

A PHONICS PATCHWORK

“A - E - I - O - U, I like reading. How about you?” The chant reverberates through the air like a drumbeat. Twenty-two voices continue, barely missing a beat, as I point to the next wall chart.

“At, et, it, ot, ut; let’s push the last door shut.” Twenty-two pairs of hands clap in rhythm.

Borrowing from several commercially published sources, I assembled the blocks to form an oral Phonics Patchwork quilt. Ideas from Mary F. Pecci; Marva Collins; “Sing, Spell, Read, and Write”; as well as childhood memories contributed the multi-hued pieces. Consonants followed by long and short vowels marched across the wall. Sight word families and simple grammar rules fringed the chalkboard edges.

My classroom did not always echo with phonics sounds disguised as rhythmic chants, poetry, and song. Our Phonics Patchwork, sewn together over the course of several years, did not evolve without a full measure of pain and disappointment.

The first year I taught straight from the basal reading series. The phonics workbooks stayed on the shelf. With five levels of readers and all the accompanying workbooks, I decided not to tackle the separate phonics books. Most of the students lived up to my expectations in reading by the end of the year. Still, I felt there was something lacking.

For two years before I began teaching first grade, I had worked in our Korean English language schools. While there I had learned to value the sounds of our complex language. I discovered long-forgotten grammar and syntax rules. Looking back on this experience, I wondered if these rules could be simplified enough for first graders to understand.

BY
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So the next year I took the workbooks down from the shelf and passed them out. I intended to do it “right” this year. We would achieve phonics mastery together, by the book. As the year progressed, the endless workbook pages with ambiguous pictures contributed to my growing uneasiness with the system.

“Teacher, is this picture a horse or a donkey?” Joshua asked.

“I thought it was a mule,” Karina interrupted before I could answer.

As I looked forward to my third year of teaching first grade, I knew something must change. The students seemed as frustrated with the phonics and decoding lessons as I was. I wanted a more involved activity than what was provided by the reading series or the workbooks. I wanted fewer workbook pages to wade through. I thought back to my beginning reading days. How did my teacher, Mr. Halvorsen, do it?

The sights and sounds of a tiny one-room school in northern Michigan came back to me. Our teacher used songs, games, and long hikes in the forest. Maps drawn in the bed of a dirt road made a lasting impression on me. Lessons learned from clay dug out of the old gravel pit for art class and dominoes for math class lingered in my mind long after worksheets faded. Endless rounds of flash cards and plenty of stories read aloud on cold winter days reinforced the idea that learning was fun.

Workbooks? Yes, I remembered them vaguely as unavoidable evils meant to be raced through so we could get on with the important tasks of learning.

Phonics? I didn’t recall learning much about letter sounds in the primary grades. The popular “look-say” methodology used in teaching reading at the time may have contributed to my ignorance of letter-sound relationships.

An avid reader before starting school, I delighted in challenging Mr. Halvorsen to unearth harder books to occupy my time. Decoding skills? I scarcely recall them at all.

Sighing as my mind snapped back to the present, I packed my bags and hurried off to summer school. The opportunity to share ideas with educators from other places drew me northward. Leaving the smoggy heat of Los Angeles for Howell Mountain's misty green coolness made the idea of summer school more than bearable.

As I drove, my mind rummaged through the previous school years. I had seen the importance of phonics. Most students needed some consistent word-attack skills. Would knowing a few basic rules make a significant difference in first-grade reading? What about the "look-say" method? Some words don't follow grammatical rules and must be memorized as is. Was there a way to blend the two seemingly divergent paths?

During that summer I discovered a teacher's guide that changed the course of my phonics instruction. A long, oddly shaped book with an even longer title caught my eye in the college bookstore: *At Last! A Reading Method for Every Child* by Mary F. Pecci.¹

Encouraged by my professors at Pacific Union College, I returned to my classroom to try it out. First, I added a 15-minute whole-group phonics period to the morning schedule right after worship and the flag salute. This evolved into a daily ritual.

The textbook divided the consonants into the ones that make the sound of the letter (Good Guys) and the ones that don't (Tough Guys). We began with a few letters each day. After about two weeks, all the students could recite the consonant sounds with the class or individually.

Next, we started on the long and short vowels. Pecci advocates teaching these concurrently, as learning either in isolation causes confusion.

Soon I began to add elements of an-

Picture
Removed

other favorite book. From Marva Collins I borrowed a few chants and much encouragement. *Marva Collins' Way*² advocated returning to the basics of decoding and then moving on to meaning-filled literature, as opposed to the "baby food" of most basal textbook series. More than a decade ago *60 Minutes* and other media shows documented her phenomenal success.

We added some songs from "Sing, Spell, Read and Write."³ "Mr. Gh," "Double Vowels," and "Silent E" became favorite songs.

After Christmas we moved on to the sight word families described by Pecci in her book. First graders found these to be more of a stretch than the consonants and vowels. But as the days went on, their mastery became increasingly more evident.

In May we invited Mrs. Hairston's fourth graders to visit our room during phonics time. We challenged them to write a word on the board to stump the first graders.

Words flew through the air as the fourth graders wrote new multisyllabic words that the first graders decoded. Cheyenne strode confidently to the marker board. "L-a-m-b-o-r-g-h-i-i-n-i," he wrote

laboriously across the white surface, then carefully capped the marker.

Stepping to the board, I divided the word into syllables. "Now, don't let this long word stump you. It's from Italian. This makes the letter /i/ have the long e sound. The /h/ is silent and the /g/ is the hard sound. So, what is it?"

"Lamborghini," yelled the first graders.

"Thank you for inviting us. May I borrow your Teacher's Edition sometime?" Mrs. Hairston asked with a wide grin as the fourth graders filed out shaking their heads incredulously.

Three Years Later . . .

"Mrs. Laughlin? I thought it was you. How are you? Are you still teaching? Do you remember me?"

I smiled. "You're April's mom. Yes, I'm teaching junior high downtown now. How's April?"

"Fine. She usually does well in school. You know, whenever April gets stuck on words that she is reading, I tell her, 'Remember what Mrs. Laughlin taught you.' Then she can usually figure the words out. Thank you so much."

"No, thank you," I murmured as she walked away. Sometimes we need to be reminded that we've done something right in picking from the potpourri of modern educational methodology. ☞

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REFERENCES

1. Mary F. Pecci, *At Last! A Reading Method for Every Child* (San Francisco: Pecci Educational Publishers, 1988).
2. Marva Collins and Civia Tamarkin, *Marva Collins' Way* (Los Angeles: Jeremy P. Tarcher, Inc., 1982).
3. Sue Dickson, et. al., *Sing, Spell, Read and Write* (Virginia Beach, Va.: Christian Broadcasting Network, 1985).