

# For Those with Dyslexia, Whole Language is a Coping Mechanism, Not a Strategy

by Dr. Kelli Sandman-Hurley

I think about hanging up my advocate hat a lot because sometimes it just isn't healthy for me. There are moments when I think we are making progress with dyslexia awareness and then there are days when I feel like I was hit by a truckload of indescribable frustration. Today, one of my clients was sent this picture as an example of how they will help her dyslexic son. This is from a

## Good Readers...



*Dolores Hudson, 2003*

large district that knows better. So, let's take these 'strategies' one at a time.

### Look at the picture

Well, if we are looking at the picture, how is that actually teaching reading? It is actually teaching guessing based on the picture. That isn't reading and it certainly is not decoding. It certainly isn't creating reading independence.

### Slide through the Whole Word

I was not even sure I knew what this meant, so I Googled it. What I found was that it means having the student use their finger or some kind of tracking device and start to read the word from the beginning.

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Okay, so using a tracking device isn't an entirely bad idea, but how does that *teach* reading. It is an accommodation, not a strategy. Where is the explicitness?

### **Skip the Words and then go back**

Again, how is this teaching reading? It is no secret that reading is a skill that has to be explicitly taught, so how is just ignoring a word, explicitly teaching reading? This is reading on and then filling in the blank with what you think might fit. So, the sentence could be: He went to the \_\_\_\_ to get some milk. The student could insert any of the following: store, shop, café, grocery store, refrigerator, Starbucks, counter, etc. Which one is right? If we are teaching the students to fill in the blank what will happen when they start to get to a level when they are guessing at every other word?

### **Get Your Mouth Reading to Make the First Sound**

What?? I have no words. Is this an attempt to incorporate phonetics? If so, they are dangerously close to explicitly teaching reading. But this doesn't make sense. What about the second and third sounds? What is the first grapheme is <ch>, which phoneme are they getting ready for? /k/, /sh/ or /ch/? (Etymology is a great tool for this question).

### **Reread. Does it look right? Does it sound right? Does it make sense?**

There is something to be said for rereading something and self-correcting. But, does it look right? That should be a question for spelling, not reading. Of course it looks right, the publisher did not misspell the word, right? Words don't make sounds, people do. So, does it sound right also does not make sense. I am assuming they mean, when I pronounced it, did I hear a word that fits? If it sounded right, you probably wouldn't have to reread it, right again?

### **Spell the word out loud**

Okay, now here is something I can get behind! But it depends on the purpose of spelling it out loud. Are they spelling it grapheme by grapheme like ch + ea + p or are they spelling it out loud like c + h + e + a + p. If it is the latter, then it's pointless. If they are spelling it out loud in order to identify the different graphemes and/or morphemes, then have at it!

### **Try a Different Vowel Sound**

This could go wrong on so many levels. The first and most obvious is which vowel should they try? Should they try a long vowel or a short vowel? Now they have up to 9 different attempts at the word. Also, are they doing this for each syllable? What if the word is <approach>, which vowel will they try to represent the schwa sound, which is arguably the most common phoneme in English? Oh, that's right, we just skip teaching the schwa, because it is too complicated, right?

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### **Think of a Rhyming Word You Do Know**

If you knew a word that rhymed with the word you are stuck on, then wouldn't logic follow that you would know the word you were stuck on? So, I come across the word glass and I can't read it, but I understand that class and mass rhyme, then I implicitly understand that the word is glass. Also, what happens when the word is <with>? What other words have the rime ith? Smith and pith? What grade school student is going to come up with that? See for yourself at <http://www.neilramsden.co.uk/spelling/searcher/>.

### **Chunk it. Look for Smaller Words Inside**

Oh, the bane of my existence. This could be so valuable if we just changed it a little bit. How about: **Chunk it. Look for Morphemes.** Let's take the word <heard>. So the student finds <ear>, which has a different pronunciation than the [ear] in <heard> and now they are not only confused about pronunciation but losing out on the learning the structure of English. Another part to the travesty, is that is missing the opportunity to show the morphemic boundaries of this word which is <hear> + <-d>. Now we have the fruitful conversation about our writing system being meaning based.

### **I save the best for the last, the title.**

#### **Good Readers...**

This seems to be a misnomer. Good readers do not use pictures to decode words, they do not look for smaller words in bigger words, they do not think of rhyming words while they are reading, they do not think about their mouth and first phoneme of a word, they certainly do not replace vowels! They don't need to, because they are good readers.

The moral of the story is that science has shown time and again that explicitness is the key to teaching reading. Our brain was not intended to decipher print but it has developed the capacity to learn when explicitly shown how to do something – like read. We know that students with dyslexia need a little more help strengthening the reading system and guessing is not a strategy it is a coping mechanism! This graphic does nothing more than rob our children the opportunity to learn how English is structured, how to interrogate their language and learn to decode unfamiliar words in order to be independent readers and spellers.