

I request that this letter remain confidential unless you can withhold my name, as I do not want my son identified. If my name and address can be withheld, then I agree for it to be made public.

Letter to the National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy March 2005

I am writing a letter to the Inquiry as the mother of two children—a daughter now 17 and a son now 15.

My reason for writing is to state that isolated phonics programs using meaningless texts are inappropriate for children who have verbal dyspraxia and a waste of time for those like my daughter who learnt to read before she was required to participate in her school's phonics program.

Our daughter was reading library books 8 months before attending a class that mandated that every student participate in an isolated phonics program. Our son on the other hand had/has a literacy difficulty and this same program did not help him.

For the purpose of this submission I wish to concentrate on our son Tim (not his real name), because children like our daughter who learn to read despite their teachers are not as vulnerable as those with reading difficulties. I will provide just one lesson as a very specific example of the process by which Tim learnt to read.

The thesis for this letter is to argue that:

- Phonics needs to be explicitly taught to those children with Developmental Verbal Dyspraxia (DVD)¹ who find learning to read difficult
- BUT**
- Phonics needs to be taught in **meaningful contexts**.
In other words Tim needed phonics teaching within the context of whole sentences and/or whole paragraphs so that he could understand and analyse what he was decoding. In this way clues, hints, predictions, educated guesses helped him, just like clues, hints etc help me for example, with cryptic crosswords and to read in fields that I have little prior knowledge with.
 - Not only does meaningful mean that the text to be read makes sense, but that it appeals to the child.

Tim's reading development history

Tim was 18 months when diagnosed with DVD (not to be confused with dyslexia). He was categorized in the severe² range and started speech pathology at 2 years of age. I was told then that 95% of children with DVD would have reading difficulties to varying degrees. Tim did have significant reading problems.

Tim is now at an academic selective high school and doing very well in all subjects (although his spelling remains remarkably unique). Fulfilling his academic potential

¹ I am attaching a document that explains DVD. <http://www.tayloredmktg.com/dyspraxia/das.shtml>

² Range types: severe, moderate, mild

was possible because of some excellent intervention in the early years (2 years of age to 8 years of age). However, this was not without its battles. At school he was exposed to a structured phonics program and his take home readers were the early editions of the Endeavor Reading Scheme circa 1960.

When Tim was diagnosed with DVD, I did considerable research in the area of dyspraxia and language and literacy development in general. Because of this research I suspected his reading program was inappropriate, but did not question school policy and/or classroom practice because I did not want the reputation of nuisance transferred to my son. In the middle of Year One, I decided to get some outside assistance because cutting 'b' words from magazines for the letter b week and making yellow jelly for the 'y' week for example, left him able to read and write his name and read just one sight word (his sister's name). Up until this stage I accepted the advice from both the teacher and school counselor that although Tim was good at Math, he was 'slow' and not to push him.

So what did I do?

I engaged a tutor familiar with teaching structured phonics programs, but using reading material that was of interest to Tim and well written. In fourteen months he was reading both age and stage appropriate texts.

This was in contrast to his 'reading program' at school where he continued to be labeled as a poor reader in Year 2 because he found it difficult to spell. For some reason the school viewed spelling and reading as synonymous. The teacher did not listen to Tim reading books. Rather, he assumed that because Tim was failing the weekly spelling and their associated comprehension work sheets, his reading was poor.

Compare these two learning experiences happening on the same day—the first at school and the second after school with the tutor (original documents available on request).

At School (This was a typical 'phonics' program)

Spelling words for the week beginning 1/3/1996

Ship, shop, shell, shape, shed, skin, shack, shade

Dictation (to be practiced for homework each day)

We saw the shape of a ship in the shade of the shop.

Tim's dictation attempt at home (original available on request)

We saw the shaf of a shef in the shade of a shef.

Points to note

He writes 'f' instead of 'p', presumably because he is hearing or processing 'p' as 'f'. (I still don't quite understand DVD, but the speech pathologists researching in this field at the University of Sydney could explain this). What I do know is that this

sentence although grammatically correct is nonsense. It is neither semantically or pragmatically correct. For children like my daughter this does not matter. They can go through the motions, get it correct, hopefully get a gold star and go home to read. But for children like Tim the impact not only on their reading development but also on their self-concept and self-esteem can be devastating.

At the tutoring session

Tim arrives at the tutor's room (Noel).

Noel reads him *Mr. McGee*, by Pamela Allen and Tim follows the print. It appeals to Tim's quirky sense of humour (which presumably Noel had thought about when choosing the book).

There is lots of discussion about:

- the story line. (Tim's favourite parts include the picture of a man in only his underpants and the bird pecking his stomach).
- The use of rhythm and rhyme. (Noel explains to me that although the terminology 'onset' and 'rhyme' will not be mentioned explicitly to Tim, this is the focus for the lesson.)

Neil reads the story again and then concentrates on the following sentences

Then Mr. McGee looked down and found, a bright red apple on the ground.

He peeled it carefully, very thin, then gobbled up the wiggly skin.

The rhyming words are identified and discussed (found, ground, thin, skin)

For example with found and ground, Tim and Noel examine that although different beginnings (onsets 'f' and 'gr') they have the same rime (ound) both aurally and visually.

The word found is written on the left hand side of a strip of paper (flash card) in large font. On the right hand side of the flash card the word ground is written and then Tim and Neil discuss other words that have the rime 'ound' in them. These are then written under the word ground. They include around and round.

found	ground
	around
	round
	pound
	mound
	sound

For homework Tim and I read the book each day and then go through the flashcards (10 flashcards in all for the different rhyming words within the book). We add any new words that we can think of. For example for the 'ound' flashcard we add pound, mound and sound. Noel encourages us to draw pictures (when possible/ appropriate) next to the words less familiar to Tim (pound and mound for instance). We also discuss multiple meanings for words such as pound.

This same/similar process followed for other texts as well, and they were not all fiction. For example as boats and sailing were his passion, excerpts from sailing books and magazines were also used.

However, I am conscious that there are many submissions to read. Therefore, I have provided snapshots from just two contrasting learning experiences that our son received on the same day. I have done this to illustrate how a structured and explicit phonics program using quality literature that was appealing and thus motivating for Tim seemed to better equip him with the necessary skills for becoming an independent reader. Should the committee require further elaboration I would be happy to provide it.

To conclude, my reason for writing is to state that isolated phonics programs using meaningless texts are inappropriate for children like Tim who have verbal dyspraxia and a waste of time for those like my daughter who learnt to read before she was required to participate in this program. I would therefore hope that the committee considers the above points when advising on the teaching of reading in schools and the resources used for this instruction.

Yours sincerely,

Parent concerned about inappropriate phonics teaching.