Literacy for early childhood: learning from the learners

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Abstract

The originator of Letterland describes a unique teaching model which blends a structured phonics approach with whole language teaching. Children are introduced to a language about language which enables them to acquire a confident mastery of print based on parallel learning. Its pictogrammatic approach creates a stimulus to inquiry and a learning environment which is imaginative and friendly.

Key words: literacy, early intervention, language enrichment, beginning reading, spelling, writing.

If I could offer one gift to every person training to teach literacy it would be the experience of working with children who are failing. I write with a background in remedial teaching, knowing that the greatest challenge for any teacher comes from those children for whom the encounter with print is difficult.

It is interesting to observe that the convictions of the 'whole language' movement sprang from the study of *fluent* readers. In 1973 Frank Smith concluded that the alphabetic principle was irrelevant to fluent readers. As he saw it, fluent readers identified words not as letter strings but as ideograms. Since fluent readers appeared to be free from the labours of spelling-sound translations and therefore able to give primacy to meaning, Smith concluded that meaning-seeking should also be the primary aim for beginner readers.

From this premise a whole generation of teacher training developed its anti-phonic direction. It was convenient to think that phonics, the most complex and the most tedious element in the teaching of reading, needed no teaching at all — either to teachers of reading or to children.

The Letterland system grew out of very different observations in a close study of *failing* readers. The system endorses the importance of a meaning-seeking orientation to print. But it does not abandon the alphabetic principle, for the simple reason that print follows the patterns of oral speech and serves to record its *sounds.* The system also takes into account extensive evidence that the single factor common among failing readers is lack of phonic knowledge.[1] Further, it concerns itself with creating not just good readers but, at the same time, good spellers. And it takes responsibility for the whole spectrum of ability in any one classroom from the failing reader to the fluent reader.

Just as medical practitioners develop healing skills from what they learn in pathology, so I have found that being right next to children with various reading and writing difficulties can offer critical clues to understanding how and why they fail. Their mistakes are our best guides. Listening to their attempts – unable to read this word or spell that one, unable to blend consonants, prone to reversals, confused by the sequence of sounds or words, unable to thread a sentence together – tells us where to begin and how to help.

In this paper I describe my approach to reading failure and its evolution into the Letterland Programs which are now used widely in British classrooms as an initial approach to literacy as well as in the special needs context.

THE ORIGINS OF LETTERLAND

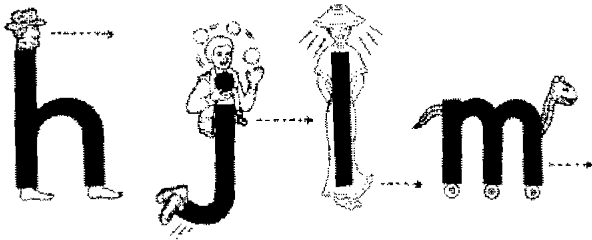
The concept of an invisible, secret place called Letterland, located somewhere in the written word

and inhabited by fictional animals and people, grew out of shared moments of make-believe with children between the ages of 5 and 10 who were persistently baffled by print.

Problems of Letter Shape and Orientation

My first preoccupation in working with failing children was how to deal with their reversals. Did they really 'see' letters in reverse when they confused **b/d**, **p/q**, **s/z**, or jumbled letter order (felt read as left)? Or did they simply perceive the shapes poorly through lack of attention to the orientation of letters in space? I could not wait for answers to these questions. I needed to DO something about the confusions.

My solution was to fuse picture cues (or pictograms) into the letter shapes, in an attempt to provide a mnemonic system of 'built-in' orientation clues. Since most of my students could not reliably tell left from right, I chose to describe the resulting letter-characters not as facing "to the right" but rather as all swimming, hopping, jumping, pointing their toes, or looking "in the reading direction".



To my relief these pictograms quickly resolved the reversal problems, most especially for my younger students. The older students (8 to 10 yrs plus) had had time to develop deeply ingrained reversal habits by daily repetition. Results were therefore slower, but also positive. Overall, the pictograms introduced an observable improvement in the efficiency of learning.

This solution was reinforced by letting the children spend time in drawing the pictograms. Several of my students had very poor fine-motor control, so the pictogram designs had to be simple and easy to re-create on the letters. Drawing the pictograms helped those who thought they couldn't draw. Playing at being animators (like professional cartoon artists) even convinced them that they could draw after all. Animating the letters provided a personal involvement with print, which merely looking at my designs did not. The children's drawings, no matter how clumsy, created a vital interaction with the 'geography' of letter shape and orientation. One could almost see the children by 'feel and touch' taking possession of print.

Equally encouraging was another development. The idea that the plain **a–z** shapes were the only visible parts of a secret group of inhabitants, living in a land of words, gripped the children's imagination. I soon realised that imagination harnessed to their efforts was a powerful ally.

Letter Sounds

Sorting out letter shape and orientation had little value unless my mnemonics could also cue their corresponding sounds.

The ability to segment words (isolate sound values) and to form strong associative links between sounds and symbols is critical to reading, and even more critical to the development of good spelling. My special needs children and I found that our 'Letterlanders' provided us with new opportunities to oust tedious exercises in segmentation in favour of question and answer games which worked on segmentation playfully. For example,

Q. What would **F**ireman **F**red prefer for lunch, **l**ettuce **l**eaves or **f**resh **f**ish?
A. (Short pause while they think.) **F**resh **f**ish.
Q. Who would want the **l**ettuce **l**eaves?
A. **L**ucy, the **L**amp **L**ady.

Q. What is your favourite food?
A. **S**paghetti.
Q. Who in Letterland would love **s**sspaghetti too?

The possibilities were endless. The children did not notice the learning built into our games, but to me it was noticeable that their ears and minds became increasingly attuned to listening – while using meaning to alert themselves to the pertinent sound.

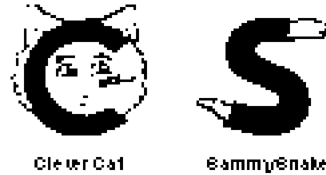
Listening for particular sounds in medial or final positions in single syllable words was also more fun when I asked "Whose sound can you hear?", "What sound is she/he (not it) making next to Munching Mike?", rather than "What letter sound can you hear next to the letter 'em'?" The first phrasing had vitality whereas the second was the usual type of grey wording which fails to register with those children who most need help.

Studying my students' numerous spelling errors, I found that even when they could isolate sounds, many errors were caused by confusion between letter sounds and traditional alphabet names. Similarly, when stumbling over a difficult word in reading, their first recourse was commonly to revert to saying what they knew best, the overlearnt alphabet names.

Such errors led me to realise how flawed our traditional alphabet labelling system 'aee, bee, cee, dee' actually is for reading. When I stopped to analyse how often any of the 26 letters did 'say' their alphabet names in words I was shocked to find that not one of the 21 consonants ever does, and that vowels only do in special circumstances. Clearly, recourse to alphabet names was a highly unreliable habit which I needed to discourage.

But how could I even talk about the letters, without at the same time reinforcing the irrelevant-to-reading alphabet names? How could I teach the essential sounds of letters, as they occurred in print, so that not the names, but the sounds became the ready response?

It was at this point that I decided to introduce alliterative labels to replace the alphabet names. Instead of talking about "the 'cee', as in cat" and "the 'es', as in snake" our short cut to the sounds became "**C**lever **C** a t" a n d "**S**ammy **S**nake".



Michael tended to write **s** for **c** in his own name (misled by the letter name starting as '**s**ssee'). He cheered up immediately when we agreed to talk about **c** as **C**lever **C**at (clever, because this cat could make a '**c**. . .' /k/ sound, whereas most cats can only say 'meow') and to talk about **s** as Sammy Snake (because he went around hissing, '**ssss**', in words).

I suggested that Michael draw these new animating details into specific words himself, to emphasise further the mnemonic link between letter shape and sound. This activity improved his morale. It came as a relief compared to writing the more inscrutable, plain letters. It also gave us time to talk and think about the letter sounds while he drew.

Most important, it enabled Michael himself to trap the letter's sound on paper, right in the abstract symbol that was trying to signal its sound to him. Unlike the spoken word, where the sounds quickly vanish, his own pictures held the sounds before his eyes.[2]

Thereafter we made sure that all the character names that we chose for the letters began – without exception – with the correct phoneme, so that any child could find its sound just by starting to name the character.[3]

Once we had started using our new names, it was a short step to devising some songs to sing about them. Apart from livening up our lesson times, the rhythm and rhyme of music helped to strengthen the learning.

Letter Patterns

Our practice of picture-coding troublesome letters turned out to be useful not only for clarifying shapes and single letter sounds but also for directing attention to letter order. For example, Michael tended (when not muddling **c** with **s**) to write the more salient **h** before **c**. Now I found that I could talk to Michael with a new clarity about **c**'s position before **h**, not after **h**. I could say, "See how **C**lever **C**at sits behind **H**arry the **H**at Man's back, not on his front foot!" Before and after can be highly ambiguous words especially for children prone to reversals and letter-sequence confusions, whereas any discussion about positions, given this new set of spatial references, remained clear.[4] As far as Michael was concerned, his tendency to start writing his name with **M i h c** ceased from that day forward.

The fact that the pronunciation of **ch** in Michael was not the typical sound of **ch** was, of course, another hurdle up ahead. At that point I was just grateful to see Michael getting the letter order right, but the new spelling-sound mappings typical of **ch, sh, ph, ar, aw, oa, oy**, etc. soon needed tackling. Could my pictogram mnemonics actually interfere with the teaching of these changes in sound-values? Or, could they be 'stretched' into helping?

They could – by a stretch of the imagination. One day 7-year-old Andy managed to provide me with a way to explain the **ch** sound. He simply joined Clever Cat and the Hat Man in one story. The Hat Man's hat became a hairy hat, so Clever Cat sneezed whenever she was next to him.[5] As Andy pointed out, "It's his hairy hat that makes her nose tickle."

Quite effortlessly Andy had translated the typical 'behaviour' of **ch** into a cause-and-effect relationship between the original pictograms for **c** and for **h.** We could even illustrate the change by putting a paw to Clever Cat's nose.

As soon as we had also developed a plausible story for **sh,** I told the two stories to 11-year old Gregory whose spelling had been endlessly confused by **ch** and **sh** (e.g. **wich** for **wish, whish** for **which, Marsh** for **March).** Fearing that Gregory would find the stories too young in tone, I presented them as whacky but useful. They were. Gregory's confusions were dramatically reduced in a matter of days.

In my experience, even older children quite readily accept these 'childish' tales so long as their purpose is clear to them. By contrast, traditional rule terminology is off-putting at any age, and can cause our teaching to fail. I had already stopped trying to talk, for example, about 'short' and 'long' vowel sounds, as I realised that neither 'short' nor 'long' were terms which effectively conveyed the

points which I needed to teach. Gradually I realised the potentials within my new narrative approach for explaining not only short and long vowel 'behaviour', combinations like **ch, sh, ph, ar,** etc. and even larger units such as **ous** and **tion,** but also for explaining major phonic generalisations running throughout the English language. I decided to try to interpret every recurring spelling pattern that I possibly could by this metaphoric route.

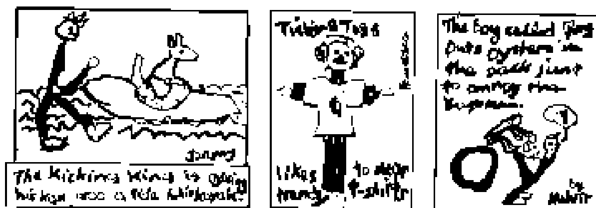
Some stories were inevitably more contrived than others, but they still carried a teaching power which traditional phonic instruction singularly lacked. The greatest value of this new lore for letter behaviour appeared to lie in its ability to provide a child-oriented logic to explain the complexities of English orthography (albeit by a fantasy route). The stories we evolved satisfied children's need to know *why* letters so often changed their sounds in particular sequences. It gave them the motivation to 'catch letters in the act' when they did change. Our fantasy reasons became the recall routes for learning, thereby forging the vital link between sound and symbol(s).

Phrases and Sentences

It may seem that my focus so far had been exclusively on the smaller building blocks of language, whereas the goal of reading is primarily to seek and take meaning from print. The 'whole language' movement had not yet gathered momentum, but the importance of reading for meaning was always inherent in my efforts.

Skipping forward in time, to the context of beginning reading (where Letterland now makes its greatest contribution) it soon became clear that the 'Letterlanders' could act as mediators not only to focus on the smaller units of the language but also to encourage emergent readers to read whole short phrases at a glance. For example, the recurring **Mm** pictograms in the phrase '**M**unching **M**ike, the **m**etal **m**onster' focus the child's attention on all five words as a cohesive group. The five-year olds in British reception classes soon expand such phrases into whole sentences, simply by thinking of more words that begin with Munching Mike's sound, e.g. "**M**unching **M**ike, the **m**etal **m**onster eats **m**agnets **m**ixed with **m**ushrooms and **m**arshmallows."

To play with alliteration is to play with language. The children follow where it leads. They combine their newly acquired 'animation skills' with speculation about the lives of the Letterlanders. The result: new reasons to write down and illustrate many sentences, and a new stimulus to enlarge their reading vocabularies. Original art work often follows naturally.



This is the stage too where children (alone or as a joint effort) readily make up their own complete stories about Letterland. The story-telling may be entirely oral at first, or the teacher may write it down for reading and re-reading. The imagery of Letterland becomes a spur to the development of independent ideas, especially for children who do not readily take to creative writing.

Whole Context

As a fictitious place called Letterland takes shape in a classroom, the concept itself provokes speculation and discussion. Letterland inhabitants are, of course, invisible (except to the children) and – as within words – capable of being in more than one place at a time! Children soon trust themselves to explore all the possibilities and to fill in the details of this fantasy world. In the process they expand both their speaking and writing skills.

With only a touch of direction from the teacher, they eagerly discuss, design, and write about many aspects of Letterland. What kind of houses might the Letterlanders live in? What might they do in their free time (hobbies, sports, work)? Where might they go on holidays? How would each one prefer to travel? And so on. For example, Clever Cat might fly by Concorde to Canada to do some cliff climbing, or Ticking Tess might travel by train to do a tight-rope act in Turkey. Another popular theme, how to get to Letterland? In what kind of vehicle? The children decide. Make-believe is their domain.

Alongside such inventiveness is the more serious activity of learning how the Letterlanders interrelate with each other in words, on signs and placards, in newspapers, on TV and, most especially, in books.

Eventually comes the time when the Letterland fantasy will fade. Its facts absorbed, the characters recede into the interstices of the printed texts.

Results

As the Letterland approach evolved it generated a child-oriented mode for exploring written language. The results in many schools confirm:

- children's heightened interest in letter shapes and sounds,
- active curiosity even from five-year olds about the working of the alphabetic code,
- within the first three to six months of teaching: confident knowledge of **aA – zZ** sounds, plus **sh, wh** and -**ing** sounds, and a corresponding security in correct handwriting strokes,
- increased spelling accuracy, without special stress on correcting errors,
- within the first and second school years: skill and willingness to make flexible use of both decoding strategies and contextual clues in the pursuit of meaning,
- enriched language activity, characterised by pupil-initiated story telling, story enactment, verses and songs, and creative writing,
- a measurable decrease in the number of children in the school requiring extra help with reading and spelling.

These 5 year olds in a British Primary School, Stafford, England are learning **a-z** by 'being' the Letterland characters and acting out their sounds. Because changes in letter behaviour are explained in story form, even the **ch** sound (and others like **sh**) become easy to understand as part of a natural progression in their play-acting.

In Conclusion

Clearly the goal of reading is that it shall become a direct pathway from print to meaning. But we now know that it is the individual letters of text that supply the basic perceptual data for the reading process, and that what frees skilled readers to attend to content is the automaticity of their response to these elementary units of language. To access meaning from print, fluent readers rely on their extensive (overlearned) knowledge of how letters typically sound, typically how they cluster into new sound configurations, and typically group into spelling patterns that comprise whole words.

In her chapter 'Why Not Phonics and whole Language?!' [6] Marilyn J. Adams asks,

> "What are the functional units of word recognition? What is the dynamic of their processing? .... In reading, the component letters of words are *the basic perceptual units*; within syllables and familiar words, *the letters are perceived interdependently and in parallel*: and the perceptual result is not an ordered string of independent units, but *a cohesive unit* itself, held together by virtue of *the associations among its letters* as well as its connections to speech and meaning." (My italics.)

In Letterland teaching, children are invited to learn the elements of print and the broader categories of language in multi-focus, so that they may recognise and distinguish them as one unitary experience. [7]

The letters form cohesive units (words, phrases, whole contexts) held together by the children's confident understanding of the associations among the letters. Because the instruction language is storylike, their learning is speeded up — freeing them from preoccupation with print as a medium, so that they may give all their attention to print as a message. ❖ ❖ ❖ ❖ ❖ ❖ ❖ ❖ ❖ ❖ ❖ ❖ ❖ ❖ ❖ ❖

When the children at Downsend Lodge Rowans, Surrey, England sequence themselves into a word there are no mistakes to rub out if they get it wrong. Instead there is a lively discussion about how particular letters behave when they meet in a word (e.g. **sh**) and they take turns retelling the Letterland story that explains the new two-letter unit of sound.

FOOTNOTES

1. Chall, J.S. (1983). *Learning to read: The great debate*. Updated Ed. New York: McGraw-Hill.

2. It is our sense that an important contribution to the effectiveness now accredited to the Letterland system derives from the children's hands-on experience in picture coding 'plain' letters. It is an innovation which is worthy of some serious research. Anyone interested may like to get in touch. (Barton, Cambridge, CB3 7AY, U.K.)

3. The traditional alphabet names, by contrast, are treacherously misleading. No less than 15 actually begin with another letter's sound, just for a start! For a full catalogue of the treacheries inherent in our alphabet names, see Wendon, L. (1987). Letterland – Changing the language of reading instruction. *Parents and teachers together*, pp 154 – 164, P. Smith (Ed.). London: Macmillan Education.

4. By contrast, stripped of the animation and body analogies, a teacher's instruction can only be a humourless corrective message along these lines: "**hc** is not a normal letter sequence; therefore, don't use it." For further discussion about the new opportunities created by pictogram mnemonics for talking about print, see Wendon, L. (1989). Talking about language with five to seven year olds. *Special educational needs; Policy and practice,* R. Evans (Ed.) Oxford: Blackwell Education.

5. Not <u>every</u> time – but we soon found story reasons to explain the difference in words like Mi**ch**ael, s**ch**ool, **ch**oir, **ch**emistry, etc. Later we even found a further story to explain exceptions like **Ch**eryl, ma**ch**ine, para**ch**ute, etc., where **ch** apes the **sh** sound.

6. Adams, M.J. (1991). *All language and the creation of literacy.* W. Ellis (Ed.) Baltimore MD: Orton Dyslexia Society.

7. Wendon, L. (1990). Synthesis in Letterland: re-instating phonics in a "whole language" setting. *Early Child Development and Care*. Vol.61 pp. 139-148. U.K. Gordon and Breach Publishers S.A.

In Judy Manson's class at Callowbrook First School, in Worcestershire, England, children are acting out the Letterland story that explains why a final **y** often sounds like an **e**. They are also learning why words like **party, any, slowly** and over 4000 other English words are spelt typically, not (as it sounds) with a final **e**, but with **y**.