goals can belong as much to a program that includes phonics as to any other program. A cautionary note: phonics is only a method, it is not the end in itself. My goal here is not to produce a "decoding expert" but rather to enable the quick recall of words so that the reader may focus on text meaning. Sounding out words, although helpful in some situations, is also not the goal of phonics.

Why Direct Instruction? In her commentary on the need to blend whole language with systematic instruction, Dixie Lee Spiegel (1992) advances several reasons why direct instruction is important. First, learning to read and write necessitates understanding print conventions (such as left to right) but unfortunately these are quite arbitrary. Thus, if left on their own to uncover these, "they may become invested in other conventions that are logical but incorrect...Further we have evidence that not all children do naturally discover these conventions by themselves, especially children from lower income families." Direct, explicit instructions would help in explaining the role of conventions in print and it could also reduce or eliminate other confusion surrounding reading where the child sees no connections and becomes frustrated and may internalize the blame as his weakness.

Spiegel continues with her thesis by citing Lisa Delpit, who argues for direct instruction as a way to achieve social balance. Delpit (1995) suggests that minority children, who by definition are not of the "power" culture, should, indeed must, have specific lucid instruction in the culture "code" so they have a chance to succeed within the majority culture. They must be taught the rules of power (reading, writing, speaking). Regardless of how much teachers

wish the power culture did not exist, it does, but literacy is a way to give these children access to the "code" of the power culture. Furthermore, she points out, many children will find it easier to be told the rules of reading and why they need it, especially because unlike the middle or upper classes, poor minority children often have not been exposed to these rules during their preschool years. Finally, Stahl (1992) included direct instruction as a primary guideline to exemplary phonics in hopes it might reduce "excessively ambiguous" phonics instruction.

Why a supportive environment? To be effective, however, direct instruction in phonics needs to be delivered in a classroom that meets the children's emotional and motivational needs since this underlies both the desire and ability to learn. To create this safe environment, two principles guided my thinking.

The first principle is that learning occurs best in a fail-free climate. Setting a non-threatening tone and always supporting the student are key to them taking risks. And learning to read means taking lots of risks, committing lots of errors. They must sense a caring attitude and understand that they will not fail. Errors must be seen as opportunities for growth, if for no other reason because learning is inhibited when threatened (Anderson and Pavan, 1993). Gaskins(1992) goes so far as to declare that without the affective bond, good instruction is insufficient because "affect and motivation play a significant role in student abilities to engage in metacognitive behaviors that characterize independent learners".

The second guiding principle is that the student must also be volitionally involved because in reading, motivation is everything.

Gambrell (1996) points to four steps we can take in the classroom to help with reading motivation: increase access to books in the classroom, have student become familiar with books, allow self selected books, increase social interaction with others around books. In sum, attitude and enthusiasm, both central to lifelong reading, need to be nourished and this occurs best in a learning environment that is emotionally-comfortable for the student.

Why pedagogical principles? The explicit instruction in phonics also need to be delivered in a classroom that takes into account principles of learning derived from educational research. The first learning principle has to do with teaching patterns. In Anderson and Pavan's (1993) review of research by Caine and Caine, the search for meaning is automatic and occurs through patterning. The brain stores and recalls related or organized information more easily than disconnected bits and the more examples or elements in the pattern, the stronger the memory. Therefore, learning to read will be enhanced when the learner is exposed to many examples of a word pattern in a systematic fashion so that s/he can group the pattern and store it so well in memory that it can be retrieved automatically. If words are grouped by orthographic or internal spelling patterns when taught, the child is most likely to grasp and recall the spelling and how it relates to the sounds of the language. For example, presenting children with lots of words with the oa pattern such as oak, moan, throat, and toast helps them to learn to associate the long O sound with the oa pattern and to recognize it in new word encounters.

The second learning principle is that extensive opportunities are needed to learn and apply skills . In reading, this translates to repeated exposure to words and sufficient practice with them. Providing a print-rich environment is an important first step to encourage the emerging literacy of students. Whole Language advocates, Strickland and Morrow(1989), give wonderful examples of classroom set-ups that do indeed promote literacy interactions. For example, in my room, children have lots of writing opportunities (some teacher directed, some self chosen) from science journal entries to thank-you notes, from puppet show invitations to get-well cards. Typewriters, computers, alphabet ink stamps, publishing supplies and the like are available. Each day begins with math thinking problems which are written on the chalkboard and must be copied into math notebooks. These are opportunities to reinforce a phonic lesson or to introduce sight words such as "many, what, half, one, two, four or some of their classmates names that don't follow logical orthographic groupings.

We are also usually in the middle of some classic read-aloud chapter book, and because I feature an author of the month, there are always colorful, enjoyable picture books being read to groups. To provide more practice in reading, I have instituted a buddy reading program, where children take turns reading aloud to each other.

Yet another way to provide meaningful practice of skills is through the use of games. Scrabble, Boggle, and Hangman are kids favorite but I prefer the commercial games of Blurt and Pictionary, for example, as they center on comprehension. In Blurt, students give the definitions and players take turns guessing the word whereas

in Pictionary (there is a junior form) the player reads a word and tries to draw something to communicate the secret word.

In a word, students are offered a balance of learning experiences supporting both skill work and other aspects of authentic literacy. However, it is also important to include the next step of sufficient systematic practice of skills to make sure they are automatically available for children to employ when needed. Examples are included under classroom descriptions.

Reading Prerequisites

Why Oral Language Development? All too often first grade reading programs focus only on written language but learning to read builds on a child's oral language. Indeed, it not only forms the foundation of phonics but it is simultaneously a limiting factor on how well a child can read with understanding. In other words, since reading is meaning-driven, vocabulary development is essential. This is especially true in later grades when vocabulary becomes subject specific. With ESL children, the lag in vocabulary (particularly in academics but also in conversational) can really affect their performance so several times a week (more often if I have parent help) are set aside to play language thinking activities as described shortly.

Print Insights, Phonemic Awareness, and the Alphabet Principal are all bridges from spoken language to written language (Adams, 1990, Lapp & Flood, 1997). In other words, before a child can read, they will need to understand that print has meaning and purpose, that

words are individual sounds blended together, and that alphabet letters are a code for writing sounds.

Why Print Insight? This is a broad category that includes the child's developing knowledge about the form (alphabetic, directionality...) and function of print (to convey meaning, why and how people use literacy). Without an overall picture or gestalt about print in general, it makes little sense to have instruction on specific reading skills such as letter-sound relationships. A child is becoming print aware, for example, when they recognize the permanence of the golden arches of McDonald or the swoosh of Nike shoes. This is known as logographic. More insights about the nature of print involve knowledge that letters have their own shapes and that these make up words (which are separated by spaces) which convey meaning. Having strong print concepts means understanding that the spoken can be written and that words are recoverable. Understanding that reading has rewards in entertainment and information is also part of being print knowledgeable.

For a middle or upper class child, the early years are filled with informal exposure to print. Through repeated experiences with writing (from grocery lists to Christmas lists) children intuitively devise some of the rules of print and its interrelation with language. Adams (1990) estimates that such a child could have an additional 1000 hours more than children such as the ones in my classroom. Children with such immersion and support may indeed need little more than a few pointers to teach themselves to read. But this will not happen for everyone. Literacy experiences would be quite different for a family that has no books in their native tongue

or in a family whose parents are illiterate or whose community doesn't value solitary reading (Delpit,1995). Children of this ilk necessarily will lag behind their fellow first graders, even if we provide a print-rich environment but it is the best we can do aside from being hyper alert to our role as language models.

Why Phonemic Awareness? Phonemes are the individual sounds that compose the spoken language. These sound bits are put together to make syllables and words. When the learner has insights that these sounds can be blended (encoded) or dissected (decoded) then they have sufficient awareness to begin meaningful instruction in reading. Much has been written on this topic (Yopp,1992, Adams,1990, Griffith and Olson,1992) and its vital role in reading acquisition. Its absence does seem to lead to reading difficulties as documented thoroughly by Spear-Swerling and Sternberg (1996). Beck and Juel (1995) remind us that if a child cannot perceive sound segments, they will have trouble sounding out words whether for reading or writing.

Jerome Rossner(1979) in his book about learning disabilities was one of the first to call our attention to the role of phonemes and the importance of teaching phoneme segmentation explicitly to show how words are put together. More recently, Adams (1991) called phoneme awareness "the single most powerful advancement this century in the science and pedagogy of reading"(392).

Why the Alphabet Principle? The discovery or uncovering of the Alphabet principle is critical because it links the orthographic system to the phonemic system. Here the child reaches an understanding of the purpose of the 26 letters: to represent the

spoken phonemes. They will soon learn that because English speakers make more than 40 sounds, there is an insufficient supply of letters so some sounds will be represented by two letters (most often vowels). The word chin has 4 letters but only 3 phonemes /ch/ /i/ /n/ and the same is true for the word leaf /l/ /ea/ /f/.

Knowing letter names is not the same as being alphabetically aware although because of the similarity between many letter names and their sounds, letter naming may benefit grasping the alphabetic principle. Since it is so important for children to understand how the alphabetic system works, it would be sheer folly just to hope that all children will grow to this understanding by inferring the rules, especially when their upbringing may not be so "print-rich". Even whole language advocates such as Linda Gibson(1989) acknowledge that children should be aware that there is a system of rules and principles for converting speech to print. Somehow this correspondence between letters and sounds must be clear in the child's mind without exception. And in such a short time as one school year, explicit instruction is the best choice.

Children are already exploring the relationship when they write CTN for kitten or ILU for I love you. Developmentally speaking we must accept and appreciate these early spelling efforts as signs of reading growth. One way to help students construct alphabetic principles is shown in the next section. This mapping of letters to sounds appears easier to teach after becoming fluent in vowel sound identification because the vowel often influences the sound of the initial consonant.

Implementation

In the classroom, my language/reading block of time is two hours and it often begins with whole group thinking oral activities. Using a speech therapist handbook is a great way to have a collection of such exercises. The books I'm familiar with (HELP Series) stress cognitive engagement or speech for meaning. For example, practice includes deductive reasoning ("Which does not belong in this group of objects?") and inductive thinking ("Why are these words grouped together?"). It also includes activities strengthening many other aspects of language and reading such as sequence, homonyms, compound words, What if's?, Complete the sentence, What happens next?, and so forth.

Another way to launch vocabulary development would be to use a word clustering system as suggested by Marzano (1984). He categorized and prioritized by frequency, clusters and superclusters of words found in elementary texts. This could prove most helpful in the later elementary grades, especially for ESL children. Examples of most frequent superclusters: occupations, types of motions, size/quantity, animals, feelings, food and so on.

Yet another technique to increase language development is to take classroom games and adjust the rules so that language becomes more central to the play. One example is in the series of Lotto games, where pictures on cards are matched to identical pictures on the playing boards. These games come in themes (Farm, Things around the Home, Fruits/Vegetables) and instead of the regular play of picking a picture card from the face down draw pile and then

calling its name, have an adult be the permanent caller and they describe the object so that everyone listens and scans their board for something that meets the definitions. They enjoy this variation and often play it this way in small groups at Center time.

And as self evident as it is, we often overlook the role of talk in promoting language development. Talk allows children to transform new information to make sense of it. As a result, talk is possibly a child's most valuable learning resource. Talk is cheap and as such it's use is encouraged throughout the day.

At the beginning of the school year, training in phonemic awareness follows these 15 minute vocabulary-enhancing sessions. From my experience, it is not necessary that children be able to manipulate all phoneme sounds before beginning to read. For example, to delete the sound /r/ from string is developmentally difficult even for strong beginning readers. However, during the first week, I quickly screen to see if children can segment compound words (Say playground. Say it again but don't say play.) This is not typically a problem for children exiting kindergarten.

What does appear to be most helpful in connecting speech to reading is awareness of the vowel sounds. These medial sounds control words and they are the most difficult to isolate, especially compared to initial and final phonemes. However, since vowel knowledge is crucial to reading, this is where I begin and end phonemic teaching. A classroom example follows.

Starting a week or so after school opens, I begin phonemic training lessons. Groups of 6 are large enough. I focus explicitly on identifying the sound heard in short vowel words, usually CVC

words. The first step, and the most difficult, is for them to hear and repeat the medial sound in a given word. It may seem as if the child is unable to distinguish this difficult sound but my contention is (and it has worked every time) that if a student can say a word then they heard the vowel phoneme and now the goal is to help them focus in on what they heard. For example, no child would confuse using words like cop and cap or rag and rug unless they didn't have the vocabulary. They hear the sounds but they are unaccustomed to dissecting language probably since it's acquisition has been so natural (native English speakers only).

One of the things I do is play with the vowels in words to stress their existence and how they effect meaning of words. So I might say "Whew! The sun sure makes me hat. Oops. I mean hit. Children enjoy the silliness of changing words and it promotes awareness of the essential aspect of words. Students giggle when they hear bedtime changed to badtime or Batman altered to Bitman or Butman.

Specifically, I will say a short vowel word, e.g. big, stressing the vowel and using it in an imagery provoking sentence. Then the child is offered 2 or 3 choices of short vowel sounds and asked to pick the one heard in /b/ /iiih/ /g/ . When I offer the choices, Did you hear /ah/, /ih/ or /uh/ in /b/ /iiih/ /g/ , big? I am careful not to give away the answer although my goal is to teach them how to get the answer. When a child says "I hear /eh/ in red and I'd use the lowercase letter E to write the word red", they are phonemically aware enough to begin instruction in blending. If on the other hand, the child says I hear /ih/ in red, it seems

to help if they hear how the word would sound with /ih/. Did I say rid or red? Can you find something red in this room? Your word is /r/ /eeeh/ /d/. Although this description may sound funny, it is critical to somehow draw attention to the role of vowels and after a half dozen 15 minute session, some students will have it and others will still be struggling to sort out the phonemes. If needed, I make a group of those ready to go on but those who are not even close to identifying the medial sound with any regularity will continue to receive more practice.

It can be slow going for some, but they will eventually hear the discriminations. It helps to remind myself that they don't say, I cut my lap when they mean lip and so they can and must tune in on their own speech. Besides, all further instructions in phonics will depend on phoneme recognition so I keep at it. I have had success with speakers of all languages. Let me hasten to add that if a child does seem to have some rudimentary understanding (consistently identifies at least two vowels) it is probably not necessary to wait for mastery because what follows is so much practice in short vowels that they inevitably will learn to discriminate the five sounds.

Why Synthetic Blending? A synthetic process goes from part to whole, in this case putting individual sounds together to make whole words. One of the traditional problems with "sounding out" is that certain letters called stop consonants are so influenced by their vowel that linguist agree it's not possible to say them without co-articulating. These consonants are generally taught as though they are followed by a short u as in /puh/ for p. Try

sounding out this: /duh/ /ah/ /duh/. Does it help to go faster? For most children, particularly those learning English, the word dad would hardly be recognizable from among those sounds! This is a problem. As noted in the summary of Adams (1990), "Because so many letters cannot be pronounced in isolation, other programs avoid or limit the use of isolated phonemes in their instruction. This may cause serious confusion." (78)

The most obvious solution is to not try and teach any of them in isolation but rather teach them in context, so to speak, with the short vowel sound attached. So when teaching any of the consonants, all five vowel sounds are co-articulated. (Examples of how this can be done will be seen later.) For blending new words, students are instructed to look at the vowel first (they already know the five vowel sounds from previous work on phonemes). Next they think about its sound and then let that dictate the sound of the first letters as you make them into one sound. To decode the word lit, the child thinks /ih/ then says the co-articulated sounds /lah/ /leh/ /lih/ "yes, /lih/ /t/." Clearly it is much easier to hear lit this way than /luh/ /ih/ /t/. The same instructions hold for blends and digraphs. Co-articulate through the vowel so the cr blend can say /crah/ as in crab or /creh/ as in crept and so on.

Later in the program, the co-articulation concept expands to include long vowel sounds and diphthongs. For example, the letter B also makes /bay/ as in bake or /bee/ as in beach and so on, or if connected to diphthong it could say /boy/ as in boil or /bew/ as in boot. Of course by this time, the synthetic blending has

been so well practiced that these minor variations don't present any learning concerns. Students rehearse short vowel sounds for the first third of the school year. We proceed through the following consonant/vowel patterns: CVC, CCVC, CVCC, CCVCC. By the end, blends and endings (ck, nd...), along with the digraphs sh, ch, th are being committed to memory. (Teacher hint: To help remember these digraphs, I put three faces on the blackboard. One has their hand to their mouth making the quiet "shh" sound while the second face has a tongue sticking out for the "th" and the third face has bulging cheeks as the character is "chewing" for "ch" sound. The students refer back to these as often as necessary throughout the year.)

One final comment. Even though terminology is helpful for adults to communicate, I see no value in having students learn them. Similarly, students do not learn rules of phonics. They learn that vowel groupings can make regular sounds but they do not have to be bogged down with trying to remember and apply some of the 166 rules that Smith (1985) says regulates English.

Let's look next at these vowel groups or orthographic patterns because it is through the understanding of these patterns that a child will come to recognize words efficiently and to generalize and apply their learning in new encounters of independent reading. Not only is grouping logical, but according to Stahl (1992), attending to the spelling patterns is an effective strategy and one of the goals of phonics. On the chart below, I began with the controlled or vowelized R. The sounds are so unique (no short vowels here) that they warrant separate studies, although be forewarned, next to phonemic awareness, this is the most difficult part of the reading

program. After this though, the learning pace increases substantially. Perhaps two sample lessons might help the reader develop a better picture of how direct instruction and phonics complement each other. This will be followed by a discussion and sample of two activities used for guided practice.

Lesson in early Fall Here the students are being introduced to some consonant names and co-articulated sounds. Early on, we study one letter at a time. The only exception is with b,d where both are studied simultaneously so that comparisons can be made (memory device to reduce confusion between the letters: lowercase b is contained in the capital B). However depending on the students experience with letter sounds, this pace might quicken.

I use commercially made sandpaper letters, called beaded alphabet. Each lowercase letter is on an individual card and the white textured letter is slightly raised off the smooth black background. A dot on the card helps student understand that orientation is critical in identifying whether it's a u or n or a p versus d for examples. These cards serve two purposes: first, it allows for tactile participation in lessons and perhaps it does help to somehow "motor encode" their learning and secondly, we use the letters to build words and play with words on the floor so they serve as a strong visual cue for beginning readers. This is what a 15-20 minute group might look and sound like.

I sit on the floor to be at eye level with the group of 6-8 and announce that today we will be learning about the letter F, which looks like this (beaded letter). Trace over it, pass it along and add it to our pile of letters already studied; the b, c and

d along with the five vowels. As the students trace over it thrice, using their pointing finger of their writing hand, the rest of us practice orally listing words that start with /fah/, /feh/, /fih/, /foh/, /fuh/. When everyone has traced the lowercase F, the co-articulation is reviewed so they can see and hear it at same time.. The F and A are placed together, away from the other letters. " When /ah/ comes with /f/, the sound is /fah/ as in fast or fact. "Fat too" someone volunteers. This continues through all five sounds.

Taking turns, the students proceed through two tasks: first everyone has a chance to "write" the first two letters in a given word (using sandpaper letters again) and then a few rounds later, they are given the two letters and must decode their sound and generate a word that begins with that sound. Obviously at this beginning level the sounds are what need to be reinforced, even if you the spelling would not agree. Thus the word, dead, would be acknowledged as a short e sound. Likewise, if teaching the sound of C as hard sound, words would sound like /kah/, /keh/, /kih/ and so if a student says kick starts with a CI, this would be accepted without correction. Since both the soft C and G are controlled by spelling rules (when followed by E, I, or Y), I do not introduce these sounds until much later. Letting students use S for soft C words and J for soft G words is preferable to setting up the confusion of one letter representing two sounds.

This session ended with a chance for everyone to decode a whole word. Using only the letters on the floor, the word cab was made and they were instructed to pretend they are "driving one" when they know what it says. This was their first exposure to taking

the co-articulated sound and blending it with the final consonant. They were so excited, they asked for another one and were told to act this out too. They were given BED and reminded to look at the vowel. Does it say /bah/, beh/, /bih/, /boh/ or /buh/ ?

Lesson in Winter Students on floor in circle. Each has a 12 inch square lap chalkboard. They are told that today they will be writing words (always in lowercase) that have the long E sound (uses examples, sheep and weeds) and the spelling pattern is ee. They write ee on top center of boards. Proceeding downward in columns they will write words that all use the same orthographic pattern. Drawing from a list of EE words, the students must try to guess the word from clues given, remembering that the word has a Long E in it. I use synonyms, antonyms and definitions. For example, this word is the same as frozen rain (sleet) or this word is the opposite of "to lose it" (keep) or this word is what plants make in order to make more plants (seeds). And so it goes until they have written maybe 15-20 words.

Now they take turns decoding their own encoding. Everyone points to the words on their boards and tries to read them silently as one child reads them all aloud. They take turns until everyone has heard and seen the words maybe 7-10 times. Usually I repeat behind the child, stressing the final sounds which so often we drop in conversational English. The session ends with a Mystery Drawing Word. I will write a word that they will draw, not shout, so that everyone can participate. Today's word(s) were sneeze and jeep.

These small groups offer a wonderful time to talk about multiple meanings of words, especially for ESL children. So even though

meet and meat or week and weak or steal and steel sound the same they have different spellings to help us know which means which. But some words such as TIP have many meanings with only one spelling. It can mean the top end of something, to lean, or money left in restaurants. And when students are encouraged to speak up, they often come up with multiple meanings that I hadn't anticipated, such as getting a tip on which horse to bet!

CHART I. HERE

Practice, Practice, Practice. It's a cry that echoes throughout the classroom on a quotidian basis, all year long. Students are reminded of how athletes must practice or how no one can learn skills like jumprope and roller skating simply by watching. And they are not the only ones hearing it; parents sometimes need to be shown how they can help and how their help will make a difference. They are told how useful it is to have their children read their classwork (described below) twice and to save it to be revisited on the weekends. This is also an effective way for students to see their own growth and build confidence which in turn can add to their motivation.

Fluent word recognition comes with repeated practice, but in what form? I wanted thinking activities that kept comprehension as the objective and as a result, two activities were devised. In the first, students copy and illustrate sentences daily. (This is what many students are doing while I work with small reading

groups). These sentences are not the typical controlled nonsensical sentences Dan can fan Nan or Pat the rat sat. I try to create sentences that are lively and involve actions and characters. But sentence meaning should not be sacrificed by trying to use too many structurally similar words. (I do not teach by word families for this reason.) When students draw they are not only forced to derive meaning from the sentences but the activity itself relies on both left and right brain use. Another reason for copying sentences is found in Adams' (1990) research which suggests that the act of writing words helps children remember them and furthermore, children absorb the syntax, vocabulary, and conceptual structure of the text. This means they are informally learning how to write in complete sentences, without even trying!

For example, on their half-ruled, oversized newsprint papers, students would copy six such sentences. When they read them aloud to me at the end of class, I fold over their pictures so they focus on the text. Then we comment on the artwork and see if the pictures matched their sentences. Often they go back and fix pictures, which shows that even one word can change the meaning of a sentence. This is an important assessment time for me. Their fluency in recognizing previously-studied words is a good indication of how much practice they are doing. They may be quietly reminded that it is their job to take care of their learning or they may be otherwise motivated to practice (Should you or should I call mom?). In any case, rehearsing is important to memory and thus is key to fluent reading.

Some examples of ee sentences:

Lee drives a green truck that sweeps the street.

The three sheep are feeding on weeds by the steep hill.

This animal likes cheese and has little teeth and feet.

Draw something that has a steering wheel.

To jazz it up later in the year, I will occasionally jumble up a sentence (or even the whole set of them) so the words are out of order. Students then write a correct version before illustrating it. Here they have a chance to see the importance of word order as it affects meaning. Finally, if there is a new word introduced that does not follow any patterns they know (sight words), the word is underlined and the students are simply told the word. Ideally, they will also have context to help them remember the word.

In the second set of exercises students receive "thinking" worksheets which ask questions built on words they are studying. Again, this is an attempt to keep phonics meaning-driven; they are engaged and comprehension is the objective. When we orally review these sheets, we have many options to talk about the questions. The queries are sometimes funny and sometimes instructive because topics range from science to social studies, from safety to friendship. Also by reviewing the worksheets, children can defend their answers by pointing out how something could be misread, depending on which words you chose to stress.

Although I never collect the worksheets for grading, it does allow me to keep a check on everyone's progress by simply glancing at it before we go over it in group. They mark their own papers

and afterwards know that it's their job to find a sibling or parent and read this several more times for homework--and the next couple nights if they missed more than a few. Typically, a worksheets might have 20 questions. Some examples with ee words:

Name something sweet that has a peel. _____

What part of a tree is green? _____

Can you feel while you sleep?_____

Which says "beep" -- a deer or a jeep?

Do you peek when you play hide and seek?

What is a steeple? _____ (independent decoding--not seen before)

Do you like worksheets like this? _____ (open for discussion!)

Early Spring My overall goal, like any reading teacher, is to move children into books at the earliest possible time by finding that balance between pleasure and frustration. It is important for this age youngster to have positive experiences if they are going to be "hooked" on reading. My hope is that by the end of first grade, a typical child will have read lots of books including the "I Can Read" Books such as Danny and the Dinosaur and Dr. Seuss's easier rhyming books like Cat in The Hat. They will also be reading (and rereading) some of the easier picture books which may have age appropriate vocabulary but no controlled word usage. Books by James Marshall, Leo Leoni, Ezra Jack Keats and Pat Hutchins would be in this category. Some will be reading beginning chapter books series including The Littles and Cam Jansen mysteries. Tradebooks on "high interest" science and social studies topics like Sharks and Titanic will also be read, depending on difficulty of language.

I need to address one final issue of interest to practitioners: sight words. Sight words are words which do not fit common spelling patterns and I teach these in two ways, both directly. When I use it in a math problem or a reading sentence or a question worksheet or anytime throughout the day, I underline it and the students know to ask if they can not figure it out. I also will use the chalkboard method described and just study 15 or so each day for 4 or 5 days, followed by practice in sentences/worksheets. Then, a list of the words will be handed to them, as all word lists have been throughout the whole year, and like all the other times, they will be instructed to put it on the refrigerator until they know them. I usually delay this list until the close of the first year and by then, they don't seem to have trouble remembering them.

Evaluation

Although the students I teach are from highly mobile families and many may not be with me an entire school year, I was able to give Fall and Spring standardized tests to 27 students during a 2-year period. I administered Gates-MacGinitie Reading Tests (1978), composed of vocabulary and comprehension subtests. Total reading scores are reported here.

Twenty three of these children are minorities while twenty two qualify for free lunch. Thirteen of them speak a language other than English at home. Five were retained in kindergarten or another first grade and fifteen began the year eligible for Chapter I Federal remedial support. Three students received speech therapy while

another with motor skill problems received occupational/physical therapy. Alcohol/drug births were cited by three parents. And by the end of the year, two out of these twenty seven qualified for special education placement.

According to the test administrators manual, the best way to show the effects of curriculum changes are through the use of derived scores, particularly the Normal Curve Equivalency (NCE). These scores rank student achievement within their own grade grouping and represent equal units of growth, thus a child that starts at 54 should end at 54 with a higher or lower rank indicating more or less than one year growth. Calculating class averages is valid for normal curve equivalents. In this case, the averages score went from 34.7 (SD = 22.1) to 70.9 (SD = 15.4) with a few notable individual scores being more dramatic. Four student went from scores of 1 to scores of 44, 67, 71 and 73. No one scored less than 40. Table 1 shows the NCE distribution scores. The difference between the pretest and posttest was statistically significant, with $t(26) = -10.31$ and $p = .001$.

TABLE 1 HERE

Since NCEs are derived from percentile ranks it is valid to convert class NCE scores to class percentiles. Here the average rose from 24th to 84th. Just as noteworthy, while 17 students began below the 30th percentile, none ended up under there and an impressive 18 of them ended above the 80th. Table 2 demonstrates the dramatic

shift of students from below the national average (50th) to above. The same results are apparent when using stanines. In Table 3, scores are grouped into stanines 1-3, 4-6, 7-9 dividing children in the lower, middle and upper thirds and again the growth is undeniable with no one ending up in the bottom third.

TABLE 2 and TABLE 3 HERE

Summary and Conclusions

In closing, evidence has been offered that when phonics is supported by direct instruction, it can yield excellent results, particularly for a traditionally low-achieving population. By merging multi-modality techniques with thinking-oriented lessons and practice, students showed gains well above national norms. Explicit teaching in the prerequisites of reading starts the students on their way and co-articulation blending makes the transition to reading smooth. The synthetic program is centered around vowel patterns which seems to allow the student easier access to meaning, as the organized memory assists word recall and attention is freed up for comprehension.

Yes, a few children did not reach grade level but they did make gains and the overwhelming majority do reach and exceed grade equivalents. Most importantly, over and over parents tell me anecdotes of how motivated their children are to read, from flashlights under the blankets to rejecting cartoon time in favor of books. Two other

teachers in my site use these same techniques and exercises and they also report a near-zero failure rate along with high student excitement about reading. So now what remains is to see if this program can be replicated by other teachers.

There is one final factor that has not been mentioned because it cannot be measured but that is the role of high expectations. I expect all children to participate willingly and to practice, and I don't take "no". If it means cajoling parents or showing "tough love" for the student, so be it. More often, however, it means a hug and some extra support during recess. To me, high expectations is key to good instruction because it motivates both the learner (I think I can, I think I can) and the educator (It's my job to find another way to show this). And although 'expecting the best' is an intangible factor, it remains a crucial characteristic of any effective reading program.

(The author would like to thank and acknowledge the editorial wizardry of Dr. Virginia Berninger.)

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Chart I.
Orthographic Units Taught
First Year

Unit	Sound	Examples
ar	/ar/	arm, card, jar
er	/er/	her, fern, bigger
ir	/er/	bird, shirt, girl
or	/or/	for, born, store
ur	/er/	turn, church, nurse
y	long i	my, fly, shy, by
ay	long a	day, tray, spray
ai	long a	hair, mail, aim
ee	long e	speed, creek, eel
ea	long e	please, steam, meal
ou	/ow/	out, couch, sound
ow	/ow/	now, gown, crowd
oo	/ew/	moon, food, shoot
ow	long o	snow, owe, throw
oo	U	book, foot, good
oa	long o	float, loan, toad
oi	/oy/	coin, moist, oil
oy	/oy/	joy, oyster, annoy
ew	/ew/	flew, news, threw
aw	/aw/	claw, hawk, lawn
ea	short e	thread, deaf, heavy
gh	silent	light, thigh, caught

TABLE 1

NCE DISTRIBUTION

OCTOBER	5	2	2	7	5	3	2			1
MAY					3	3	6	6	6	3
	1-9	10-19	20-29	30-39	40-49	50-59	60-69	70-79	80-89	90-99

TABLE 2

NUMBER OF STUDENTS ABOVE/BELOW 50th PERCENTILE

OCTOBER	21	6
MAY	3	24
	BELOW 50%	ABOVE 50%

TABLE 3

STANINE DISTRIBUTION

OCTOBER	15	11	1
MAY	0	8	19
	STANINES: 1-3	4-6	7-9