

Thoughts on Long Vowels, Short Vowels and the Stevenson Program

As those of you who use the *Stevenson Language Skills Program* know, it begins by teaching the decoding and encoding of long vowel words. Over the years we have seen a few other programs use long vowel words in this manner, but it is certainly unusual for a phonics-based method (as *Stevenson* is) to take this approach. We decided it might be helpful to put some of our thoughts on this matter into writing.

We teach words with long vowel sounds first because author Nancy Stevenson, during her long years working with reading disabled students and young beginners, found that long vowels were easier for her students to discriminate, isolate, retrieve and blend. When she first made the observation (while tutoring in the late 1950's), research on dyslexia was limited. Since then, however, research has determined that very many students who are dyslexic (or otherwise at high risk for reading failure) have difficulty with phonological and/or phonemic processing. In other words, these students are more likely than other pupils to have difficulty discriminating, isolating, retrieving and/or blending the sounds that make up words (phonemes). Recent research has also confirmed the value of explicitly teaching high-risk students to decode (sound out words). Students are more likely to decode accurately if they can **discriminate**, **isolate**, **retrieve** and **blend** letter sounds successfully.

We have searched for, but have not found, research that proves that long vowel sounds are easier to process than short vowel sounds, or vice versa. During the early stages of developing her method, however, Nancy Stevenson made some basic observations that seem to be supported by common sense. These observations, along with many others from her teaching experiences, led her to try a different approach, so we thought we would share these points with you.

One point Nancy noticed is that telling the **difference** between one long vowel sound and another is much easier than telling the difference between one short vowel sound and another. If you say /ā/ as in hay, /ē/ as in heat, /ī/ as in ride, /ō/ as in boat and /ū/ as in cute, you will quickly see that the sounds contrast with each other more than when you say /ă/ as in cat, /ĕ/ as in bed, /ĭ/ as in pin, /ŏ/ as in hot and /ŭ/ as in cut. Since it seems easier to discriminate among long vowel sounds, Nancy thought that students decoding long vowel words would be more likely to use the correct vowel sound.

Another point that Nancy noticed is that her dyslexic students seemed to **isolate** the long vowel sounds more easily than short vowel sounds. She surmised that the reason for this relative ease is the presence of isolated long vowel sounds in our daily speech. We use the long vowel sounds /ī/ and /ū/ constantly because they are the words I and you. We use the exclamatory "Oh?" very frequently, as in "oh no", "oh yeah" or even as a simple question, "Oh?" We even use the long /ā/ and long /ē/ sounds in exclamatory ways, such as Fonzie in *Happy Days* who says, "Aaaaay" or the cartoon characters who see a mouse and say "Eeeeeee." Also, of course, any child who has watched Sesame Street hears long vowel sounds as the names of the letters. In contrast, how often does one hear isolated short vowel sounds in daily conversation? About the only time you are likely to hear the short sounds, /ă/, /ĕ/, /ĭ/, /ŏ/ and /ŭ/, is when someone drinks sour milk, stubs a toe or stumbles over their words. This ability to isolate a sound, like the ability to discriminate one, would seem to make it easier to decode a word containing that sound.

Nancy also observed that **retrieving** long vowel sounds seemed easier for her students than retrieving short vowel sounds. It is not unusual for a young student or one with a reading disability to forget the sound one letter makes in a word while trying to decode the next letter. So using a vowel sound that is easier to recall would seem to facilitate the decoding process. Nancy thinks that long vowel sounds may be easier to remember for the same reason that they seem easier to isolate – their presence in our daily conversations. In general, you can recall something you experience personally better than something that is only explained to you. Although students hear short vowel sounds constantly, they do not experience them in isolation. Of course, Nancy enhances the memorable aspects of the long vowel sounds in her Seven Special Reading steps when she asks students to repeat these sounds “long and loud.” This emphasis on the long vowel sound allows it to resonate and helps the student retrieve it when it is time to connect it to other sounds in the word. It is difficult to give that same kind of enunciation to a short vowel

Very importantly, Nancy also found in her experience that the long vowel sounds were easier for her students to **blend**. It is common for young and disabled readers to have some difficulty blending as they learn to decode. You will hear the student stumble from sound to sound before they learn to blend them smoothly. It is unusual, however, to find a severe blending problem where a student cannot seem to combine a single consonant sound to a single vowel sound without coming up with a third incorrect sound by mistake. Nancy, however, had many such students with severe blending problems referred to her during her years as a tutor and consultant. These students had almost always been taught some other structured multisensory phonics program before seeing her. Even with systematic decoding instruction, however, they could not blend accurately or read fluently. One reason that Nancy devised her Seven Special Reading Steps was to help students blend, but when she worked with these severe cases, she had to break the steps down into even simpler tasks and present these tasks as a separate exercise. She also **had** to use the long vowel sounds. She feels that you simply cannot remediate a severe blending problem by using short vowel words first.

Nancy speculates that the long vowels not only contrast with each other more than the short vowel sounds, but **also contrast with the consonants more**. It is not very natural to make a pure consonant sound that has no vowel sound attached. When we try to isolate a consonant sound like the one for *t*, we tend to add a schwa (/tuh/ = /ə/) or some similar vowel sound, so that instead of saying a pure /t/, we sometimes say /tuh/ (or /teh/ or /tih/, etc.). If you are teaching the blending of a short vowel word, the students’ tendencies to add a schwa (/ə/) to the consonant confuses them, and they frequently reproduce the incorrect sound. Thus most multisensory phonics methods try to insist that students make a pure consonant sound. If, however, students do make a pure consonant sound, they have to stop their breath (e.g., a glottal stop for /g/ or a dental stop for /d/), which, in terms of speech muscle movements, seems to work against the blending process. By using long vowel sounds, Nancy was able to create special, extra blending exercises in which the presence of a schwa on the consonant was not a problem. These exercises make it easier for students with severe blending difficulties to combine a vowel and a consonant sound correctly. After the blending problem is overcome with the long vowel sounds, students can apply their new skill to other vowel sounds with less difficulty.

(It is important to point out that Nancy's special exercises for correcting severe blending problems are not given in the Stevenson Language Skills Program manuals. If you are working with such students, you should call us at 1-800-343-1211 and ask for a consultant. We will arrange a time for you to have a phone conversation for 20 minutes or so to model the exercises.)

So, if Nancy is correct, and processing long vowel sounds really is easier, why do almost all phonics programs start with short vowel sounds? For good reason. English orthography, the fancy word for spelling, is complicated and inconsistent. Compare it to Spanish, for example, where most vowel sounds are only spelled one way. If you notice the words we used as examples of long vowel sounds, hay, heat, ride, boat and cute, they use vowel pairs and silent letters. Think about hay rhyming with they, or consider the homonyms wav and weigh or main and mane. Why isn't great pronounced /greet/ or spelled as mate or grait? How are students supposed to keep it all straight (or steat, strate or streight)?

By contrast, the words we used to illustrate short vowel sounds - cat, bed, hot and cut - all have a wonderful quality. Each has three letters and three sounds, one sound per letter. Students do not have to figure out what to do with all those crazy letter combinations (at least not until they encounter the rest of the English Language). Of course, even with those neat, orderly three letter words, students face other problems such as reading pin for pen or pen for pan. Those problems are related to the phonemic processing difficulties that we mentioned earlier. It is simply difficult to discriminate one vowel sound from another in pin, pen and pan.

Another reason for using short vowel sounds first is that there are more common one-syllable words that contain those sounds than there are common one-syllable words that contain long vowel sounds. (It is not that there are very many more one-syllable short vowel words, but that the one-syllable short vowel words are more commonly used.) Consequently, more beginning reading books have been written using predominantly short vowel (CVC) constructions. Beginning students who start with short vowels will encounter vocabulary that is more familiar, and they will have more reading material to choose from - until, that is, they reach multi-syllable words. In these longer words, long vowel sounds become more prevalent. (Isn't English wonderful?) So students who are dependent on short vowel words are in for a rude awakening when they try to achieve real functional literacy. Real functional literacy requires accurately decoding at a minimum of a sixth grade level, and that means handling a large number of multi-syllable words.

The *Stevenson Program* handles the vowel pairs and silent letters common to long vowel words by using special mnemonic (memory-aiding) clues. Most of you are familiar with our crunchy peanut butter and jelly words and our layer cake words. (If you are not, request a description of the Stevenson Program or visit our web site.) These clues not only make it easy for students to remember what letters make what sounds, they also provide concrete models that help students understand what letters get sounded out in what order. If Nancy had not discovered her special sandwich and cake clues, she probably would not have continued to use long vowel words first. Since the special sandwich and cake clues came easily to both her and her students, however, Nancy was able to develop a word attack strategy that seems to make decoding easier for many high-risk pupils. In addition to using the sandwich and cake clues, Nancy chose not to teach all of the long vowel constructions at once. Some long vowel patterns (e.g., oe in foe) do not occur as often and do not lend themselves to mnemonic clues as well as the sandwich (CVVC) and

cake (CVCV) patterns. Nancy does not introduce some long vowel patterns (such as the ea in great) until students are successfully reading dozens of different vowel patterns (long, short and otherwise) and more than a thousand different words.

If anyone knows of any research specific to the use of short vowel words first versus the use of long vowel words first in the teaching of phonics, we would like to know about it. It would be exciting to see an experiment done with three groups of high risk and/or dyslexic students. One group would receive multisensory phonics instruction with short vowel words first; one group would receive similar instruction with long vowel words first; and a third group would receive multisensory, mnemonic Stevenson instruction with the sandwich and cake long vowel words first. Our guess is that the non-Stevenson phonics instruction using long vowel words first would fare the worst, that similar instruction using short vowel CVC words first would do better, but that the Stevenson approach using long vowel sandwich and cake words would do the best. One would have to devise a special test instrument to evaluate the results, but it would certainly be interesting. Does anyone out there have a spare research grant?

Note by Internet Publisher: Donald L. Potter
January 1, 2006

In December of 2005, I discovered that the *Stevenson Method* taught the long vowels first. This caught my eye because of my long standing theoretical and practical interest in the optimal sequencing of phonics reading instruction. Most of the various phonics programs I have taught begin with the short vowel. The outstanding exception was the old *Open Court* with which I taught my son to read. The *Open Court* method was based on *The Association Method* by Mildred McGinnis, which also starts with the long vowels. My oldest daughter learned with the *Economy Keys to Reading*, which also started with the long vowels (actually all the vowel sounds before any consonants). Recently I learned of *The Weiss Method*, that also starts with the long vowels and has been used for several decades, reporting exceptional results. The concept of beginning with the long vowels is not new, but it is unusual among currently available phonics programs. Both the original *Open Court* and *Economy* are no longer being published. (The new *Open Court* switched to the short-vowel-first approach for inexplicable reasons.) I would like to join the *Stevenson* company in recommending that their proposed study be undertaken so we can better understand the best sequence for optimal reading success. For more information on theoretical, historical, and practical aspects of reading instruction, visit the Education Page of my web site: www.donpotter.net. Another advantage of starting with the long vowels first it that it gives the children more time to master the more complex spellings.

I would like to note that *School Phonics* by Didax uses a long-vowel-first approach based on the Association Method as developed by Priscilla McQueen when she left *Open Court* to publish her own method.

I appreciate Mr. Stevenson sending me this valuable article, "Thoughts on Long Vowels, Short Vowels and the Stevenson Program." The Stevenson Learning System web site is: <http://stevensonsemple.com/>

Published 6/6/09.