What got this teacher on the front page of her local paper?

A Phonics Case Study

Cracking the code gives teachers help with reading
How was this school’s approach to early literacy changed forever?

Let Amabel Sauble School, tell you in their own words…

Discovering *Jolly Phonics*

by Barbara Misener, Kindergarten Teacher

In the Spring of 1997, a *Jolly Phonics Handbook* was made available in each school in the Bluewater board enabling a total phonics programme to be carried out with this one professional tool.

Over that summer, I reviewed the handbook and made a decision to begin the programme in my blended Junior/Senior Kindergarten in the fall. These children were 3, 4 and 5 years old. In actual fact, it was not until January of the next year that I actually began instruction exclusively using the *Jolly Phonics* programme.

I have a background as an itinerant speech and language teacher and was immediately in agreement with the phonemic component of *Jolly Phonics* (i.e., teaching of all the 42 phonemes, including the digraphs). To teach just the sounds of the 26 letters in the alphabet never satisfied my need to give children all the information needed to crack the code for reading the English language.

From 1971 to 1995, I was engaged in various forms of remedial teaching. I found that the most debilitating learning block confronting children in their later elementary education to be the lack of a strong foundation in reading. Enthusiasm and skill in reading is the basis of all learning. Lack of it erodes self-confidence, which begins the vicious circle of failure and discouragement that many young learners face. The pleasure of reading is lost to them, seemingly forever.

During the six months from January to June of 1998, I followed the programme laid out in *The Phonics Handbook* and my approach to early literacy teaching changed forever! *Jolly Phonics* is, and will continue to be, my stepping off point to early literacy. I see it as a win, win solution for a much larger majority of students, parents and teachers. Rather than see children falling through the foundational cracks and so often being sentenced to chronic remedial instruction, *Jolly Phonics* instruction equips children with the tools to become lifelong readers. All components of early literacy are sequentially covered by following the suggestions and extensions in *The Phonics Handbook*.

For example, by the third term, after having taught all 42 sounds, I am very pleased with the letter sounds and group spelling work that the children can do. We have progressed through the *Jolly Phonics* word lists and have spelled 3 words a day as a group, including individually printing them on our chalk boards. The children are sounding and blending well as a result. Spelling errors are VERY interesting! It is amazing to see how they use their *Jolly Phonics* awareness to sound out. I find myself being proud and pleased with their errors! By using the Schonell Spelling Assessment, some of my children tested out of the 7 years old plus level of spelling skill (i.e., spelling 50+ words before being asked to stop). An amazing feat! During this assessment, I think one of the most interesting results was that there was very little noticeable difference in the assessment results of the Junior and the Senior Kindergarten children! Certainly a major
admonish for those who believe “the younger the better” when it comes to literacy development. I suspect the real “proof of the pudding” will be recognized in two to three years, when the solid foundation has had a chance to settle and mature. Their comfort in personal writing will be a delight!

I have used a new “printing” language with the children as we worked on individual, mini-chalkboards. The language from the Jolly Phonics videos has allowed me to encourage the children to effectively learn the flow of printing to further enable them to write with speed and accuracy in Grade one and two. I have also been more focused on pencil grip.

In addition, I have found value in using parent volunteers to sequentially blend words daily with the children, using the words listed in the Jolly Phonics Handbook. By working one on one with each child, and maintaining an ongoing information binder of their progress, any volunteer who comes in can carry on from where the children are without delay or regression. The parents can make comments in the margin for the next time and that also encourages the children to succeed.

As the school year progressed, the children involved in this programme continually blossomed and progressed. My expectations have been surpassed. I also see many ways in which I will adapt and adjust my programme. The exciting potential of the programme is still to be tapped! The unique way in which a teacher “learns by doing” is one of the most exciting facets of the programme. You can constantly see new ways to approach the pieces to the code and make it easier and easier for all children to succeed.

Jolly Phonics is organized by beginning with the most used letters to create as many words as possible early on for blending. I do not wait to teach all the sounds before beginning spelling. I slowly introduce children into the literacy programme as they show ability. I also introduced the “tricky words” adding two or three words per week. I track the progress of each child, as with the word blending and I assess and increase their quantity of words as they are able. Constant, daily exposure in a quick activity makes reading of these words not so tricky!

Suggestions in the videos for these tricky words certainly helped.

I look forward to continuing to learn and grow with my students through the use of Jolly Phonics. I strongly encourage you to allow all young learners to reap the benefits through its use.

“the younger the better”

It is exhilarating to provide leadership in a project that truly makes a difference in the lives of children

by Mary Anne Alton, Superintendent, Bluewater District Schoolboard

TWO Bluewater teachers read an article in the FWTAO Newsletter showcasing the impact of the “Balanced Literacy Diet” on student performance. These teachers set up a visit to Beaumonde Heights in Etobicoke and shared their excitement upon their return. As part of a new superintendent orientation programme I was also able to visit Beaumonde Heights and through Margo Dixon, a teacher there, was able to make contact with Dr Dale Willows of OISE/UT.

Through a series of fortunate events, Dr Willows agreed to embark upon a literacy project in Bluewater. Based on written proposals, five schools were selected as project schools. Primary teams from each school engaged in staff development sessions with Dr Willows, completed extensive professional reading, attended weekly in-school literacy meetings and used District-provided literacy resources including Jolly Phonics.

The assessment completed at the end of year one of the project, demonstrated that the most significant student gains had occurred at the Kindergarten level. Jolly Phonics was seen as a key factor in improved student performance.

Jolly Phonics was purchased for every school in Bluewater and placed in Kindergarten classes for the 1998–1999 school year. Sue Lloyd, author of the Jolly Phonics Handbook, visited Bluewater in October 1998 when educators spent a Friday evening enhancing their understanding of Jolly Phonics. In March 1999, Chris Jolly of Jolly Learning visited Bluewater and shared the evolution of Jolly Phonics with educators. Two Bluewater teachers provided after-school sessions to support the implementation of Jolly Phonics.

During the 1998–99 school year, Dr Willows provided literacy staff development sessions for all Kindergarten teachers. In June 1999, Grade one teachers were included in these sessions to prepare them to adjust their programmes to accommodate the higher stage of literacy development they could expect from their students.

Visiting Kindergarten classes in Bluewater bordered on a spiritual experience! Teachers, principals and parents constantly express their elation at what they have observed Kindergarten children accomplishing. Jolly Phonics raises our literacy expectations of young children in a stimulating and child-friendly environment. As a superintendent, it is exhilarating to provide leadership in a project that truly makes a difference in the lives of children. I can provide additional information for interested educators through my e-mail at maryanne_alton@bwdsb.on.ca
An excellent foundation in English skills with Jolly Phonics
by Pam MacDermid, mother of three

As the parents of three young children, we are amazed at
the head start that the Jolly Phonics programme has given to
our two youngest.

Our oldest son, Lane, is in Grade 4. He did not attend
Junior Kindergarten, but did go to Kindergarten where the focus
was mainly on socializing and following a daily routine. Jolly Phonics was
not part of that programme and although Lane has done extremely well thus far,
we believe that he has been exposed to Jolly Phonics he
would have started reading at a much younger age than he did.
He himself has made comments about how much his younger
sister and brother have done in Kindergarten compared to what
he did when he was their age.

Our second child, Leah, is in
Grade 1. She attended Junior Kindergarten and Jolly Phonics
was introduced to her class in Senior Kindergarten. Once
underway, we noticed how quickly she progressed learning
sounds while associating them with unique actions. We think that
these associations allowed her to grasp how words
sound phonetically at a very early age. She came out of
Kindergarten with an excellent foundation in English skills which
she continued to use for sounding out words and for
spelling. Leah reads above her grade level right now and really
loves reading books out loud and practicing spelling. We are very
happy with her progress and what she has accomplished.

We have seen the benefits of Jolly Phonics at an even earlier
age with our youngest son, Kurtis.

He is in Junior Kindergarten and has
been exposed to Jolly Phonics since he began
the school year. We noticed a real difference
in Kurtis around November when he
started to catch on to matching sounds to
t heir actions. It was very exciting as parents to
watch our four year old recognise
letters and know their corresponding sounds. He loved
the fact that he had “homework”
tool! Each night we would spend
a few minutes reviewing what he
done at school that day and
reading together. Since we had
done this routine with Leah, she
would sometimes help her
brother if he was stuck. Kurtis is
well ahead of the stages his
siblings had reached at his age
and already recognizes some
simple words by sight. We believe
that Jolly Phonics gives children a
fun and exciting way to learn some
very important skills that will be
the basis of their reading and
writing in years to come.

The Jolly Phonics programme
works so well at our school
because of the hard work,
dedication and enthusiasm of our
Kindergarten teacher Barbara
Misener. We have been extremely
fortunate to have had her teach
our two youngest in their
Kindergarten years and believe
that she is a big part of the success
of the Jolly Phonics programme.

The excitement among our students as they
use their phonemic awareness is contagious
by Lillian Cottrill, Principal of Amabel Sauble School, Bluewater

My first thought when I initially
heard about the Jolly Phonics
programme was skepticism, that it
was just one more backward step
to an overemphasis on phonics
and teaching phonics in isolation. My fears were that we might be
returning to the days of filling in
phonics pages and abandoning

the richness of a balanced
literacy program. As I came to
realise that the focus of Jolly Phonics was on phonemic
awareness, an area where many
of our Primary and Junior
students were struggling, I
became interested in learning more about
it.

It has been exciting to see the impact
of this programme on our
Kindergarten students as they
master the forty two phonemic
sounds and make the next steps
from sounding out to blending
to creating meaning with words.
The excitement among our
students as they use their
phonemic awareness as a key to
unlock the puzzle of reading is
contagious.

Of course, not every child has
become a reader… yet. But the
involvement in the Jolly Phonics
programme and exposure to rich
literature within the classroom has
moved everyone well along the road
to becoming a successful reader.

And the earlier this exposure
begins the better. In the
1998/1999 school year our
Kindergarten students received
only six months of Jolly Phonics
and we have seen a difference in
their reading and writing levels at
Grade one. This school year the
programme began in September
1999 and now many of our Senior
and Junior Kindergarten students
are reading quite comfortably. We
have begun using Jolly Phonics
with struggling readers at the late-
primary and early-junior level and
can see it making a difference
for these students. What is
particularly appealing is that it
involves all of the learning
modalities, for example, it is
tactile and colourful. In addition,
it is a straightforward, easy-to-
follow programme for teachers
and easy for parents to support at
home for just a few minutes a night
along with reading.

We are pleased with the Jolly Phonics programme and the
difference it is making for our
students.

“What is particularly appealing is that Jolly Phonics involves all of the
learning modalities”