

Intensive Phonics (*Alpha-Phonics*) Testimonial

by Paul Lukawski

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I have been a high school English teacher for 14 years. I remember in college wanting to know how to teach children to read. I went to a teacher college established in 1910. The school had one of the oldest teacher colleges in the country. Its College of Education enjoyed an excellent reputation. I asked three different professors how do you teach reading. I received three different vague responses.

After I completed my second year of teaching, I realized that my students could not read. I taught grades nine through twelve. The second year, I had three classes of ninth graders. I assigned the novel *To Kill a Mocking Bird* for them to read. I realized that most of my students could not read the novel's literate narrative. It was during this time that I heard Samuel Blumenfeld interviewed on short wave radio. At this time the Rodney King verdict had come in and there was rioting in the streets of L.A. He said that the reason the people were rioting was that they did not have jobs. They did not have jobs because they were illiterate. He said you could tell they were illiterate by listening to the lyrics of the songs they listened to and by the way they talked. I was intrigued by what he said because it verified my experience as a high school teacher. He then said the schools were at fault because of the way they taught reading. I was again intrigued because of my experience in college trying to determine how to teach children to read. I was never taught it in college.

Mr. Blumenfeld had made two provocative statements on the radio, but I knew them to be true because of my personal experience. I then decided to buy a couple of his books, including *Alpha-Phonics*.

My third year of teaching, I had a class of ninth graders that consisted of the worst performing students in the school. These students were in the dropout prevention program. They were waiting until they turned sixteen to drop out of school. I teach in our state's poorest county and our district at that time had a high drop out rate. Also in the class were several students from Mexico and one from Haiti. These students were speakers of other languages (ESOL). Their only problem was that they had a limited understanding of English. Everyday in the class was a struggle with disruptive behavior; and if I could finish class without a student being sent to the office for discipline problems, I considered it a success.

The students had chronic discipline problems; they had trouble with the law, every problem you could imagine. After two months of getting absolutely nowhere with the students I decided that I would try an experiment. I was going to use *Alpha-Phonics* beginning with lesson one to teach those that wanted to learn how to read. I told the class that those that wanted to learn would sit on this side of the room, and those that did not were to sit on the opposite side of the room. The only rule was a student could not interfere with the *Alpha-Phonics* lesson. Until this time, everyone sat scattered around the back of the room, as I did not have a seating chart. Any student, when given the option, will not sit in the front of the room with the teacher.

The stage being set, I began the first day by reading the directions from the “Teachers Manual” to *Alpha-Phonics* and beginning with lesson one. I wondered what response I would get.

I was shocked by the response of the students. Nothing could have prepared me for what happened. If someone had told me what would happen I would not have believed them. With the exception of a few students who sat on the other side of the room because they did not want to participate, all of the students followed along as I wrote the lessons on the board. I would write the lesson on the board, read it out loud, and then have them read. The students leaned forward in their desks and followed along. The next day the students all sat in the front of the room. Everyone would raise their hand and want to read. Indeed, after the first few days, the students would fuss among themselves to read out aloud. They fought over who could write the lessons on the board. Everyone wanted to read aloud. Everyone sat in front of the room. There were no discipline problems. The entire class had been transformed. I had discovered a disturbing truth.

We worked through the book; and about halfway through the book, we began reading *Sounder* and *The Old Man and the Sea*. One youth in the class who could not read and who had been a behavior problem told me that every night he would sit with his dad as his dad read the sports section of the papers. He said he always wanted to read the paper with his dad but he could not because he did not know how to read. A few weeks after starting *Alpha-Phonics*, he entered the class one day and told me that as he was driving down the road he began to sound out the words on the signs. He was excited because he was never able to do that before.

We had started *Alpha-Phonics* in October and the semester ended in December. I would not be seeing the students anymore. We had completed about three fourths of the book and read the two novels. I would begin each class by doing about 15 minutes of *Alpha-Phonics* and then read from the novels. The students were eager and well behaved. The youth who began reading the signs told me that in evening he could now sit with his dad and read the sports section along with him. They would talk about what they had read. Three Spanish-speaking students learned English this way.

The following year, I tried another experiment. I had one student who was identified as having ADD/ADHD. He was notorious. He was a ninth grader. This was his first year at our school. I had another student who was in trouble with the dean’s office constantly. I gave both of them Sam’s *Blumenfeld Oral Reading Test* (BORAT), and they scored between the 1st and second grade levels. I made an arrangement with other teachers to have both students come to my class for fifteen minutes while I did an *Alpha-Phonics* lesson with them. Because I began in August, I was able to finish the whole book with them by Christmas. I gave both students the BORAT posttest. One boy had doubled his reading score and the other was close behind him. The boy with ADD/ADHD was never antsy or hyperactive when he was working on the lesson. He was a completely different child when he was with me. Indeed, his teacher would often allow him to stay the whole hour with me because he had many behavior problems in her class. He never had a behavior problem when working on *Alpha-Phonics*, neither did the other child who was constantly getting into fights and being suspended. When these two youngsters worked on *Alpha-Phonics* with me they were totally different children.

The following year, I worked with some other children. I had developed a system where I would set aside ten minutes each class period and do a few lessons while the rest of the class would work quietly on their own at their desks. I would use the BORAT to identify the illiterates in my class. I would then ask them if they had ever had an A in English. Invariably they would say, "No." I would ask them if they would want one. They would say, "Yes." I then would say that all they had to do was work with me for ten minutes a day on *Alpha-Phonics* until we were done with the book. When we were done with the book, I would choose several pages at random for them to read from. If they could read the pages to me, they would receive an A. I told them that that was all they had to worry about in the class. I was not interested in what they did regarding the usual coursework. That was the incentive I offered them. It was up to them.

One youth had had failed the ninth grade and was taking his ninth grade English class over again with me. He was also taking his tenth grade English class. His tenth grade class met next door to mine first period. He would then come to my class second period. His tenth grade teacher was the same one he took the year before, the class, which he had failed. He was working ten minutes a day on *Alpha-Phonics* for several weeks, when one day the door that communicated between my room and the neighboring room opened. It was his tenth grade teacher. She called me over to her and asked what it was I was doing with him. I told her *Alpha-Phonics*. She said, "Look." The whole class was watching Channel One and chatting. It was during homeroom. The whole class, except this youth, who was busy reading a book I had given him. The teacher was flabbergasted. She knew he was illiterate and could not believe that he was able to read.

One day I was working with this boy at my desk when we had a new student enter the class. He had just been released from a juvenile detention. He knew the youth I was working with and sat by him as we worked together. He was curious about what we were doing, and I explained it to him.

He said that he could not read either. He explained that he started having trouble reading in the third grade. He said that when the time came to read aloud he would intentionally get into trouble so he would be sent to the office so that he would not have to read. He could not take the embarrassment. He did not want anyone to know that he could not read. The boy I was working chimed in and said that he was the same way. They both recounted events when they would get into trouble on purpose so they could avoid reading. They would even start fistfights. The boy who had been in juvenile detention was sent there because he had set fire to the junior high school.

The following year I had firmly established my regular ten-minute routine in my class, and every year after that I would have students who would participate. One year I was in a staffing meeting for a boy who was labeled as a special education student with learning disabilities. The special education staffer, whom I had never met before asked me what I was doing with the boy. The reason she asked is that she was with the boy's science teacher when the science teacher had reported that the boy began volunteering to read aloud. The science teacher was astonished. We live in a small community and the teacher had known the boy ever since kindergarten and had known that he could not read, thus the placement in the special education program: Here he was volunteering to read aloud in her class. I told them what it was I was doing.

There is one case that haunts me. I had a big strapping youth who was seventeen years old. He had failed ninth and tenth grade English because he could not read. He was in my ninth grade English class. I had given him the BORAT test, and he was at about the 1-2 grade level: A typical case. We began working ten minutes a day. After a month I gave him the book *Sounder*, and he told me he was reading it at home. We were about halfway through the book when he no longer showed up in my class. I learned that he had moved away. I do not know if he ever completely learned how to read. He was a decent well-mannered youth who would show up everyday, was polite and carried a big stack of books with him. He was waiting for someone to teach him to read.

My daughter was born in 1996. I remember seeing the little girl read in the *Hooked on Phonics* commercials and wished my daughter could read like her. When she was two, I began to teach her how to read during my summer vacation. She would take naps then, and I followed the advice in the teacher's manual. I set up a routine. Everyday, before she took her nap, we would sit together. Following Sam's advice, I appealed to her intellect. I said, "It is time for our lessons." I began by following the alphabet pre-reading exercise in the back of the book. Again, following Mr. Blumenfeld's advice, I did not pressure her or scold her, regardless her behavior. Some days, she would kick at the book and giggle. I would say, "You did a good job today!" And I put the book away. We would continue tomorrow. It went on like this for several months. When school started again she would do the lessons with me before we went to bed. She enjoyed the routine and the lessons. One evening, while my wife was in the room, she took out the book on her own and began reading from lesson two: "Am, Sam, Hear the S sound," she said. Then, - "Sam sat." - etc. My wife could not believe it. "Did she memorize those words?" She asked. "No," I replied, and then explained the method. When she was three, we were driving down the road when she said, "Look Momma," pointing to a sign, "*Marshal's*, there is your store!" My wife could not believe it. When she was three, there was one occasion when our daughter was at Sunday school. Her teachers were arguing over whether or not she was reading the colors on the crayons. "She's memorized them," said one. "No, she is reading them," said the other. The colors she was reading were purple, fuchsia and magenta. Magenta was her favorite.

The spring before my daughter began kindergarten she could read fluently any word in front of her. We were at a spring festival when my daughter and her friend bought soft drinks. My daughter read the inside of the cap, which told whether or not you had won a prize advertised on the side of the can. My daughter read the label effortlessly, which included the words **vacation** and **discovery**. "She is a genius!" exclaimed the father. My daughter's friend asked her dad to read the soft drink label to her. I told the girl's father that his daughter could read as well if he used *Alpha-Phonics* with her. I said, "Follow the lesson manual and be patient, do not pressure you child, as Mr. Blumenfeld says, and in a year or so she will be like my daughter."

That fall I saw the girl's parents and asked how she was doing. He said his daughter had not really taken to the book yet. (His daughter had just started kindergarten, as mine had.) I said, "Be patient and keep going." Meanwhile, my daughter was reading at 2nd grade level; and during kindergarten reading time, she would go to a second grade class for reading instruction. The following year I saw the girl's dad again and asked him how she was doing in first grade. He said that his daughter was reading at a second grade level and was being tested for gifted and talented.

Meanwhile my daughter entered the first grade and soon afterwards was referred to the gifted and talented program. She won the spelling bee and Math bash just as she did in kindergarten. I used Samuel Blumenfeld's *How-to-Tutor* to instruct her in math. In second grade, she read at the seventh grade level, won all of the reading, spelling and math prizes and was elected to the school's hall of fame. She has had straight A's in every class. She learned to read with *Alpha-phonics* and learned math with *How-to-Tutor*.

While my daughter was in first grade, I was asked to sit on a parent teacher committee. While on the committee, the mayor of our town complained to the principal that he had been on the committee for three years and that the committee was always talking about doing something out side of the box when it came to improving the school's reading scores. Regardless of what the committee did to improve reading scores, they were always the same. The principal said that he was open for suggestions outside of the box. No one had any suggestions so I said that I was familiar with the method of reading instruction in the public schools and that was what was at fault. I said that I had a method that worked better. Indeed, I said that I drop my daughter off at school at 7:30, I could walk into any class, give a ten minute lesson and still arrive at the high school were I teach in time to sign in a 8:00 a.m. I said that if anyone doubted me, I get a paycheck every two weeks with a comma in it, let's put it on the table and keep the tourists out. I wanted to let them know my intentions were serious.

They took me up on the offer, and a first year teacher volunteered her class. I began the first Monday after spring break. I only had six weeks to work with the children. I made transparencies of the *Alpha-Phonics* lessons and followed the teacher's manual. I only did a ten-minute lesson. The teacher combined her bottom ½ students with the reading teacher's bottom ½ students. After two weeks, the mother of one of the children approached me. She said, "I am glad you are working with my daughter. A while back the school called me up to their office and told me there was something wrong with my daughter. She had a learning disability." "I cried for two days," she said. I told her not to listen to anything the schools told her, to be patient and to watch what happens. A week after school was over, I saw the mother again and I asked her how her daughter was doing. She said that the school had called her up again and told her that they had given her daughter an end of the year reading test showing that she had a 40% improvement in her reading: they and were going to put her into an advanced class.

The following year, I was asked to do the project again with a first grade class. I worked ten minutes each morning. I was only able to complete three-fourths of the book. The school's diagnostic test revealed that of the children who were able to complete the project successfully, not one had a reading disability. The makers of the diagnostic test said that you could expect 20% of the children to have reading disabilities.

I once was explaining to a student why children have reading problems. When I finished, a girl from the other side of the class, who I thought was not listening, said, "This is what happened to my brother. He is in the fourth grade, hates to read and gets stomach aches and headaches." I told her that his troubles were over and gave her a copy of *Alpha-phonics*. Four months later, I asked how was her brother doing. She said he completed the book and reads just fine. I had the same success with students in special education, who were labeled as learning disabled or educatably mentally retarded. I have 100% per cent success with every student. The only variable is the speed at which students progress. You must follow Dr. Blumenfeld's advice and be patient. Do not pressure the child.

I have many other heartbreaking stories about children who have quit school because they did not know how to read, and no one will teach them. I have had children take a copy of *Alpha phonics* and keep it to teach friends they know, how to read. **I encouraged everyone to try *Alpha-Phonics*. The results you see in the child are truly miraculous. It must be seen to believe.**

Brief Confirmatory Testimony Concerning Alpha-Phonics

by Donald L. Potter

I received this stirring testimony from Paul on May 19, 2008. My experiences are very similar to Paul's. The "disturbing fact" that Paul and I discovered was that faulty reading instruction in beginning reading classes was the obvious cause of the reading failure we were remediating. This was confirmed by the rapidity by which our tutoring students were learning to read, after many years of failure. Together Paul and I have taught literally hundreds of illiterates to read with a method that is so cheap and simple that it staggers the imagination.

I have used Mr. Blumenfeld's *Alpha-Phonics* in public school classes for bilingual students and in my private tutoring since 1994. It all started when a home school parent loaned me a copy. The first year I used it with one first-grade student who I was told was not very smart. His teacher was planning to retain him in first grade. I worked with him for 15 to 20 minutes each evening after school. By the end of the year, he had finished the book. I remember that his mother bought me a silk tie to show the family's appreciation. I was able to follow his progress through the sixth grade. He passed the Texas TAKS test every year and was a very excellent all-around student. I had been using *Classroom Phonics* before I got *Alpha-Phonics*. Later John Saxon bought *Classroom Phonics* and transformed it into the more expensive and highly complicated *Saxon Phonics*. *Alpha-Phonics*, on the other hand, was very inexpensive and easy to teach, and every bit as effective.

I used it for five years in a bilingual pullout program at Burnet Elementary School in Odessa, TX. I also had the privilege to train other bilingual teachers in *Alpha-Phonics*. I have corresponded with several who use *Alpha-Phonics* to this day.

During the 1999 – 2000 school year, I taught *Alpha-Phonics* to a 2nd grade bilingual class. The students were on various levels of spoken English competence. During summer vacation I developed detailed Lesson Plans for each day of the school year. I knew that *Alpha-Phonics* was effective in individual and small group tutoring; but I wanted to see if it could be successfully taught to a whole class in a single year. I wanted the kids to receive the full benefit of Sam Blumenfeld's program so I used the cursive handwriting lessons in his wonderfully comprehensive little *How-to-Tutor* book. The cursive lessons follow the same order as the phonics lessons in *Alpha-Phonics*. Each day the children would copy an Alpha-Phonics Lesson from the overhead into a spiral notebook we called our "Alpha-Phonics Notebook." On Monday they would get their homework for the entire week. It consisted of a single piece of paper they took home with them containing an English and Spanish Newsletter concerning classroom and school activities and the words and sentences we would be studying for the week. The students were assigned four days of homework that they would bring to school each day for me to check. Basically they rewrote all the words and sentences I had taught for the day. The Lesson Plans are published on my website, www.donpotter.net.

I believe the lesson plans represent a model of pedagogical efficiency. All the work was in cursive. I never wrote any English on the board in manuscript. They used only cursive for the English. At first, I did allow them to use manuscript for the Spanish since that is what they were used to it. By the end of the year they were all doing the Spanish work in cursive because they realized it was much easier to write in cursive than the more laborious print.

This year (2009-2010), I am using Dr. Blumenfeld's *Alpha-Phonics* intensive phonics reading program and his cursive program in my tutoring at the Odessa Christian School in Odessa, TX. I truly believe that any teacher who teaches *Alpha-Phonics*, especially when coupled with cursive handwriting, will have total success in teaching all children how to read. [I am happy to report that the five second-grade students and two first grade students all learned to read with *Alpha-Phonics*. They wrote all the words and sentences in *Alpha-Phonics* in cursive. July 7, 2010.]

I would like to conclude by making it clear that Paul and I have no financial ambition whatsoever when it comes to promoting *Alpha-Phonics*. Our only concern is that students who have been failing with the customary reading methods used in American schools may have the opportunity to learn to read and spell with this superior intensive phonics method.

Paul and I would like to recommend all the books and essays by Dr. Samuel L. Blumenfeld for consideration by the educational community. Several of Sam's essays on reading and handwriting instruction are available for free on the Education Page of my web site, www.donpotter.net. Also visit the new *Samuel L. Blumenfeld Foundation* website: www.slblf.org.

We also recommend books and essays by Geraldine Rodgers, Raymond Laurita, Helen Lowe, Dr. Rudolf Flesch, Dr. Charles Walcutt, Dr. Patrick Groff, Harry Hattyar, and others on my website.

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