



Phonics by the Book

Alphabet books make introducing phonics as easy as A,B,C

Alphabet books are building blocks to reading – often employing phonics and rhyming to teach blossoming students to read.

Nicole Ickes, who will enter her senior year at The University of Findlay this fall, found her interest piqued by an Ohio State Buckeye football alphabet book. At first, the elementary education major wanted to write her own alphabet book as an honors project.

But her mentor, Penny Soboleski, assistant professor of reading, guided her toward a research project, learning the genre and the best attributes of alphabet books.

“I wanted her to discover the answers to her questions, not just hand over the information,” Soboleski said, adding, “If a teacher doesn’t remain a lifelong learner, they can’t model that for their students.”

But she’s a fan of the genre too: “I have alphabet books in every room in my house! Pass the passion!” she said with a smile.

“We decided to research the role of a phonemic (sound) alphabet book and how it could be used in the classroom,” Ickes said. “We came up with a question: What is the place of alphabet books in phonics and emergent literacy?”

An exhaustive literature review followed, and Ickes began developing a list of attributes of good alphabet books. Surprisingly, she learned that alphabet books aren’t just for beginning readers. “Alphabet books can be used all the way through the curriculum, even through 12th grade,” she said. An example is a state books series: An alphabet book offers fairly sophisticated information about each state.

The benefit can vary with the age group, she pointed out. “At lower levels, they’re learning the alphabet. But also, you’re providing other information, so they’re learning on two levels.”

In addition to her research, Ickes has had some firsthand experience, some as a volunteer helping with the HOSTS (Helping One Student to Succeed) program at Jacobs Elementary, where she works with first-grade students on pre-literacy and learning success skills.

“We look at pictures and predict what will happen, then read it. After we read it, they tell me what they think the book was about,” Ickes said. “It’s a mere 30 minutes once a week, but you can see them grow.”

She likes the fact that the curriculum itself stresses hands-on experience early. “I was out in the classroom my freshman year,” and during fall semester 2006, spent time in Pickett Elementary School in Toledo — fulfilling national accreditation standards that call for placement in classrooms with diversity in the student population.

“It was an awesome experience,” she



said, adding how much she appreciates field placement and has already learned that “every day in the classroom is never going to be the same. The lesson you spent an hour on is probably going to change, and you have to modify your curriculum, get through the day and go with the flow.”

An elementary education major who is pursuing a double minor in music, both voice and clarinet, Ickes is also seeking a reading endorsement, which will allow her to teach as a reading specialist.

The soon-to-be teacher can see herself using what she has learned in the near future.

“I would love to teach in the classroom. My goal right now is second grade, but I can see myself going into a reading program,” Ickes said. “I want to have alphabet books that can enhance my lessons in the classroom — use them in my lessons.”

So — through her research, has she found the alphabet book that she’s going to use as a teacher? No, she said. “There isn’t that ideal alphabet book out there. There are good ones, but nothing that is perfect,” Ickes said.

That’s her next project.

Evaluating Non-Fiction Books on the Five As:

1. Authority of the author
2. Accuracy of text content
3. Appropriateness of the book for children
4. Literary artistry
5. Appearance of the book

Moss, B. (1995). "Using Children's Nonfiction Tradebooks as Read-Alouds." p. 123.