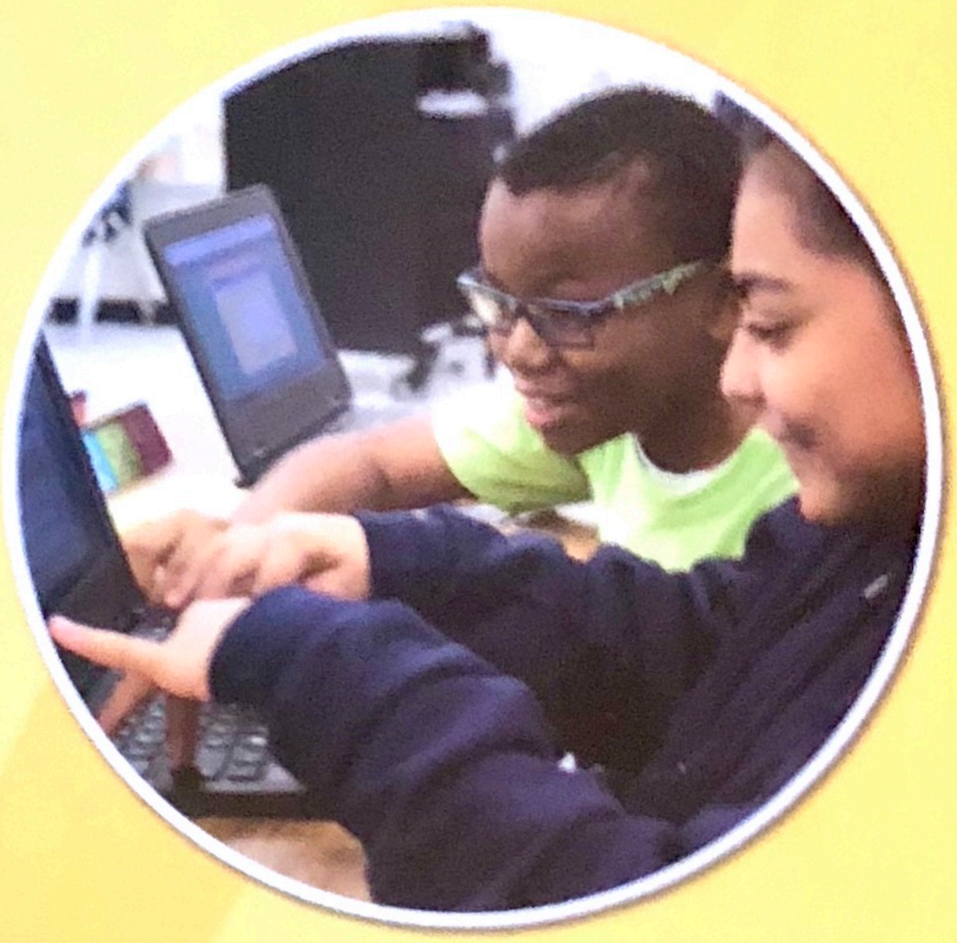
The Power of Practice and Play

Strategies for Successful Literacy Instruction



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Phonics & the Brain: *Spotting the Elephant in the Classroom!*

What Elementary Principals Need to Know

By **Katie Garner, M.Ed.**

Think back to your last round of classroom observations. Did you ever notice any elephants in the rooms that you visited? How about during reading instruction in your kindergarten and first grade classrooms, as that's where the elephants tend to congregate! If you didn't see them, don't worry, as they can be easy to miss if you don't know what to look for…

As an elementary school principal, you have probably heard a lot about phonics instruction, and already know that developing effective, early decoding proficiencies is an essential task of primary grade teachers. What you may not know is how ill-equipped many early grade teachers are to provide the early, intensive and expert literacy instruction 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% of kindergarten and first grade teachers fall into the category that the research suggests can teach everyone to read. Even more troublesome, only 50% of teachers are equipped with the skills required to teach students in the easy to teach group. The remaining 25% of teachers are unable to teach *anyone* to read (Stuhlman & Pinata, 2009). Surveys conducted by the National Foundation for Educational Research have repeatedly 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 are often ineffective. Through his observations, he estimates that up to a third of the teachers are weak in the area of literacy instruction (Pressley, 2002).

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So then, what *does* early grade phonics instruction have to do with invisible elephants running amuck on your campus? 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" with the information presented grounded in meaning and future relevance. Nowhere does this pose a greater challenge than with early grade phonics instruction. 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 to early age 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. Every day in early grade classrooms, students are taught the letter y says "yuh," only to then observe the letter y doing everything but making the "yuh" sound in actual text. For example, they 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?)

LETTERS ARE LIKE KIDS

Like kids, the letters behave beautifully when separated from one another up on the wall or on an alphabet chart. But when they get close together in words, all bets are off and entirely new sounds emerge!

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. In 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.

THE SECRET

These letters don't get along and shouldn't be together. But they don't listen, and whenever they are together in a word, they stick out their tongues and say

"Thhhhhhhhh!"

like in words like:

this, there, then, that, these, though, etc.

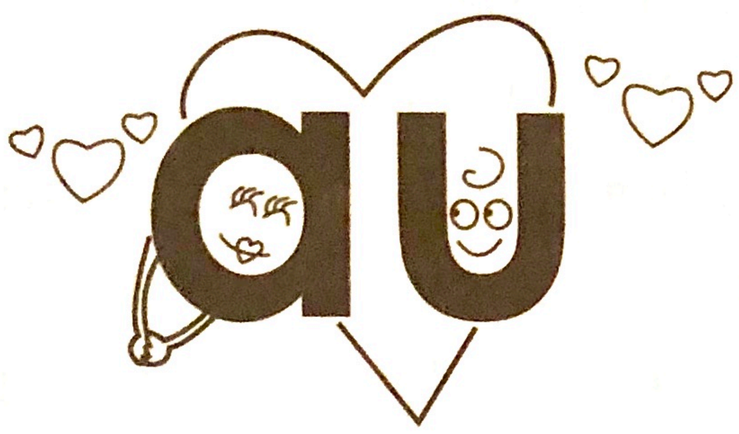
So how can teachers help students to understand and account for what seem to be constant contradictions of letter sounds in text, while avoiding the use of commonly heard phrases like, *"It just is... It just does... You just have to remember..."*? It's actually quite simple when following the path carved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

THE SECRET



These letters have a huge crush on each other and whenever they're together in a word they get so embarrased that they always say *awwww*, like in the word *August*.

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. If something is emotionally stimulating, it is 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 that letters make (together) in actual text.

The brain seeks meaning and relevance, which is why it is vital that phonics 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 instruction 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, learning 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 Pre-K, kindergarten and first grade teachers," further noting that, "No amount of remediation or retention can compare with high quality, professional development for Pre-K, 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 and bypass areas of inherent weakness, as well as teach to multiple intelligences, appealing to as many senses as possible through movement, visuals, sounds and props (Jensen, 2009). 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...). Additionally, this allows teachers to teach

Lessons that are brain compatible enable teachers to teach to multiple intelligences, appealing to as many senses as possible through movement, visuals, sounds and props.

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 is alignment with the brain rather than in 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 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. ■

Secret Stories® Cracking the Reading Code with the Brain in Mind! *is a backdoor approach to critical phonics skill mastery that is designed to underscore any existing reading curriculum and instruction. It equips both students and teachers with meaningful, relevant and logical connections to phonics skills so as to explain WHY letters do what they do when they don't do what they should!*
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About the author

Best-selling author, speaker and literacy consultant Katie Garner, M.Ed., has more than twenty years of early grade classroom experience and a passion for infusing neuroscience into literacy and learning. Her "backdoor-to-the-brain" approach to phonics skill acquisition via the affective (feeling) domain helps shift the paradigms associated with beginning reading skill instruction. Her strategies have gained national recognition with the No Child Left Behind, Reading First, and RTI Initiatives. 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."