Phonics Their Way:

First Grade Students Take a New Look at Old Phonics

Denise D. Cunningham, Ph.D.
Missouri State University
901 S. National
Springfield, MO 65897
(417) 836-4492
(417) 836-8900 FAX
DeniseCunningham@missouristate.edu

I am an Associate Professor in the Childhood Education & Family Studies Department within the College of Education. I teach the methods courses for early childhood certification. I am a former primary teacher (1st & 2nd grades) in a constructivist school. My areas of specialization include early childhood curriculum, constructivist education, early literacy, and development of language and literacy environments in early childhood classrooms.

Abstract

This paper is a description of an action research project investigating the process of teaching phonics and word study in a developmentally appropriate first grade classroom located in a large, urban Midwestern school district. The students constructed understandings about phonics that assisted them in learning letter-sound relationships and letter patterns for spelling and pronunciation of words. By incorporating the three principles of effective phonics instruction, providing relevant experiences with print, and allowing students to hypothesize and test these hypotheses, students were able to construct knowledge about phonics based on their own contexts. Out of three first grade classrooms, the classroom in this study comprised the largest concentration of “at-risk” students and made the greatest gains on both formal and informal assessments. The study suggests that developmentally appropriate practices (DAP) can be used to effectively teach phonics and word study skills.

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Introduction

Reading instruction over the past 130 years has typically involved two general approaches: phonics – an analytic approach, and whole word (now, whole language) a more global approach (Sousa, 2005). Phonics instruction was the earliest method for teaching reading. Letter names and corresponding sounds were taught in the hope that children would string the sounds together to form syllables and words. However, one major reason for advocating for the whole word method was the irregularity of the pronunciation of common words, which meant that letter-to-phoneme correspondence was not always reliable. It was argued that an emphasis should be placed on learning to memorize the pronunciation of the whole word, not parts of words. In addition, it was stated that whole word learning promoted comprehension early in the reading process – words have meaning, speech sounds do not (Rayner, Foorman, Porfetti, Pesetsky, & Seidenberg, 2001). Throughout the 1990s the "reading wars" consumed researchers and impacted reading curricula and instruction.

At the beginning of the 21st century, two major reports were published that seemed to stir the proverbial phonics and whole language pot once again. The National Research Council (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998) advocated for a balanced reading approach, acknowledging that not all children can be reached by one type of curriculum, material or strategy. The National Reading Panel (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000) states that scientific evidence suggested that reading programs that included a strong phonics component were more likely to be successful with more beginning readers than programs lacking that component. This movement toward a balanced approach provides a backdrop to analyze the two systems, and creates opportunities to apply both.

Approaches to Phonics Instruction and Word Learning

Beginning readers learn words by: 1) sight, 2) letter-sound decoding, 3) analogy, and 4) contextual guessing (Ehri, 1991/1994; McGee & Richgels, 2011). To read words by sight, readers retrieve information about the words stored in memory from previous experiences reading the words. Decoding involves sounding out the letters and blending them into sounds. Analogizing consists of accessing from memory information about familiar sight words to read unknown words. Contextual guessing involves using meaning-based cues in preceding text or in pictures to predict what a word might be. Sight word reading is the principal way that familiar words are read; the other ways are used to read unfamiliar words that have not been stored as sight word memory.

Decoding and the use of phonics are being stressed as a technique that needs more attention for today's young readers (Snow et al., 1998). There are two main methods to teach phonics: analytic and synthetic. In the analytic method, which is also known as implicit phonics instruction, consonants and vowels are generally not isolated but are taught within the context of a whole word. In the synthetic method, which is often referred to as explicit phonics instruction, words are decoded sound by sound, and both consonant and vowel sounds are pronounced in isolation. However, many experts recommend a combination of analytic and synthetic approaches (Clay, 1991; Cunningham & Allington, 2006; Dahl, Sharer, Lawson, & Grogan, 2001; Morrow, 2009) to maximize literacy-learning for beginning readers. In synthesizing the data from the National Reading Council (Snow et al., 1998) and the National Reading Panel (NICHHD, 2000), Smith and Read (2009) concluded there are three principles of effective phonics instruction: (1) phonics instruction must be connected to meaningful reading, (2) phonics instruction must be simple, flexible, and enjoyable, and (3) phonics instruction must be explicit and systematic.

Developmentally Appropriate Teaching and Learning

Against the backdrop of No Child Left Behind (NCLB), Reading First, and other initiatives and mandates, there has been a trend to devalue student-centered, developmentally appropriate classrooms in exchange for increasingly more explicit and skills-based literacy instruction in kindergarten and the primary grades (Hubbard, 2014). Teachers and researchers agree that these mandates often get in the way of effective teaching (Washor & Mojkowski, 2006) as well as increase teacher stress (Deniston & Gentry, 2010) and teacher turnover (Cavanagh, 2012). Teachers who understand how children learn and how emergent literacy develops struggle to maintain their vision and creativity within an increasingly restrictive, prescribed and narrow curriculum (Center on Educational Policy, 2006).

In a developmentally appropriate classroom, learning occurs when students are encouraged to construct their own knowledge by testing ideas based on prior knowledge and experiences followed by applications in new situations (NAEYC, 2009). Learning is an active process that is authentic, meaningful, and ongoing. Like building blocks, previously learned ideas are used as foundations for new learning situations.

In an applied setting, experiences in a developmentally appropriate classroom emphasize *learning* rather than *teaching* (DeVries & Edmiaston, 1998). Learning occurs when each student actively contributes to his or her acquisition of knowledge by constructing his or her understanding and meaning (DeVries & Kohlberg, 1987; Perez, 2008). Classroom instruction is student-centered rather than teacher-directed (NAEYC, 2009). Student's ideas are respected and higher-order thinking is encouraged. The teacher asks open-ended questions and engages in discussions with children. This form of instruction facilitates learning and is crucial for the development of critical thinking during the child's early years (DeVries & Kohlberg, 1987). This developmentally appropriate approach to learning is advocated by the National Association for

the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) and the International Reading Association (IRA), as documented in the joint position statement issued by the organizations (IRA & NAEYC, 1999).

NCLB has had a dramatic effect on curriculum in early childhood classrooms. It is arguably the most far-reaching educational policy enacted in the past four decades. The emphasis on accountability measures has prompted a shift from developmentally appropriate practices (DAP) that focus on intellectual, physical, social, and emotional development to a direct-instruction model limited to discrete skills (Hubbard, 2014; Neuman & Roskos, 2005). The curriculum has narrowed to exclude subjects not tested such as social studies and the arts (Center on Educational Policy, 2006). Administrators and teachers in schools with high-risk populations feel manipulated and demoralized by the reward and sanction culture of NCLB (Santoro, 2011). This is the environment in which this teacher-inquiry occurred. This article describes first grade students' strategies to learn and apply phonics when given opportunities to construct their own knowledge in a developmentally appropriate classroom setting.

The Inquiry

This action research project was carried out in response to a district-wide initiative to implement a prescriptive phonics curriculum. I had questions regarding my use of DAP and the implementation of synthetic phonics instruction: (1) How can I implement the three principles of effective phonics instruction (i.e., instruction connected to meaningful reading; instruction that is simple, flexible, and enjoyable; instruction that is explicit and systematic) within a developmentally appropriate classroom, and (2) Would students be able to construct knowledge about phonics and word learning through instruction that was deliberate and explicit yet remained student-centered and developmentally appropriate?

Answering these questions required a variety of appropriate data sources (Meier & Henderson, 2007), which included (1) student journals, (2) field notes, (3) lesson plans, (4) the

DIBELS, (5) camera, and (6) audio cassette recorder.. Lesson plans were coded using the three principles of phonics instruction. The first grade students were formally assessed in early September for guided reading levels and Lexile Levels were determined for each student. The DIBELS (Dynamic Instruction for Basic Early Literacy Skills) assessment was administered in September, January, and May. Beginning-of-the-year and end-of-the-year scores are depicted in Table 1 (see next page).

The Students and Setting

This study took place in a magnet school in a large, urban school district in the Midwest of the USA. There were three first grade classrooms in the school, all of which were taught by master-level teachers. There were 23 ethnically diverse students in my classroom (15 African American, 7 Caucasian, 1 Asian) of which 14 were boys. Over half of my students were identified with risk factors; 11 qualified for free or reduced meals, four were included in special education services and another three received speech and language services.

Investigating the Three Principles of Phonics Instruction

Principle 1: Connect instruction to meaningful reading

Connecting phonics to meaningful reading and using *authentic* text has been identified as imperative components for an effective reading program (DaCruz-Payne & Schulman, 1998; Smith & Read, 2009). Materials that engage a student's interest or imagination, as well as extend their knowledge, are optimal. Phonics and spelling skills can be integrated through the shared reading and writing of meaningful and interesting texts. The most meaningful and authentic texts available to me (or any teacher) were those created specifically for and from my first grade students. Therefore, I started each day with a "morning message" (DaCruz-Payne & Schulman).

Table 1: *Beginning - and End –of - Year Assessments*

Student#	Lexile		**D**ynamic **I**ndicators of **B**asic Early Literacy **S**kills (DIBELS)										+/- Grade Level	
	Fall	Sp	Letter Name		Phoneme Segmentation		Nonsense Word		Oral Reading		Retelling			
			Fall	Sp	Fall	Sp	Fall	Sp	Fall	Sp	Fall	Sp	Fall	Sp
01*	BR	305L	21*	NA	7*	33	10*	48	NA	83	NA	44	Be	At
02	90L	400L	37	NA	35	55	48	61	NA	95	NA	56	At	A
03	90L	305L	38	NA	36	39	49	55	NA	83	NA	43	At	At
04*	BR	90L	11*	NA	1*	21	1*	34	NA	59	NA	30	Be	Be
05	100L	455L	38	NA	36	64	48	67	NA	101	NA	58	At	A
06	170L	510L	47	NA	45	65	48	70	NA	107	NA	65	A	A
07*	BR	245L	18*	NA	5*	33	2*	44	NA	76	NA	55	Be	At
08*	BR	485L	20*	NA	4*	65	2*	66	NA	105	NA	65	Be	A
09	100L	485L	37	NA	35	66	48	69	NA	105	NA	63Dear	At	A
10	90L	485L	37	NA	35	63	47	66	NA	105	NA	60	At	A
11	200L	545L	55	NA	48	62	50	66	NA	101	NA	94	A	A
12	100L	365L	36	NA	34	50	38	50	NA	90	NA	51	At	At
13*	BR	245	24*	NA	9*	33	12*	49	NA	76	NA	49	Be	At
14*	BR	455L	23*	NA	8*	54	11*	58	NA	99	NA	60	Be	A
15	110L	295L	34	NA	34	34	20	50	NA	82	NA	50	At	At
16	100L	445L	36	NA	33	56	20	58	NA	99	NA	82	At	A
17*	BR	240	17*	NA	5*	32	11*	48	NA	76	NA	47	Be	At
18*	50L	260L	25	NA	9*	34	12*	50	NA	78	NA	51	Be	At
19	100L	370L	35	NA	34	44	24	56	NA	90	NA	50	At	At
20*	BR	285L	24*	NA	9*	32	12*	40	NA	81	NA	46	Be	At
21*	BR	305L	23*	NA	8*	31	8*	48	NA	83	NA	45	Be	At
22*	BR	285L	24*	NA	9*	35	12*	47	NA	81	NA	40	Be	At
23	100L	475L	40	NA	34	50	20	62	NA	103	NA	58	At	A

*denotes at-risk status

**Be - Below

A - Above

At - At

Morning message is a tool to help students with reading and writing skills. They are used by teachers in many primary classrooms for the purpose of modeling and engaging the students in literacy activities. Morning messages "create a bridge to independent writing" (DaCruz-Payne & Schulman, 1998, p. 40) and reaches the variety of reading and writing levels in the classroom. Morning messages provide opportunities for more experienced writers to demonstrate writing and for other students to make connections about word learning in a variety of ways.

There are three main types of morning messages: teacher-directed, shared writing, and independent/student-generated messages (Geddes & Swearingen, 2001). Teacher- directed messages are written by the teacher and are used for the purpose of rereading together as a class. Teacher directed messages can involve the students in locating letters, sounds, words, and punctuation under the guidance of the teacher. Shared writing gives the opportunity for the "teacher to share the pen with the students" (DaCruz-Payne & Schulman, 1998, p. 8). During shared writing messages, the students are more directly involved in the writing of the message with the teacher's assistance. Independent or student-generated writing allows for the students to create the actual morning message.

Children come to school with the ability to use oral language in sophisticated and meaningful ways. With this in mind, using a combination of teacher words and student words and ideas, each day I created a message that reflected something of importance or interest to the students. We also engaged in daily shared reading of a poem that related to the student-selected theme being investigated, as well as daily reading of quality children's literature. Through these various experiences, children would try out, refine, and test their hypotheses about how the written symbol system works. We studied words and their spellings in the context of what was authentic and interesting.

Principle 2: Simple, flexible, and enjoyable instruction

Students learn phonics when they write meaningful messages (Cunningham, 2004; Savage, 2001). They learn to break up words and listen for all the sounds when they write from experiences or topics of their interest. I would model "stretching out words" as I wrote the morning message. Students would match beginning, ending and medial sounds from word wall words to words in the morning message text. The students created their own "phonics rules" to help them remember sounds and patterns and would use these strategies when they wrote interactively with me. Students participated in writing text that met their own developmental level.

By implementing the morning message along with the inclusion of theme related poetry and other quality children's literature, students were able to engage in meaning-making literacy activities. These activities incorporated comprehensive word study and phonics instruction through teacher-student discussions in a respectful learning community, rather than performing rote exercises such as copying words correctly or completing worksheets. This type of instruction was "simple, flexible, and enjoyable" (Smith & Read, 2009.

Principle 3: Explicit and systematic instruction

By first grade, children have usually learned many consonant letter-sound correspondences. These are typically the first phonics relationships taught due to their consistency. However, in first grade, phonics become more complex – introducing multiple spelling variations for the same sound (e.g., *ph, ff, gh* = *f*; *c* = *s* or *k*). Then there are the vowels that elicit great variation. Knowing that I wanted to teach phonics systematically without commercially-made materials and use authentic text, I referred to Rinsky's (1993) book, "Teaching Word Recognition Skills". This book provided a phonics sequence that made sense to

me and did not rely on workbooks. For first grade, Rinsky (1993) suggested reviewing consonants, vowels and letter combinations as well as introducing useful phonics rules.

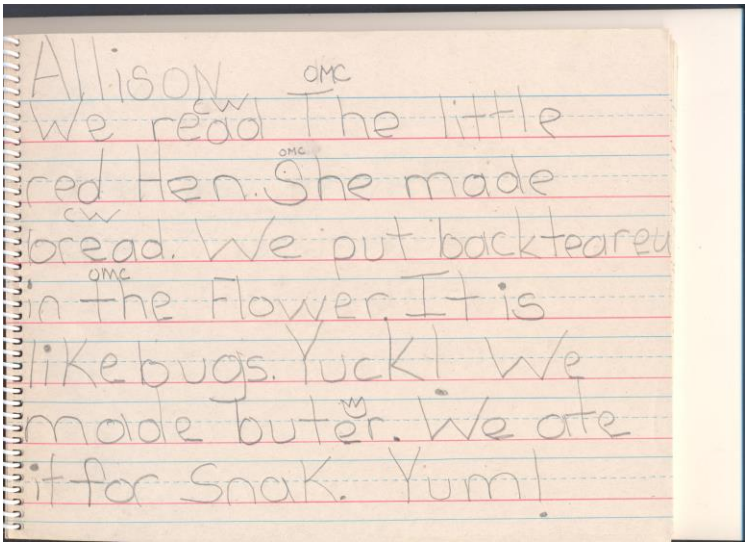
In the 1950s and 1960s, phonics rules were introduced to first grade children to help them grapple with phonics relationships. Clymer (1963/1996) examined four widely used primary grade sets of readers to determine which phonics rules were being taught. It was found that there were too many exceptions to classify the relationships as rules. Instead, the concept of "generalization" was adopted. Five types of generalizations were identified as being taught: (1) vowels, (2) consonants, (3) endings, (4) syllabications, and (5) miscellaneous relationships. Clymer found 50 vowel generalizations, 15 consonant generalizations, and 25 generalizations for both endings and syllabication. The study considered 45 of the generalizations most frequently taught through the primary reading series. The study determined that many of the generalizations commonly taught in the primary grades held little value.

Clymer (1963/1996) found that the utility of phonics generalizations were minimal for young readers. For example, the rule "when two vowels go walking the first one does the talking and says its long name" works only about 45% of the time in words typically used in texts for primary students. Or, when a word follows the consonant-vowel-consonant-silent *e* pattern, the middle vowel is long, only works 63% of the time. It seemed as though some generalizations may be useful to encourage children to examine words for sound and letter relationships. I believed my students could use the "old phonics" to construct their own knowledge about phonics and word learning if given enough experience with print – and deliberate guidance (i.e., explicit and systematic instruction).

Our New Look

Through morning messages and other reading and writing experiences, these first grade students became astute word watchers, noticing patterns in words and spellings (e.g., rimes,

blends, digraphs). Students were developing decoding and analogy strategies through varied and deliberate experiences with text. As students were reading and writing I would draw their attention to patterns such as /*th*/, /*sh*/, and /*ch*/. One day, the students wanted to write about a new class rule, "Do not shout. Have a quiet voice inside." I thought the word *shout* would lend itself to a mini-lesson about consonant digraphs. I had students identify the sound of */s/* in the word *inside* and the sound of /*h/* in the word *has.* Then I asked the students why they thought the /*sh*/ in the word *shout* made a different sound than a /*s*/ and a /*h*/ blended together. After a long silence, Timothy remarked he thought those letters were like an "old married couple". He explained, "You know, like when old married couples hang around with each other a long time, they start acting like, you know, like a *couple* not like regular people. Don't you think? So maybe /*s*/ and /*h*/ don't act like regular letters when they're together, maybe they act like an old married couple – kinda like my grandma and grandpa." Other students responded enthusiastically that they understood this line of thought and agreed with it. The students went on a hunt through additional texts in the classroom to find other groups of letters that could be called "old married couples." The students applied this new knowledge and identified /*th*/ and /*ch*/ as other "old married couples." In everything they read the students would identify these sounds in this special way. For weeks, the students' writing activities, both shared and independent, contained a variety of words that contained, and were identified as, "old married couples."

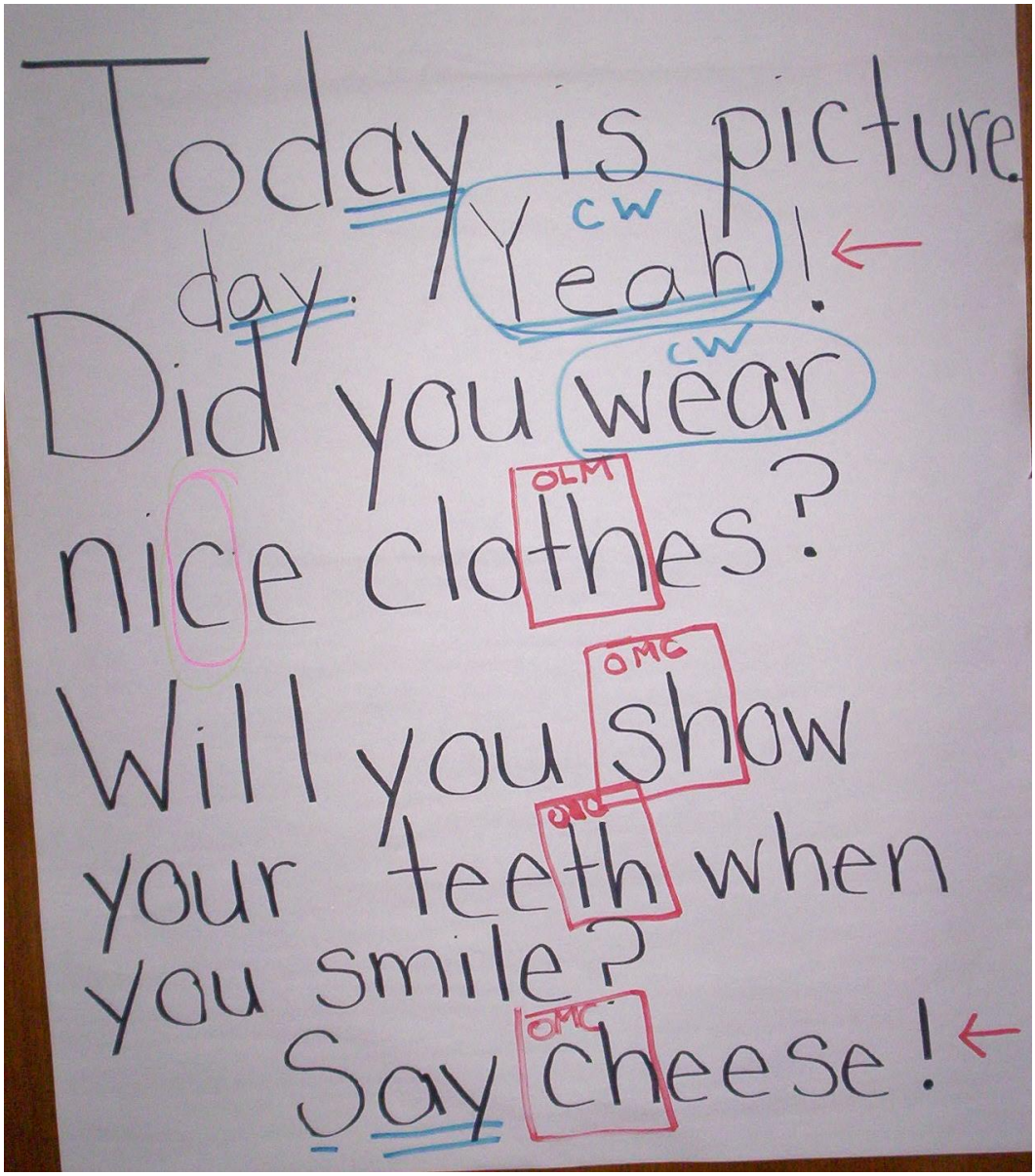


As time went on, students started noticing other patterns. For example, upon examining words with two vowels side-by-side, like *scream*, *loaf*, *mean*, students noticed they could hear the letter name of the first vowel. One day when the students were in the school library, Allison noticed the vowel pattern in a book she was reading. The librarian told Allison the old phonics rule that applied to the vowel pattern - when two vowels go walking the first one does the talking and says its long name. I knew the utility of this generalization was poor; however, since students had already been making observations about this type of vowel pattern, I thought that the rule might encourage them to analyze more words. Spurred by their success in identifying, locating, and applying the concept of "old married couples," students began looking for all the words that met the new vowel rule. It did not take long before they began to find words that rejected the rule. They started making decoding and pronunciation errors due to the application of this rule.

These mistakes were not signs of an approach gone wrong. In fact, errors are valued in a developmentally appropriate classroom (DeVries & Kohlberg, 1987). It is through our errors that we learn; we test our hypothesis and make necessary adjustments to conform. I wrote morning messages to provide opportunities for students to experiment with words, make errors, test

hypotheses, and make mental adjustments. For example, a message included the word *read* (short *e* sound) and the students pronounced it as *read* (long *e* sound). However, given the context, it did not make sense. The two meanings were discussed. The explanation did not appease Allison. She protested the word *had* to be *read (*long *e* sound) because of the rule "two vowels go walking". I explained that sometimes there were words that broke the rule. Robert proclaimed, "So they're like criminals. We should call those words criminals because when a person breaks the rules they are called criminals." Students agreed wholeheartedly. They started finding many "criminal words" in their daily reading and writing. Chantal suggested that a list of these words should be kept to help them remember that those words break the rule. Immediately Jamar had the idea to construct a bulletin board like a jail and put the words on cards in the jail. When we placed a "criminal word" in jail, we also included the sentence from which we found the word so the students always had context and prior knowledge to draw upon. Our jail quickly filled with all the "criminals" that we found. It was exciting to observe the children constructing knowledge about phonics. It seemed that although the utility of phonics generalizations might be poor, the rules certainly encouraged my first graders to be aware of vowel patterns and challenged them to decipher if the generalization worked or not. Every language rule became suspect.

Construction of knowledge about phonics and words did not end with criminal words. Consonant clusters and blends became "daters" because they "went together" and blended their "personalities". We also had "King R" for *r*-controlled vowels, which became the "King R Triplets" when it was discovered *er, ir,* and *ur* all "ruled" the words in which they were found. "Ring-a-ding-ding" indicated the */ing/* pattern that was found in so many of the words they were reading. Finally, there was the "boyfriend/girlfriend" relationship that students used to describe what happens to the letter /*c*/ when it is followed by an /*i*/, /*e*/, or /y/. The students decided that /*c*/ made herself sound differently when one of her "boyfriends" (*i*, *e,* or *y*) were hanging around. "Miss C" would get "sweet and soft" when one of her boyfriends stood beside her – and perhaps the alliteration helped them to remember the soft /c/ sound.



Results

This project investigated the use of phonics instruction in a first grade classroom in a school from a large, urban school district. Two of the school's first grade classrooms implemented a prescriptive phonics curriculum recommended by the school district. The third classroom, my classroom, used DAP and implemented the three principles of effective phonics instruction that encouraged students to construct knowledge about phonics and word learning.

Formal and informal assessments of the first grade students' phonics skills revealed they had made good progress through the year by using the developmentally appropriate phonics instruction rather than the prescriptive curriculum and strategies being advocated by the school district.

In the fall, 11 of 23 students in my classroom had been identified by the school as "at risk" due to various risk factors, including speech/language deficits, low screening scores, or free/reduced meal status. These 11 students entered first grade with a Lexile Level of "Beginning Reader" and were classified "below grade level" for reading. In the spring, all students had moved from the "Beginning Reader" stage and eight were reading "at grade level." Of special note, two of the "at-risk" students who had scored "Beginning Reader" in the fall had moved to "above grade level" by the spring. In addition, six students moved from "at grade level" to "above grade level." From fall to spring, all students made adequate progress in the areas of phonemic segmentation and decoding of nonsense words. This class, with the highest number of identified at-risk students of the three classrooms, made the greatest gains of all first grade classes in the school. The other two classrooms had 17% - 20% of their students still reading "below grade level" at the end of the school year.

Table 2: *First Grade Classes Reading Levels*

	Fall				Spring			
Class	***N***	Below Grade Level	At Grade Level	Above Grade Leve	***N***	Below Grade Level	At Grade Level	Above Grade Level
201	24	6/25%	17/70%	1/4%	23	4/17%	18/78%	1/4%
203*	23	11/47.8%	10/43%	2/8%	23	1/4%	12/52%	10/43%
205	23	7/30%	16/69.5%	0	24	5/20.8%	17/70%	2/8%

*indicates study classroom

Conclusion

Language arts skills are best acquired when students are actively engaged in the process of learning and becoming literate (Blachowicz & Fisher, 2002; NICHHD, 2000). Students are better able to comprehend information when they integrate learning with their own life experiences. Therefore, the student responds better in a learning environment where he/she can make the connection between the learning going on and real-life experiences. The more the student is engaged in the process of seeing the meaning and connection of the material presented to their everyday life, the better the opportunity to construct meaning.

These first grade students were tried and true "word detectives" always on the lookout for old married couples, daters, King R, Miss C, or criminals to put into their jail. My developmentally appropriate approach to phonics instruction was validated. Students constructed knowledge about the English language and its symbol system. Through a blending of explicit and implicit phonics instruction, the students created phonics understandings based on their own personal contexts and used them to refine their hypotheses about how our language works. It has been said that children must feel comfortable and confident about their abilities to actively engage in reading and writing activities without fear of failure (Cunningham, 2004). When children approach print with a problem-solving approach, as did these first grade students, they gain power over the print. Piaget (1973) stated that knowing something involves much more than being able to recite memorized information, (e.g., phonics rules). Knowing involves organizing information and forming a conceptual framework within which new knowledge can fit. Knowledge is never static; it changes and transforms with each new discovery. Furthermore, the learner has an active part in the learning process. Piaget has described learning as being engaged in actively structuring a system through which to

understand the world (as cited by Pflaum, 1986, p. 6). These first grade students were thoroughly engaged in the active construction of literacy learning.

Many first grade students appear to make discoveries about words and can learn to read without explicit instruction (Goodman, 1986). However, students who are at-risk for failure in learning to read may not make these discoveries on their own. The progress the at-risk students made in this classroom must be highlighted. All but one student left first grade at the expected reading level. It is often stated that it is the at-risk student who needs the most explicit and structured curriculum. This study seems to indicate otherwise. In an effort to make sense out of a representational system that has many flaws, these at-risk students put phonics and word learning into a perspective with which *they* could relate. They made discoveries and constructed knowledge about phonics *their* way.

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