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Reading and the Right-Brained Child

or

What To Do When Phonics Just Won't Work

Margaret McNamara

We all know this child...He, or she, never seems to be listening, and can't follow directions. He has trouble naming objects: a green book on the desk becomes "that thingy over there." Multisyllable words are a real problem. He may tell you he had "pa-sghetti" for dinner.

This student has great difficulty learning his sounds. If he finally does master them, or at least the consonants, he can't blend them together to make a word. He is likely to start with the last sound when attempting this, so that h-a-n-d becomes "door" or "dog."

Traditionally, we have labeled this student as auditorially disabled. Often we place him in an intensified phonics program, or an auditory training program in an effort to alleviate his problems and teach him to read.

The Brain Research

The right-brained, left-brained (hemispheric) research of recent years has given us a more positive way of looking at this student. It also points the way to a more appropriate method of teaching him.



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The brain research indicates that our auditorially disabled student may exhibit many of the learning characteristics associated with a right-brained learning style. This knowledge allows us to look at how he **does** learn, rather than focusing on his deficits.

Right-brained learners, that is, students who tap into a right-brained mode of functioning when presented with any task, are holistic, global learners. They need to see the "big picture" first, before they can back off and look at its component parts. They definitely are visual learners, and automatically seek patterns in what they see. Our right-brained learners are weak auditorially, and are not strong in sequencing small pieces together to make a whole. They do not have an orderly, logical thought process.

Right-Brained Learners

Strengths	Weaknesses
Visual	Auditory
Intuitive	Logic
See "big picture"	Sequencing
See overall patterns	Linear reasoning

When you look at this profile of strengths and weaknesses, does such a student seem a likely candidate for a phonetic approach to reading: that is, an approach based on the orderly sequencing of nonmeaningful sounds.

A New Approach

My colleague Diane Gustaveson, a Chapter 1 Reading Specialist in Washington State, and I thought not. That is why we have developed, and used successfully, a system of

reading instruction we call the Integrated, Comprehension-Based Reading Program.

The IC-B Reading Program capitalizes on the **strengths** of the right-brained learner. It draws upon his abilities to visualize and uses his preferred mode of learning — the visual. It presents the overall picture to him first, rather than requiring him to deal with small pieces. It uses the whole word as the basic unit of instruction, but adds a new component to the old “look-say” method. Each word is presented in the context of personal meaning and experience for the student.

We have used this reading system with four major basal reading series. Our students have been 1st through 6th graders in Chapter 1, Special Education, Communication Disorders, ESL and regular classrooms in public and private schools. And, we have used the program through both rich and lean times — with small classes and excellent instructional aides, and in large classes with many behavior problems and no aides.

Using the IC-B Reading Program

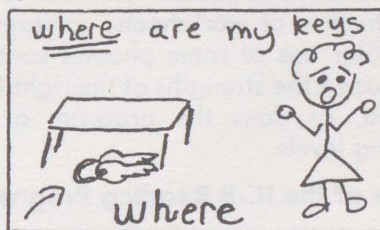
Although implementation of the IC-B varies somewhat at the different elementary reading levels, the basic elements remain the same:

- The IC-B uses the **whole word** as the basic unit of instruction.
- It teaches the student to attach **personal meaning** to the word in order to help him visualize it. This visualization is the catalyst for remembering and retrieving the word for reading.
- It includes **kinesthetic reinforcement**. The student traces the word and pronounces it as a whole word, at the same time he is looking at his visual clue. He then writes the word from memory.
- It acknowledges that these students need **constant review** to retain what they have learned.
- It is applied to a regular **basal reading series**. Students do all appropriate worksheets, workbook pages and enrichment activities accompanying the series.

IC-B and the Nonreader

Students with no reading vocabulary are taught to develop one specific clue for each word they are to learn. For example, if you are teaching the word “where” you might say: “Did you ever get ready to go shopping with your mother, but she can’t find her car keys? She keeps saying, ‘**Where** are my keys, **where** are my keys?’”

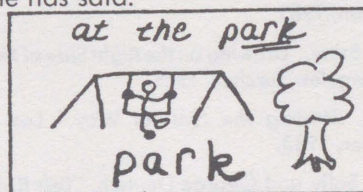
1. As you say this, draw an illustrative picture on a blank 3x5 card (or have the student draw it) and print “where” at the bottom of the card in magic marker. You may want to print the clue sentence at the top also.



2. Have the student repeat the word and the clue sentence a couple of times. Then have him trace the word with his pencil or a colored pencil. He should say “where” as a whole word while he traces.

3. When he has traced and repeated the word twice, remove this visual clue card and have him write the word from memory. If he makes a mistake, do not have him erase and fix it. Instead, go back to the picture clue card and have him repeat the trace and say step. Then try printing the word again. Once he can print the word accurately, make a non-picture word card for daily review.

For words that are more concrete and easier to visualize, he can develop his own picture clue card. For example, if the word is “park” ask him, “Have you ever been to the park?...What do you like to do at the park?” Then have him draw a picture clue card of what he has said.



4. Present about two or three new vocabulary words a day in this fashion. And every day review all the words the child has learned so far by using the nonpicture review cards. If there is trouble with any of them, return to the visual clue card and have the

child repeat the trace and say step. Put out several visual clue cards and nonpicture word cards and have the student match pairs, reading the words as he/she does so.

5. Do not bring out the first preprimer until all the words in the book are mastered. When you give him the book, tell him he already knows all the words in it. Have him read a few words from the glossary at random to prove your point. Program him for success!

This is a very brief outline of the IC-B technique for teaching word recognition to nonreaders, the first step in their instruction. The IC-B techniques for oral reading, introduction of worksheets, comprehension and later use of some phonics continue to emphasize the strengths of the right-brained student, as does the program at higher reading levels.

Value of the IC-B Reading Program

At all elementary levels, we have seen the following benefits from using this program:

- **Specific reading gain** in word recognition, fluency and comprehension, as measured by standardized tests and reading series' placement and evaluation tests.
- **Improved student attitudes** towards reading.
- **Appropriate behavior** during reading periods, even from students labeled as severe behavior problems.

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IRA Applauds Reading Gains

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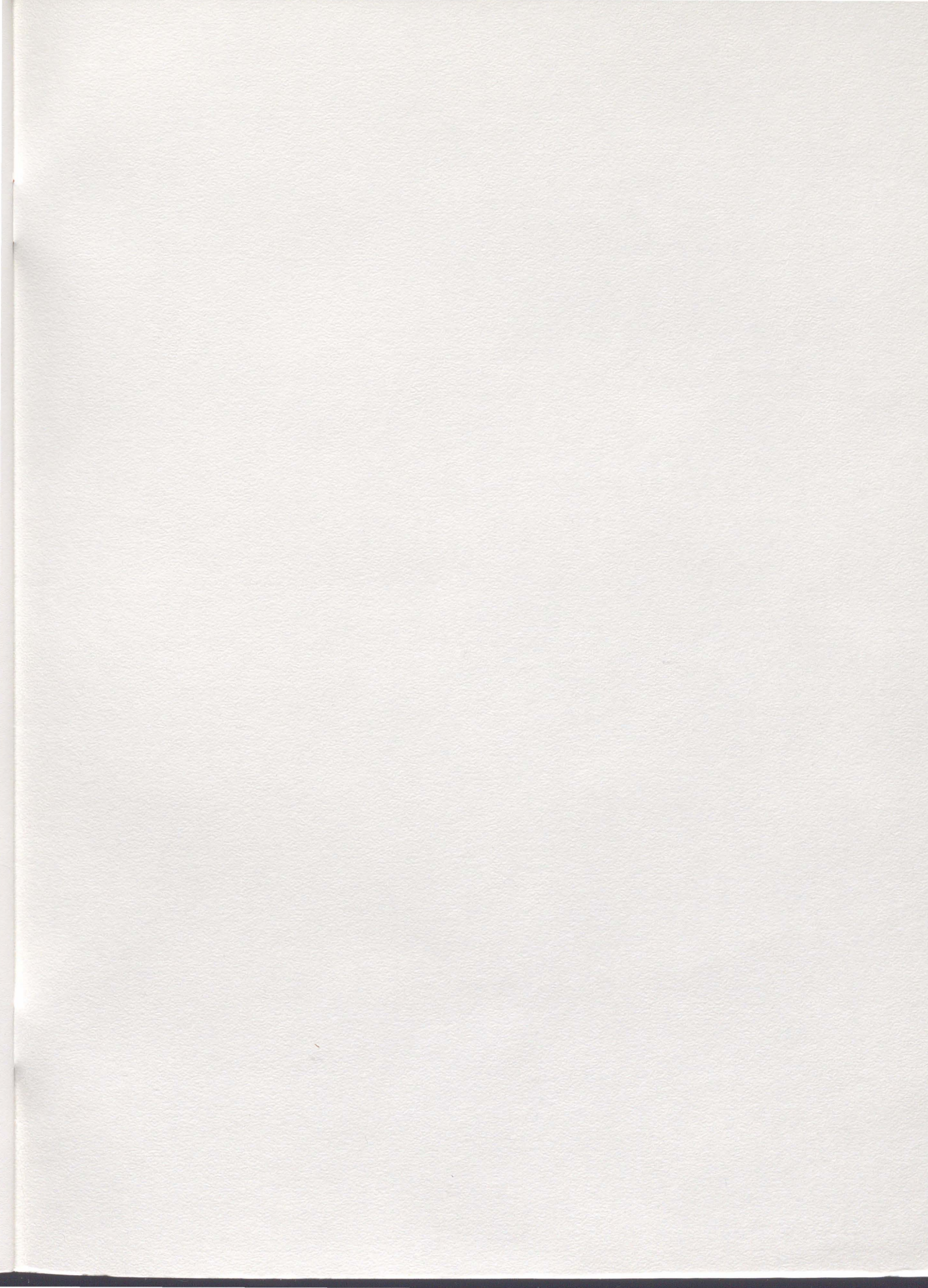
"I think it is also indicative of the fact that early childhood education programs are having a significant impact."

● The data may suggest that federally-funded research is also having a positive effect, says IRA Director of Research Alan E. Farstrup. "When research findings are put to practical application in the classroom, they can have a positive impact on youngsters' reading skills."

● The lack of proficiency in higher-level reading skills suggests that more attention should be given to comprehension at all levels of instruction. "Older students, especially, need instruction geared toward equipping them with the higher-level reading skills they will need to function effectively in the work world. The results highlight the need for reading research and the importance of applications of research findings in areas where the NAEP data show need, such as higher-level skills," notes Farstrup.

The report shows that although there is still much left to be done, much has already been accomplished in improving the reading skills of our nation's youth, concludes Mitchell. "We must not lose sight of the substantial gains that have been made, and we should be encouraged as we strive to meet the challenges that lie ahead," he says.

"In the past, we have focused on educators when the findings have been disappointing," concludes Indrisano. "I hope we will focus equally on the educator now that there is a remarkable success story."



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