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A Backdoor Route to Phonics Skill Mastery: How to Spot the Elephants in Your Classroom!

By Katie Garner, M.Ed. and Dr. Jill Buchan

Have you ever noticed any elephants in your classroom? They often can be spotted in early grade classrooms, especially during reading and writing instruction. You also might notice them hovering around your guided reading table, as they tend to congregate there, as well. If you have not noticed them, do not worry, as they easily can be missed— even when they are hiding in plain sight!



An essential task of primary grade teachers is developing effective, early decoding proficiencies. However, many who teach at the earliest grade levels often feel ill-equipped to provide the intensive and expert level of literacy instruction that's needed to successfully teach all students to read (Allington, 2011). Understanding phonics means understanding the relationship between sounds and their spellings. Teaching students the most common sound-spelling relationships is what allows them to decode (sound out) words when reading and encode (spell) words when writing.

Early literacy research suggests that there are three kinds of kids: those who are easy to teach to read, those who are hard to teach to

read, and those who are very hard to teach to read. Yet, only 25 percent of kindergarten and first grade teachers fall into the category that the research suggests can teach everyone to read. Even more troublesome, only 50 percent of teachers are equipped with the skills required to teach students in the easy to teach group. The remaining 25 percent of teachers are unable to teach anyone to read (Stuhlman & Pinata, 2009). Surveys conducted by the National Foundation for Educational Research repeatedly have shown that many teachers, despite the overwhelming research, still cling to a random assortment of mixed methods, an approach Dr. Michael Pressley describes as a “disastrous strategy.” Pressley contends that, because of the random assortment of methods, teachers often are ineffective. Through his observations, he estimates that up to a third of the teachers are weak in the area of literacy instruction (Pressley, 2002).

So then, what do early literacy research and phonics have to do with invisible elephants running amuck in the classroom? The connection lies within the brain and how we learn best. An understanding of the brain research can inform literacy instruction, confronting educational practice to ask whether attention to the evidence base calls for significant

change to conventional practice.

The brain is the ultimate pattern-making machine, and as phonics skills are comprised of nothing more than letter sound patterns, it stands to reason that phonics should be easy to learn and, therefore, easy to teach, right? Wrong! Our brains learn best on a “need-to-know” basis. This means that information presented should be grounded in meaning and future relevance, and nowhere does this pose a greater challenge than with early grade phonics skill instruction. This challenge is primarily due to the difficulties associated with having to teach abstract letter sound (phonics) skills that have no inherent meaning for young learners who are “concrete-level” thinkers. Without meaning, teachers cannot provide the logical explanations the brain craves about why letters make the many different sounds they do. In other words, it's extremely difficult to teach something that doesn't make sense in a way that actually makes sense, and teachers' diligent attempts to do so are what often cause elephants to appear!

Take, for example, the letter *y*. Everyday in early grade classrooms, students are taught that the letter *y* says “yuh,” only then to observe the letter *y* doing everything but making the “yuh” sound in actual text. For example, they

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sing the alphabet song every morning, “Y says yo-yo, yuh, yuh, yuh,” and then move on to daily calendar time where they notice the y sound in words like: July, January, February, May, Sunday, Monday, etc... Additionally, they see the letter y in books that are “by” a particular author, and above the door of the “boy’s” bathroom. Teaching beginning learners the one sound for y that it is least likely to make may sound counterintuitive, but it is actually the norm in traditional core reading and phonics instruction. (Can you see the elephants starting to appear?)

The English language is ripe with letter sound inconsistencies, as letters in isolation almost never seem to make the sounds that they are supposed to when they come together in real words. Another example, kindergartners are taught, “T says turtle, tuh, tuh, tuh,” despite the fact that nine times out of ten, t won’t actually say “tuh,” because of high frequency words: like: the, this, them, they, those, there, then, etc... Such blatant instructional discrepancies are the reading equivalent of sending early grade learners on a wild goose chase. It is not until the late fall or early winter of first grade that th appears on the scope and sequence of most core reading and phonics programs for formal introduction.

So how can teachers help students to understand and account for what seem to be constant contradictions of letter sounds in text, while avoiding the use of commonly heard phrases like, “It just is... It just does... You just have to remember...”? It’s actually quite simple when following the path carved by brain science.

So now let’s imagine that it’s the first day of kindergarten and students have just finished singing the alphabet song, which includes singing both the short (as in apple) and long

(as in ape) sounds for the letter a. The class then transitions to calendar time. Without skipping a beat, the teacher shifts the instructional focus to the calendar. The first question she asks is, “What month is it?” She points to the letter A in the word August, helping them sound out, “ahhh—guh—ust.” And then it happens, a student calls out, “But I thought the letter O was supposed to say ‘ahhh’, not A?” (Enter elephant, stage right!) This sticky, yet all too common, classroom scenario poses an instructional dilemma for many teachers, yet it’s actually an ideal optimal learning opportunity in disguise!

Whenever instruction aligns with a learner’s need-to-know, the information presented is marked for memory, and thus prioritized for learning in the brain. And in the above-described scenario, what students need to know is the reading and writing “secret” about au, which is that these letters are in love! They have a huge crush on each other (as do aw) and whenever they have to stand right next to each other in a word, they get so embarrassed that they always put their heads down and say, “Ahhhhhhh!” (Garner, 2016). Sharing the simple secret about au and aw with beginning (and struggling, upper grade) readers empowers them to not only read the word August, but hundreds of other words too, like: Autumn, awful, awesome, auto, etc.

This simple shifting of the instructional delivery from “skill” based to “feeling” based allows teachers to target phonics instruction to the earlier developing, affective (social and emotional) learning domain, rather than the later developing, higher level processing centers. By connecting letter sound behavior with learners’ existing frameworks of social and emotional understanding (i.e. being in love, feeling embarrassed, etc...) skills become relevant and meaningful.

The result is forging stronger learner connections and easier retrieval. “It is literally neurobiologically impossible to think deeply about things that you don’t care about. Deep understanding depends on making emotional connections between concepts. Emotion guides our learning. The emotional brain filters all incoming information. If something is emotionally stimulating, it will be marked identified marked for memory.” (Immordino-Yang, 2015).

As previously stated, early literacy research suggests that often poor readers read poorly because they are taught poorly at the earliest grade levels (Allington, 2011). Implementation of a core reading and/or phonics program by which learners acquire only bits and pieces of the code, dispersed over multiple grade level years, does not provide those at the beginning grade levels with the tools they need to fully partake in the many reading and writing experiences that occur across the instructional day. Nor does this planned “fragmentation” model of instruction equip students with the tools they need to read or write about what is personally meaningful to them. “Three to four years is a long time to make learners wait for access to the whole code” (Allington, 2011). This accepted practice of delaying learner-access to the whole code needed for reading and writing puts those at the earliest grade levels at a tremendous disadvantage. This disadvantage occurs because learners at the beginning grade levels acquire only minimal access to letter sound and phonics skills, severely limiting their ability to engage in the many rich text experiences that are woven throughout the instructional day, beginning in pre-K. This disadvantage is compounded by the fact that the small parts of the code they do know (individual letters and sounds) often appear contradictory to the sounds

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that letters make (together) in actual text.

The brain seeks meaning and relevance, which is why it is vital that phonics skill instruction is aligned with that which is important to learners. When information does not make sense, the brain is unable to process the concepts and must rely on rote learning methods instead. Cloaking phonics skills as grown-up, reading and writing “secrets” that learners want to know makes them easy to teach, and allows them to be shared as needed—and from as early as kindergarten—whenever and wherever they are encountered throughout the instructional day. The result is a systematic, yet learner-driven “buffet-style” approach to phonics skill introduction that aligns with our brain’s need to pattern-out information on a need-to-know basis; as opposed to delivering disjointed skills during a designated reading block, and spread across multiple, grade level years. Within this brain based instructional design, learner-momentum in both reading and writing increases far beyond just simple decoding, with students at the earliest grade levels empowered with the tools needed to read books that are of genuine interest and write the stories that they want to tell.

It is essential that teachers, especially those at the beginning grade levels, both understand and are prepared for the many hurdles and pitfalls inherent in early grade, literacy skill instruction. According to Dr. Allington, “What really matters is ongoing, professional development for PK, kindergarten and first grade teachers,” further noting that, “No amount of remediation or retention can compare with high quality, professional development for preK, K and 1st grade level teachers.” This is the only way to ensure that teachers are equipped with the knowledge

and tools needed to ensure the early, intensive and expert literacy instruction required to teach all kids to read. (Allington, 2013)

Educators must be familiar with brain compatible practices and also those that are brain antagonistic. Based on what we currently know about the brain’s structure and function, brain compatible teaching emphasizes the way the brain naturally learns (Sprenger, 2013). Lessons that are brain compatible enable teachers to target instruction to areas of learner strength (social emotive awareness and understanding) and effectively bypass areas of inherent weakness (i.e. developmental readiness, cognitive processing, language delays, etc...) (Jensen 2009). Additionally, this allows teachers to teach to multiple intelligences, appealing to as many senses as possible through movement, visuals, sounds and props (Jensen, 2009). Alternatively, brain antagonistic practices diminish proper brain function due to use of explicit memory pathways. Teachers must understand the differences between brain compatible and brain antagonistic instruction. Principals must also evaluate to determine teacher-effectiveness, particularly in regards to the delivery of phonics skill instruction, to ensure that it aligns with the brain rather than opposition to it.

Understanding of brain science and its implications for teaching and learning is an invaluable asset in today’s classrooms. Those who are prepared with knowledge about how our brains receive, store, and process information are better equipped to provide students with optimal learning opportunities through which critical literacy skills are more easily acquired. It is up to school leaders to ensure that teachers know not only what to do, but why to do it. Principals must understand the inherent hurdles and

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ARKANSAS READING ASSOCIATION
45th ANNUAL
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Literacy Conference Housing Information

The Little Rock Marriott will once again serve as host hotel to the upcoming Arkansas Reading Association Literacy Conference.

Reservations may be made by calling before October 15: 1-877-759-6290.

Overnight parking charges, taxes and fees are additional.



The Little Rock Marriott* - \$159.00

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pitfalls in early grade reading instruction, particularly at the earliest grade levels. They must be capable of clearly identifying the role that phonics plays in effective reading instruction and provide ongoing staff development opportunities for teachers so as to ensure the early, intensive, expert literacy instruction needed to successfully teach all students to read. It is the only way to keep those pesky elephants at bay!

The ongoing advances in brain research speak loud and clear to today's educators, but it is up to school and literacy leaders to ensure that message is heard (Fischer, 2008). Understanding why some kids don't learn to read is essential to catching our most vulnerable before they fall, and our children cannot wait.

About the Authors

Katie Garner, M.Ed., is an internationally known speaker, author and literacy consultant with over twenty years of experience working in elementary grade classrooms, and a passion for infusing neuroscience into literacy and learning. Her "backdoor-to-the-brain" approach to critical phonics skill acquisition, via the affective (social emotional/feeling) domain, shifts the paradigms associated with traditional literacy and phonics skill instruction, and has gained national recognition with the No Child Left Behind, Reading First, and RTI Initiatives. As a keynote and featured speaker at educational conferences across the United States and abroad— including an ongoing keynote series at the Vulnerable Readers Summits with North American literacy leaders, Dr. Richard Allington (What Really Matters for Struggling Readers) and Dr. Anne Cunningham (The National Early Literacy Panel "NELP" Report)— Katie shares multi-modal, "brain-changing" strategies for boosting existing, reading curriculum and phonics instruction with the latest neural research showing how our brains learn best. Her practical and proven methods for bringing neuroscience into the forefront of literacy learning have been shared in both lecture and panel discussions at Harvard University and MIT as part of the Learning and the Brain Conference and Research Consortium, and are the subject of an upcoming, professional development book series. For more information: www.KatieGarner.com.

Dr. Jill Buchan is an Assistant Professor of Education at Upper Iowa University in Des Moines, Iowa. Buchan has been a leader in the field of education for almost two decades. She earned her bachelor's degree in elementary education from Upper Iowa University. She continued her studies at Drake University where she earned a Masters in Science degree with an emphasis in special education. Most recently, she earned her doctoral degree from Capella University in the area of special education leadership.

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Member IDs Needed to Register as Member for 2018 Conference Discount

Individuals who are members of ARA receive a discount on the cost of the ARA conference registration. Anyone who registers for the conference as a member will have to provide their member ID on the registration form.

To locate your 8-digit User ID, click on your icon in the upper right corner and click "View Profile." The User ID listed there is your ARA Membership number.

ARA/ILA Reorganization

Arkansas Reading Association has taken the steps to formally begin the process of obtaining their new ILA charter.

At Summer Leadership on July 13-14, leaders will receive information about the reorganization and exciting new projects for this upcoming year.

Attending ILA?

ARA members attending ILA Convention in Austin, Texas, should contact ILA Coordinator Jeanne Trawick, who is planning a "Meet and Greet" for Arkansas members.

Email Jeanne@arareading.org, and she will send you information!

Editor Needed

ARA is currently seeking an editor and layout designer for the *The Reader*. This person would be responsible for seeking articles for submission, creating the document, submitting to a committee for review, and making final revisions and edits.

The Reader is the scholarly journal of the Arkansas Reading Association. It is designed to serve as a resource for all Arkansas reading teachers.

This would be a two-year commitment.

Interested persons should send an email to susan@reading.org with rationale and credentials for position no later than June 30.