

'P is for Pterodactyl' and other considerations for the intelligent phonics teacher



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Have you seen the latest publication from Raj Haldar and Chris Carpenter? It's called *P is for Pterodactyl* and by its own admission, it's the worst alphabet book ever! Every single page is littered with a plethora of words known to English language users that fail the basic rules of synthetic phonics. The book, however, is one of my favourites. Beautifully illustrated by Maria Tina Beddia, it's also a good belly laugh. For example, on the 'T' page, the text reads 'The charging tsunami washed away all of Tchaikovsky's tchotchkes' (Haldar, Carpenter & Beddia, 2019). The cartoon image shows a rather flustered Tchaikovsky watching his grand piano being swamped by a huge wave, whilst an array of trinkets spill across the page.

As an experienced early years teacher, I use books like this so young children can discover that English letters don't have one sound but any sound can be written in a number of ways. The fidelity we might like to expect between sounds (phonemes) and their written representation does not exist when we explore English words in all of their (in) glorious incarnations. The complexity comes about because the English language has a mixed pedigree, using the 26 letters of the alphabet to make more than 40 phonemes through 120 different written combinations. As Campbell (2019) reminds us, the 'number of phonemes and written combinations keep growing as foreign language words are adopted into the English language' (p. 70). The complexity doesn't reside alone in big foreign words such as 'tsunami', 'Tchaikovsky' and 'tchotchkes'. More common everyday words such as 'of', 'they', 'was', 'what' and 'laugh' cannot be decoded using the basic rules of synthetic phonics.

Intelligent reading teachers know that learning to read is a journey, from the place where a child first experiences language and starts to make sense of sounds and their written representations whilst being nurtured in the bosom of the family, to a place of reading a wide range of disciplinary texts fluently, with meaning and critical intent. This journey, however, is not one of linear skill development. As Luke and Freebody (1999) have long attested, the

literacy practices of code breaking, meaning making, text use and text analyst develop concurrently, even in the early years, and over a lifetime. The matter of the moment is how code breaking should be taught. Commercial publishers are pushing synthetic phonics programs where children are taught that letters have sounds that are blended to make words.

Synthetic phonics programs, however, are confusing for beginning readers. Before Alicia started preschool, she knew how to write her name and was developing her competencies with environmental print. It's not uncommon for families from all walks of life to start discussions of this ilk with preschool age children. Alicia commenced week 1 of preschool with a knowledge and skill set that was not uncommon for young children. In week 1 of preschool, she was introduced to the 'Ants on the Apple' ditty. The drill was the letter 'a' says /a/ (as in apple). She was given a worksheet with a picture of an apple and the letters 'A' and 'a' to colour. She was told to practise the 'Ants on the apple' ditty with the coda 'the letter 'a' says /a/ (as in apple). Her mother recounts that when Alicia brought the worksheet home she was confused, stating, 'In my name the letter 'a' says /u/ (as in up)' (Exley, 2014). Alicia was right. The phoneme/alphabet correspondence reinforced through the 'Ants on the apple' ditty didn't hold true for her name, or for lots of the words that were part of her environmental print repertoire such as 'Kmart', 'McDonalds' and 'Antonella' (her cousin's name). Together with her mother, she explored the /u/ sound in her name and found other words with the /u/ sound such as 'run', 'onion' and 'honey' and learnt that the /u/ sound can be written in many ways such as 'A', 'u', and 'o'. In week 3, the drill was the letter 'c' says /k/ (as in caterpillar). Alicia was given a worksheet with a picture of caterpillars crawling on a leaf and the letters 'C' and 'c' to colour. She was told to practise the 'Caterpillars are crawling' ditty with the coda 'the letter 'c' says /k/ (as in caterpillar). Alicia once again expressed her confusion, noting that the letter 'c' did not say /k/ in her name.

Together with her mother, she found words with the /k/ sound such as 'school', 'kiss' and 'back' and learnt that the /k/ sound can be written in many ways such as 'ch', 'k' or 'ck'.

There are six important points here:

1. The basic rules of synthetic phonics did not make sense to Alicia as she tried to read words that mattered to her;
2. Teaching phonics through a linear synthetic sequence meant that it would be a long time before Alicia received instruction that was within her zone of proximal development;
3. Alicia's exploration of the alphabetic code started with isolating phonemes in words that mattered to her, and then finding the different written patterns;
4. Alicia was supported by a more knowledgeable adult who used what Mantei and Kervin (2019) refer to as a systematic and personalised approach to phonics;
5. Alicia was enthused by the discovery pedagogy of hunting for sounds and their different written representations; and
6. Alicia learnt very early in life that the sound/symbol code of English is fickle. She was young and a beginning reader, but she coped with the cognitive dissonance of English.

Intelligent phonics teachers have the professional knowledge and skill to work elbow-to-elbow with children, to discover the patterns of sounds and symbols in English via real texts in their environment and in high-quality children's literature. If we believe in young children as 'confident and involved learners', with 'dispositions for learning such as curiosity, cooperation, confidence, creativity, commitment, enthusiasm, persistence, imagination and reflexivity' (Australian Government Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations for the Council of Australian Governments, 2010, p. 38), then we don't need to treat them as empty vessels that need a skill, drill and phonic pill approach. If we believe that young children are already engaging 'with a range of texts and gain meaning from a range of texts' (Australian Government Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations for the Council of Australian Governments, 2010, p. 44), then we should bring to the fore a pedagogy that builds on their desire to gain real meaning from real texts, expand their vocabulary and to nurture a love of reading.

My colleague Ariane and I (Exley & Richard-Bossez, 2013) found that within the same class, different students were at different points of their literacy journey and thus needed the teacher to provide different pedagogical practices. Quite

simply, pedagogies that engage individual children at their point of need cannot be undertaken with a commercial phonics program. The commercial publishers have never met your children. They don't know what words are in your children's environmental print repertoire, or the texts that you and your children like to read together or the texts that your children seek to read. The pedagogies that offer a systematic and personalised approach to all children in a class require nothing short of an intelligent phonics teacher – it's as simple and complex as that.

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