

Xtreme Reading and Writing

Education in Survival Mode

By

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“NEW” EMPHASIS NEEDED IN EDUCATION

Reading, ‘Riting and ‘Rithmetic

Why am I calling this “new”? The overriding philosophy in education for the past century has been to proclaim the priority of reading, writing and arithmetic—shortened to “the three R’s” because of our familiarity with the philosophy.

First look at the problem of reading, writing—and yes, spelling.

In 1982, John Culkin, a Harvard educated former Jesuit, wrote in the August issue of Science Digest that “25 million adults in our nation are functionally illiterate.”

Fast-forward just ten years, to 1992. The Educational Testing Service, on behalf of the U.S. Department of Education, conducted the National Adult Literacy Survey (NALS), a comprehensive study of adult literacy. The NALS concluded that an estimated 40 to 44 million Americans were functionally illiterate. At the time, those numbers represented 46 to 51 percent of our population. How can we hope to compete on a global scale if half our population cannot read and understand a traffic ticket, a mortgage, a job application or an instruction booklet?

John Culkin again, from the same Science Digest article: “According to one study, the average child entering first grade has a recognition vocabulary of 8,000 words (up 7,000 from the turn of the century). But in their introduction to reading and writing, first-graders learn to read only 400 of these words, and not the most exciting 400, either. When fast-moving kids with short attention spans spend a whole year learning 5 percent of their spoken vocabulary, you have disaffected students and shrinking reading scores.”

Children today, it is estimated, enter first grade with a spoken vocabulary of 8,000 to 12,000 words. Using any other resource—Pitman ITA, Phonics Game, Fry List, Reading Recovery or anything else—a first grader is only expected to recognize at the most 250 words, fewer than in 1982. Now they are expected to learn only 2 to 3 percent of their spoken vocabulary. It’s getting worse, not better.

The New York Times, reporting on the 1993 NALS figures, estimated that businesses were losing \$25 billion to \$30 billion per year from lost time accidents and errors that could be traced to our literacy problem.

“In 1999, recognizing ‘a wide gap between the highest and lowest levels of reading achievement’ the Government set up a Literacy Taskforce to help it achieve its goal that ‘by 2005, every child turning nine will be able to read, write, and do maths for success’. 2005 has come and gone. In spite of the taskforce’s recommendations on teaching and resources (and more recent ones in a Select Committee report) there is no evidence that every nine-year-old is now

'reading for success'. Italian and Finnish seven-year-olds can do so. They have sensible spelling.' *

While America gives lip service to raising our quality of education, the adult illiteracy rate continues to rise. The United States is freefalling from its position of economic leadership and there is no parachute. Our schools struggle to qualify for funding under the “No Child Left Behind” (NCLB) Act. Many of them were in danger of losing federal money, causing the new leadership to “dummy down” the NCLB requirements.

2/3's of the words in written communication consist of 300 high frequency words. Most of what can be said can be said using only 800 words. 90% of the words in written communication consist of 2000 high frequency words. 99% of written communication uses only 5000 words.

Compare this to a third grader's reading ability today:

Grade level - Reading Level and the number of memorized sight-words.

Gr	Read	Write
<i>K</i>	<i>58</i>	<i>0</i>
<i>1</i>	<i>280</i>	<i>0</i>
<i>2</i>	<i>440</i>	<i>280</i>
<i>3</i>	<i>750</i>	<i>440</i>
<i>4</i>	<i>860</i>	<i>750</i>
<i>5</i>	<i>930</i>	<i>860</i>

A 3rd grade reading level means that you can read about 750 sight words. Children can learn about 250 sight-words per year. The progress could continue but usually is not supported after the 3rd grade. †

Our bulging prisons have by far the greatest percentage of functional illiterates, along with the corresponding low self-esteem illiteracy fosters. An ever-greater percentage of inmates cannot read. Instead of teaching students to read, write and handle basic math first, public schools implement expensive, slick structured programs. Students who fail to excel are called “retarded” and placed in special classes. At the other end of the educational spectrum, college freshmen are often required to take remedial English courses before they can pass a basic writing course. Something is seriously wrong with this picture.

If the businesses that are losing \$25 billion annually would invest 1/10 of 1% of that loss and unite with community and schools (public, private and home) to provide the resources recommended here—proven to work—the current downward spiral of our

* Bett, Steve, message #1475 posted at Yahoo! Unifon Group, October 27, 2006. Dr. Bett is the moderator of the Unifon group.

† Bett, Steve, message #1502 posted at Yahoo! Unifon Group, December 10, 2006.

educational system could be reversed. Our children deserve a chance to succeed, to compete, and to lead productive lives. The government, however well meaning, and despite its legislation and funding policies, has proved to be impotent in dealing with our educational crisis. If you want your business to survive, if you believe our children are our most valuable resource, or if you are a concerned parent, you need to communicate with others in your community to discuss the problem and find a solution.

WHY UNIFON?

FROM OUR VANTAGE POINT we are able to look back upon the years that Unifon was used in various school systems. Dr. Margaret S. Ratz was a visionary, working with a new teaching tool. With the passage of time, we can form a more objective opinion, based on the evidence from the Unifon projects.

The designer of the Unifon alphabet, Chicago economist Dr. John R. Malone, appropriately called Margaret Ratz his "apostle." More than any other person, Dr. Ratz was responsible for the consistent success of Unifon in every school system where it was taught, from before 1960 through her retirement years in the mid 1970s.

Another acquaintance of Mr. Malone's was a producer for the local ABC TV affiliate in Chicago. In 1960 he was assigned the task of producing a summer show about what was happening in Chicago. Having heard of the success of Dr. Ratz at Principia College, he and Mr. Malone devised a bold and daring experiment.

Dr. Ratz was put on the payroll of ABC TV in Chicago for three months during the summer of 1960. In front of live cameras, she would teach four pre-school children to read. Three of the children were entering first grade. The fourth was entering kindergarten. None of them could read when they began the program. Dr. Ratz proposed to teach for one hour a day for 17 days—as Mr. Malone describes it, “17 hours with cookies and milk.” After only 17 hours of instruction, on live TV, all four children could read third, fourth or fifth grade books in traditional spelling.

Based on the success of her summer TV program, Dr. Ratz and John Malone were able to acquire grants from Ford Foundation, Western Publishing Company, Mott Foundation, Lilly Foundation and the federal government, among others. The funds were used to conduct Unifon projects in Indianapolis and Hammond, Indiana, in New Orleans, Louisiana, in Washington, DC, and at several locations in the Chicago area.

The Hammond project was funded for a three-year period by a Title III grant under the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act. Dr. Ratz spent the first year (1972) of the Hammond project training and preparing teachers in the effective use of Unifon, and making the teaching materials for the classrooms. (In the age before home computers, everything had to be done by hand.) In the second year, seven classrooms in three elementary schools started using Unifon to teach first graders to read. By March, most of the children in the room were reading regular books on their own. The third year the Hammond schools added another eight classrooms to the Unifon project.

Comments from teachers involved in the Hammond project were uniformly positive. Children could write any word they could say. Some children would make the transition to traditional spelling before Thanksgiving. Children didn't feel frustrated. They were enthusiastic, and so were the teachers. What Dr. Ratz brought to this project and others was the fact that Unifon could be taught by anybody with the proper preparation.

The 17 hours with cookies and milk, aired on ABC Chicago in 1960, marked the beginning of the Unifon phenomenon. The producer of that program later moved to CBS, where he produced another program, "The Day They Changed the Alphabet," a portion of which aired as a featured segment on the Charles Kuralt program "On the Road," in 1973.

Enter John Culkin. Culkin, a former Jesuit priest with a Harvard PhD in education and reading, was then a professor at the New School in New York City. One day a student asked him, "John, have you seen 'The Day They Changed the Alphabet?'"

Dr. Culkin said, "No." In 1973, you could not run out and get a copy at your local video store, but Dr. Culkin quickly located a copy of that program. After viewing it, his response was, "Why haven't I heard of this?" A few days later he located John Malone's phone number and called him. "I've seen this program," he explained. "Have you got any classes around Chicago?"

Malone told him, "I know one we've got in town. The others are out of town. There's a sprinkling around, but this one is pretty good."

The Howalton Day School was located in inner city Chicago, and met in a local Methodist Church. In 1973 Unifon arrived at the Howalton Day School. Dr. Ratz called Ms. Elisabeth Jones out of retirement to teach Unifon classes for three years. The resources were severely limited, but together Ms. Jones and Dr. Ratz prepared the teaching materials. The challenge they had to overcome at Howalton was the economic, environmental and cultural barriers that discouraged African Americans from developing self-esteem.

It was just before Christmas vacation when Dr. Culkin called Mr. Malone and asked to see Unifon in action. Culkin arranged to come to Chicago in January, 1974, and Malone set up a visit to the Howalton school. Dr. Ratz was invited, but she couldn't be there. John Culkin had asked to see Unifon in action. Malone apologized, saying that the children had already abandoned it.

Dr. Culkin asked the teacher, Ms. Elisabeth Jones, if one of her students could read something for him. Ms. Jones said "Who wants to read for Dr. Culkin?" All the hands went up.

Culkin chose a little girl, and asked, "Do you want to pick your book?"

The child said, "Oh, any one of them."

Mr. Malone relates that the girl could read so well that John Culkin stood with his mouth open in amazement. Before that day was over, most of the students had read something for Dr. Culkin. There were some 100 books to choose from, in traditional spelling. Child after child encountered complex words without stumbling. The Howalton Day School

became the inspiration for Dr. Culkin to author more than 150 articles about Unifon for various publications. If Dr. Ratz was the primary Unifon apostle, John Culkin became its chief evangelist. On July 20, 1977, Dr. Culkin penned this for The New York Times.

“I recently visited the Howalton Day School in Chicago.... For the last three years, the first graders achieved the highest reading scores of all first grade students in the greater Chicago area, urban and suburban, public and private.

“The students, taking the standard Stanford reading tests using the traditional alphabet, scored at well beyond the third grade level. Some had read as many as 20 books. Mr. Malone supplied the alphabet; Dr. Margaret Ratz provided the pedagogy and training; Mrs. Elizabeth Jones did the teaching.

“Students had mastered the unifon system by October, were reading and writing by December and had transferred these skills to conventional English by April. Similar results have occurred with extensive experiments involving unifon and the Initial Teaching Alphabet with thousands of students. It works because the children's first experience with print is positive. They become readers and writers simultaneously. They work with their own lively words and they are reading from the first day of the school year. The phonetic alphabet makes sense to the children of the media age.”

In a 1982 article for Science Digest, after the results were tabulated, Culkin was able to add this statistical footnote: “At the private Howalton School in Chicago, first graders who learned to read with the Unifon alphabet tested at the 3.8 grade level.”

The efforts of John Culkin resulted in Unifon making some inroads to commercial applications which, at the time, were very expensive. Western Publishing Company had invested over \$1,000,000 in printed Unifon resources to be used in classroom instruction. Nu-Vue-Cue, a school for the deaf, implemented Unifon successfully. Smith Corona made Unifon typewriters. IBM made Unifon typing balls for their Selectric Typewriters. Apple Computer developed the fonts and a keyboard layout for four American Indian tribes that used Unifon to memorialize their languages.

According to Science Digest, the two Unifon articles that John Culkin wrote for them elicited more reader response than any others they had ever published. By his untimely death in 1994, John Culkin had made Unifon known well enough that The New York Times had developed a Unifon font and was planning to feature a Unifon page in that newspaper.

Today, technologies have merged, at the dawn of the information age, so that all these resources may be duplicated and implemented in a short time and without massive funding.

We know that from 1974 until her retirement, Dr Ratz continued to instruct teachers and students in Unifon. Recently we discovered that even in her retirement years Dr. Ratz continued to tutor students. One of them sent an e-mail to the Unifon web site at

www.unifon.org. Her poignant testimony indicates that Dr. Ratz continued to achieve superb results.

“Dr. Ratz was the person that turned my life around. My mother was told that I was ‘retarded’ and that I would never learn to read. My mom found Dr. Ratz. We were living in Venice, FL at the time and would drive to Sarasota every Saturday. I would have to check with my mom to see how long I was tutored by Dr. Ratz. I do know that because of the program I returned to school after the summer reading at a 5th grade level at the beginning of 2nd grade.

“I am now a teacher. ...This is the third year teaching the program. It is wonderful to see the growth my students make.”

“...If she is still alive, I would love to thank her for the impact she made in my life.”

Darellee Regnier

Unifon drifted into undeserved oblivion after the untimely death of John Culkin in 1994. What has happened to reading instruction in the years since then? The Unifon and ITA projects have been replaced by such commercial enterprises as the Phonics Game, Reading Readiness, Success for All Foundation and other slick, expensive, pre-packaged curricula. Have they done well? Consider the evidence.

*There is a "tangled" web between outcome based education, federal initiatives like school-to-work, Goals 2000, national testing, and state level initiatives which have openly embraced the ideas of Marc Tucker's NCEE, Alliance for Restructuring Education, and other spin-offs. California's disasters in reading, math, and assessment proves that education reform movements are the most harmful thing to happen to education in the 20th century, yet states like Washington remain intent on following in their footsteps because of the political popularity of "reform". These initiatives don't come from teachers, or experts in math or english [sic.], and they are not demanded by parents. They are driven by theories created by psychologists and economists who care more about how students feel about "learning" than whether or not they can do math or read. They have absolutely no research that any of this does any good, yet they attack people like Thaddeus Lott who use basics to make inner city kids perform like those in affluent suburbs. Socialism was the attempt to create equal economic outcomes for all, but not even China and Russia were foolish enough to attempt to promise that all students would perform to the highest standards, indeed they have clung to traditional education which often outperforms education systems in more economically "advanced" nations.**

Children today enter first grade with a spoken vocabulary of 8,000 to 12,000 words. Using any other resource—Pitman ITA, Phonics Game, Fry List, Reading Recovery or anything else—a first grader is still only expected to recognize at the most 250 words.

* Hu, Arthur, article posted at <http://www.arthurhu.com/index/edreform.htm>. For more information and complete articles, please contact him: arthurhu@comcast.net.

The statistics illustrate the deplorable results of the commercial applications: half the population of the United States is still functionally illiterate.

Unifon, taught for three months in kindergarten or first grade, could turn these statistics around. When children learn first with Unifon, they can write any word they can say in less than three months. When they begin the transition to traditional spelling, they discover that 23 of the 26 letters are already familiar to them!

The vision of John Malone and John Culkin, and the dedicated efforts of teachers like Dr. Margaret Ratz and Elizabeth Jones all deserve more than this legacy of apathy. These pioneers saw the potential of Unifon and found a way to make it a reality. The present crisis in education demands no less from us.

Unifon is a phonemic alphabet. Many countries have adopted phonemic or phonetic alphabets to present their written language. Students in those countries typically learn to read in three months. There is no need for spelling classes in Spain, for instance, because words are spelled in sound signs, each symbol consistently representing the same speech sound. In Spain, Italy, Finland and dozens of other countries, children learn to read and write their native language in three months of first grade.

Children who learn to read early have a deeper sense of self-worth that matures with them into competitive endeavors in high school, throughout college and their work environment. Children who can read and write early can spend more time with math, science, history, social studies and the humanities. They retain for life their joy of learning, whatever the discipline. Unifon students that we have been able to track typically have graduated two years ahead of their peers and have successful, rewarding careers.

It is time to reconsider Unifon. Based on its past evidence, Unifon remains the only *proven* reading accelerator. It could enable a troubled school system qualify for federal money. It will improve the self-esteem and confidence of our children. It offers the promise to help reduce our prison population. It may indeed be the best hope for our children to compete in the mushrooming global economy.

LEARN UNIFON FIRST

Dr. Margaret S. Ratz began her 1966 book about teaching Unifon with these words:

“Welcome to the land of Unifon. It is, we think, a land full of promise, where the child discovers that he wants to read and he can. ... You will find in Unifon a simple and consistent learning tool to introduce the child to reading.

*“This is individualized teaching. ... We have set down for you certain guideposts, to give you a bit of security in those first days of experimentation... You’re not even sure of your own ability to function well in Unifon, and here you are teaching it to little, wide-eyed children.”**

Do not fear. Unifon is easy to learn. Here’s why:

Unifon is essentially phonetic. Many other countries have phonetic (or nearly phonetic) alphabets. In each of these countries, young children learn how to read in three months or less. In some countries, the sound-to-symbol ratio is so good that there is no need for spelling classes. There, and in Unifon, you write the sounds, you read the sounds that are written, and there are no other rules to confuse you (or your students.)

Unifon keeps 23 of the standard letters of the English alphabet and uses them in familiar ways. When your child switches to traditional spelling, he will know all but three of the letters, and the most common way they are used. You, of course, already know more than half of the 40-character Unifon alphabet, so learning Unifon will be easy for you. The alphabet thus meets us halfway.

Vowel groups in Unifon have shapes that are similar to the familiar letters. For instance, O, Ω, Ø, Ɔ and Ɔ represent the five “O” sounds. So while there are several sounds available for each vowel, and each sound now has its own unique symbol, each vowel group is easy to identify. Within those 16 vowel symbols of Unifon, there remain only five primary shapes, A, E, I, O and U.

In this section of the book we will first introduce the alphabet to you. Then we will discuss various educational resources developed by Dr. Ratz and Ms. Elisabeth Jones, the two most creative teachers of Unifon. What you will not get—because each child learns at a different pace—is a series of lesson plans.

The great challenge, as well as the great joy, is to let the children’s environment determine which words they learn next, which stories they will write or read next, and when they will make the transition to traditional English spelling. To provide you with such lesson plans would defeat the discovery process so vital to the Unifon experience.

* Unifon: A Design for Teaching Reading, by Margaret S. Ratz, PhD. Western Publishing Company, 1966, p. 10.

Instead, we will provide you with tools to help you prepare the lesson plans appropriate for your classes.

In the years when Unifon was first being used, our country encountered monumental social issues such as the Korean Conflict, the Cold War, the Viet Nam War, the assassination of the Kennedy brothers and Dr. Martin Luther King, the struggle for racial equality and fairness, and many more. Most people have given little notice to some of the changes that took place in the school systems during and since that time. The environment in every public school in the United States, however, was consistent in that every early reader had stories about white, middle class children and their typical suburban environment. Sometimes the setting would move to the country farm. Never were there any stories about inner city life or children of any minority ethnic group.

Into that hostile environment, as exemplified by the experience at the Howalton Day School, Dr. Margaret Ratz called Ms. Elizabeth Jones out of retirement to teach classes in Unifon. It is very unfortunate that we know so little about Ms. Jones. Dr. Ratz, however, exposed her educational philosophy in a very practical way that truly benefited the students at the African American inner city school of Chicago, Illinois. Today we know and applaud the results of that philosophy; in 1974 it represented the leading edge of the educational movement to include all ethnic groups into the American educational system as persons of equal worth and ability and, of course, equal civil rights.

When you read below about what Dr. Ratz called Buildabooks, please remember the social issues of the era in which Unifon was taught, the open philosophy of Dr. Ratz, and what it meant for the children who created these little gems. The Buildabook concept, which cannot become a reality until children can write, was unique to first graders because of Unifon. Students in Unifon classes wrote their own stories, about their own life experiences, wherever they lived. For the person of African, Italian or Hispanic background, the Buildabooks presented an opportunity for something vital to emerge from the classroom: each child could take a sense of pride in who he was, in where he lived, about the community in which he lived, about his friends and the games they played. By writing about their own experiences and sharing their stories among the rest of their class, each of these children understood that they were somebody worth knowing. Wow, that is really an important concept to grasp. For those who were not WASPs, it was an elusive concept until Unifon brought a new reality to them.

Perhaps in the long run, the hope and self-respect that Unifon brought to the classroom was equal in importance to the improvement in reading and writing. Certainly Unifon classes contributed to a child's well-being beyond the classroom. The same was said of the Trachtenberg system of mathematics. Early success, less trauma to the learning process, and a rising self-esteem seemed to be the hallmarks of such extreme education. Indeed, it is the prime requirement for inclusion in the Xtreme Ed category.

Dr. Ratz wrote, “Unifon will make of you a freer, more creative teacher. As such, you will find the whole process of teaching beginning reading brightened for you, as well as for your class.”* Time after time she witnessed the proof of her statement.

Whether you’re a musician, an athlete, or a teacher, muscle tension destroys performance and causes fatigue. You must learn to relax and enjoy both Unifon and the children under your care. They will amaze and delight you with their comprehension of Unifon, their zeal to read and write, the speed with which they abandon Unifon for traditional spelling, and above all the sense of accomplishment and self-worth they feel in the process.

A reminder: Dr. Ratz made her reputation by teaching 5-year-old children to read, write, and make the transition to traditional spelling, all in front of a TV camera, and all in “17 hours with cookies and milk.” Tell yourself: if a child can learn this in a few hours, I can learn it too. My personal testimony: after 15 minutes with Unifon I could write words if I kept the alphabet and mnemonics next to me. After about three or four hours I only needed the alphabet chart once in a while.

Designer of the Unifon alphabet, Chicago economist John R. Malone, wrote, “...The orthography for a language has one powerful and overriding need, that of isomorphism. In classic concept, the alphabet of a language should be such that there is one unique symbol for each phoneme, and one unique phoneme for each symbol; this quality is the means by which a language is made readily accessible....”† If that seems to be a mouthful, here is the bottom line: the fastest way to learn to learn any language is for that language to have only one symbol for each sound. Indeed, that is the meaning of the word Unifon, “single sound.”

“The ITA (Initial Teaching Alphabet) teachers in the 1960's tended to tell the parents they could not tutor their kids in the ITA and they should not expose them to traditional text. The lack of ITA understanding eventually led to a backlash against the new program. A vocal 5% of the parents did not support the decision of the school to use the ITA.

“John Malone taught Unifon to parents in a 2 hour session. At the end of the session, all the adults could transcribe English text into Unifon. This is one of the factors that made Unifon much more successful than the IPA. Parents could tutor their children in Unifon.”‡

How did John Malone select the particular symbols that we find in Unifon today? He did what is any good economist should do. He selected the most economical way to preserve speech in writing. That meant selecting one letter for each phoneme in English. His research included the School of Broadcast in Council Bluffs, Iowa; the Thorndike-Barnhart dictionary that followed that school’s pronunciation guide; and the oscilloscopes at Bell Laboratories, whereby speech could be broken down into its sound components, as well as writings of spelling reformers Benjamin Franklin, Mark Twain, President

* Ibid, p. 10.

† John R. Malone, “The Larger Aspects of Spelling Reform,” *Elementary English* (May, 1962), p. 435.

‡ Steve Bett, PhD, message #1477, November 14, 2006, commentary posted at the Yahoo! Unifon group.

Theodore Roosevelt, George Bernard Shaw, and others. They had all settled on a set of 40 sounds that comprised the English language.

The most economical way to reproduce 40 sounds in print would be to use one symbol for each sound. Since the English language has only 26 letters, that would be impossible without adding new letters. In addition, there were many inconsistencies with the spelling that made it difficult for all but a few people to feel comfortable writing in their mother tongue.

Another goal for John Malone was to maintain as much as possible of the existing alphabet. Unifon retains 23 of the 26 letters and uses them in familiar ways. People who already read can learn to read in Unifon quickly. People who are learning to read will have only one way to spell a sound instead of eight or more. New readers will make the transition to traditional spelling without trauma when they suddenly discover that they can read 23 of the letters already.

Mr. Malone tells the story of the first Unifon student—his son, Will Malone, age five. Home sick from kindergarten one day, Will complained to his father that he had been going to school for weeks and still could not read. John presented Unifon to Will. In one afternoon Will Malone learned the “code,” as his father called it. Within days, Will then taught his “code” to the rest of his kindergarten class and they were all writing—in Unifon—any word they could say. A five-year-old boy thus became the second teacher of Unifon. How hard can it be?

The Unifon phenomenon had begun. Prompted by Will’s interest and that of his classmates, John Malone learned that the time to act was upon the child’s initial desire to read, and that he was able to provide the most efficient means to accomplish that goal.

Dr. Margaret Ratz particularly appreciated the fact that vowel sounds are grouped in such a way that they retain their basic shape, yet there is a special symbol for each vowel sound. “This helps place vowel behavior in the very center of language instruction, where we feel it belongs.”*

Unifon uses only capital letters. If we have upper case and lower case letter for the same sound, there are two symbols for each sound. Because English consists of upper and lower case letters, children must learn 52 letters instead of 26. Unifon thus uses fewer letters and each letter is used in a uniform way.

Children learn early that capital letters are used to emphasize important information on traffic signs, billboards, television commercials and labels. They can begin to make the transition to traditional spelling as soon as they learn the upper case letters of the alphabet, reading such signs and messages.

* Ratz, op. cit., p. 14.

The Unifon Sound-signs

A

AT

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BOW

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ZEBRA

To review before going forward: Unifon represents spoken English in the most efficient manner—one symbol for each of the 40 sounds. It uses only capital letters because lower case letters defeat the purpose of one symbol for one sound. It retains 23 of the familiar letters of the alphabet. It retains basic shapes for vowel groups, yet each vowel has a private symbol. Perhaps most important, it reduces spelling problems from nearly 800 to zero, giving the child a chance to be successful and feel confident about reading before he is confronted with those 800 spelling inconsistencies.

John Malone organized his Unifon alphabet as follows.*

1. The basic common Latin-English sound representations are used for: B, D, F, G, H, K, L, M, N, P, R, S, T, V, W, Z.
2. Some sounds have two or more letters. For instance, the same “hiss” sound is spelled with the letters S (sand), C (cell, race), Z (pretzel), PS (psalm), and ST (listen), among others. Unifon consistently uses the single letter S to represent that sound, thus: SAND, SEL, RAS, PRETSUL, SAM, LISUN.

Some letters have two sounds. C may be the “S” sound of *cell* or the hard “k” sound of *cat*. Since both of those letters are already used, C is no longer needed. G may be soft (gem) or hard (goat). Unifon retains the hard G, but uses J for its soft sound thus: JEM, GQT.

Y is used only for its consonant sound (yet). It is not needed for vowel sounds, thus: YET (yet), YUŃ (young), but DΔ (day), KΞ (key), BΘ (boy), or ΞZI (easy).

3. The six consonant sounds most often spelled with two symbols (digraphs) in English are as follows:
 - i. Ç (ch) Ń (ng) Š (sh)
 - ii. Ħ (th voiced) Ʀ (th voiceless) Σ (zh)
4. The 16 vowel sounds of English are each assigned a specific symbol. The five short Latin vowels are given their standard symbols, but the top and bottom of the I is extended to bring this character nearer in width to the others.

A – bat	E – get	I – pit
O – pot	U – but	

Their long sounds retain the basic shape, but with a horizontal line added as a helpful memory device:

Δ – gate	Ξ – feet	± – pie
Q – toe	Ū – flute	

* Malone, op. cit., p. 444.

In addition, there are some vowel diphthongs and related sounds which require memory ties:

Λ – awe	℞ – her	⊖ – look
⊖ – how	⊖ – boy	⊍ – use

Viewed from a different perspective, here are the five vowel families.

A (At)	Δ (Ate)	Λ (All)		
E (Hen)	℞ (He)	℞ (Her)		
I (Bit)	± (Bite)			
O (Lot)	⊖ (Old)	⊖ (Look)	⊖ (Out)	⊖ (Boy)
U (Up)	⊍ (Due)	⊍ (Use)		

To help you to write or type in Unifon, download some resources from the Unifon web site. There is a set of four fonts that you can download and use to type directly in Unifon. The best font for teaching is Unifon F 2005. That is the Unifon font used in this book.

<http://www.unifon.org/unifon%20characters.htm>

You will also need a keyboard map to show you where the characters are located. The following chart may be printed out and taped near your keyboard for reference. Notice that the familiar characters remain at the familiar locations (except for C and Q.)

<http://www.unifon.org/UFEdRes/Unifon%20keyboard.pdf>

The letters X, C and Q are not used in Unifon, but they appear on the keyboard for backward compatibility. If you ever need them for proper names, or just for typing in both traditional English and Unifon, you don't need to switch from one font to another to accomplish that.

Practice writing these words:

soft, see, sit, cent, simple, cylinder, jaw, gem, go, get, gather.
SAFT, SĚ, SIT, SENT, SIMPUL, SILUNDR, JΛ, JEM, GQ, GET, GAĦR.

Drill on these words:

here, there, far, for, store, learn, weather, whether.
HIR, ĦER, FOR, FAR, STAR, LRN, WEĦR, HWEĦR.

Remember, all syllables must have a vowel, even a final "le." Thus, little = LITUL.

Study the following word lists. There are three lists: one each for words with one, two and three phonemes (sound signs). You will refer to these lists (and others) when you plan your lessons.

<http://www.unifon.org/UFEdRes/word%20lists/Words%20with%20one%20phoneme.pdf>

<http://www.unifon.org/UFEdRes/word%20lists/Words%20with%202%20phonemes.pdf>

<http://www.unifon.org/UFEdRes/word%20lists/Words%20with%203%20phonemes.pdf>

Study the Fry List—1,000 words that Dr. Fry thinks children should recognize on sight after (gasp!) four years. You should be familiar with this list and know which words are found there. <http://www.unifon.org/UFEdRes/Fry%20Unifon%20Order.pdf>

While you are learning the alphabet, refer to the Unifon Alphabet Chart. You may download and print it out from the following page at the Unifon web site: <http://www.unifon.org/images/UNIFON%20Eye%20Chart.pdf>. The chart includes mnemonics to help you remember which sounds are being used.

We recommend that you begin your Treasure Chest (described later) as you learn the alphabet. Find each of these items and place them in a box or Treasure Chest. Hold one up in the classroom when you introduce the corresponding new letter-sound or when you review it. You will, of course, need to settle for a photograph of the ocean, but most of the other items can be found in toy sections of stores near your home.

If you have access to a Thorndike-Barnhart Junior Dictionary (Sixth Edition), you may use that pronunciation guide. Unifon was keyed to that dictionary. The word lists provided here are also keyed to that guide. CAUTION: the on-line interactive resources (Dictionary and Translator) are based on the CMU on-line dictionary pronunciation guide and do not always match Thorndike-Barnhart. They are meant only to serve as an introduction to Unifon for visitors, not as a viable teaching resource.

Read some of the literature. In a short time you will become comfortable reading Unifon. Begin with *A Child's Garden of Verse*, by Robert Louis Stevenson. Download it at: <http://www.unifon.org/A%20Child's%20Garden%20of%20Verses.pdf>

Alice in Wonderland, by Louis Carroll, was converted to Unifon before the latest character change was authorized by Dr. Malone, in 2006. The digraph \mathfrak{R} will appear as two characters ($\exists\mathfrak{R}$) in *Alice*. This should not present a problem for you. <http://66.41.57.23/Alice%20in%20Wonderland.pdf>

Unifon tells a child, “Here are the symbols. There is one for each sound you speak. When you learn them, you can write any word you can say. Spell the words exactly like they sound to you.”

We read books so we can understand what they mean. We write for others to understand what we mean. Thus the *meaning* of words is the most important thing to grasp. Unifon makes it possible sooner. In the process it gives the child a sense of self-esteem through success.

TOOLS YOU MAY USE

Some of the following items were created and used successfully by Dr. Margaret Ratz in the Unifon projects she led. They were funded by grants from, among others, Ford Foundation, Lilly Foundation and Western Publishing Company, which also published the books and materials for Unifon. At the time these resources were very expensive and often time-consuming to create.

Other items we recommend below were used by Dr. Ratz and other teachers after Dr. Ratz' book was published in 1966. The remaining items offered have been produced since 2004, as the www.unifon.org web site has begun to replace or improve resources missing since funding ended and Dr. Ratz retired. When we know it, proper credit is given for the introduction of the resources.

Our recommendation is to keep the process as simple as possible. John Malone has suggested that all these materials are not necessary. They are only suggestions. Choose those that work for you, and use no more than you need. The objective is to get children to write the words they can say, and to love to read books. Whatever gets in the way of that objective should be discarded or ignored.

UNIFON SYMBOL-SOUND CARDS

Each card has a large Unifon symbol on one side. On the other side is a smaller letter and a picture mnemonic to help the child remember the sound represented by that symbol. In 1966, classroom sets of these cards were very expensive to print. The picture was in black and white and the child was supposed to color it. In 2006, Scott White and his wife, Kristy, produced such cards based on the Alphabet Chart mentioned above, with colorful pictures. You may download one set and print out cards of each letter as you need it, for pennies. Visit the web page at <http://www.unifon.org/UNIFON%20Sound%20Cards.pdf> for this valuable resource.

Each child collects one letter card when that letter is introduced. The child learns to finger trace the shape of the letter and places the card in a small ring binder for reference as needed. In addition to the cards, you will need a ring binder for each student to file them.

UNIFON TOUCH-AND-FEEL CARDS

These cards were the same size as the Symbol-Sound cards above, with a large textured letter on one side and the same picture mnemonic on the back. We cannot reproduce these, but you may do so if you wish. Use the Symbol-Sound card above and glue your own texture over the large letter, in the same color. Different textures for vowels and

consonants would help to reinforce the color-coding. The purpose is to encourage children to trace the letter.

UNIFON SYMBOL-LEARNING SLATES

Dr. Ratz suggested a “magic” slate writing board with sticker-pieces showing the symbols and mnemonics. The stickers would permit children to trace each letter as it was introduced, to practice drawing the letter. The magic part was to raise the sticky letter to see how well the drawing was done—immediate feedback for the student—and then to erase the drawing and do it again and again.

This is another item we cannot reproduce. You may wish to create something that will work for you, using an erasable drawing board of your choice. You will need to make your own stencil guides for drawing if you choose this resource.

UNIFON FLASH CARDS

The value of flash cards has by now been well established. Everybody uses them, and so will you. The same cards used for the Sound-Symbol sets, by Scott and Kristy White, are used as flash cards. In this case, the student does not get one of his own. You will probably choose to cut and paste each symbol to a sturdier cardboard card.

Symbols are blue for consonants and red for vowels. On the reverse side are the mnemonics that use the sounds that the symbols represent. Whatever learning games you now do with flash cards can be adapted to these cards.

UNIFON SYMBOL CLASSROOM DISPLAY CARDS

These cards are large, to display in the front of the classroom as each symbol is introduced. Scott and Kristy White have again adapted the Alphabet Chart to produce these. Use them for word building or ask children to match their Symbol-Sound Cards to a Display Card.

UNIFON PICTURE-SOUND CLASSROOM DISPLAY CARDS

These cards were produced in full color for Dr. Ratz’ classes. Use the resource above.

UNIFON SYMBOL PUZZLES AND SOUND-SYMBOL PUZZLES.

This is another resource we have not produced from 1966. If you wish, you may create such puzzles out of the resources provided by Scott and Kristy.

These were two-piece puzzles, one puzzle for each symbol. Each symbol was different, so that all 40 would fit together only one way. If you make your own sets—and you will need several—be sure to adhere to this requirement.

LABELS IN UNIFON

Label in Unifon for everything in the classroom. This resource will give you a wonderful opportunity to use your new Unifon typing skills. (Excuse me, we don't "type" anymore; we "keyboard." You can try out your Unifon keyboarding skills.) You have downloaded one or more Unifon fonts; you have downloaded the Unifon Keyboard display and you have taped it near the computer keyboard. The other resource you will need is the software and printer paper to produce mailing labels. Choose the label size you prefer for your class.

Find the longest Unifon word you will include in your labels. From the list below, it would be **DIKŞUNERI**. Select the largest size of the Unifon font that will fill one label with that word. Use the same size for all the labels. Then simply type into each label the name of one item. For items like chair and pencil, you may want to make a full page of the item to save paper.

Change the font to Ariel. Following the same sequence, prepare labels for the same items in traditional spelling. For this second phase, you have choices to make. If you use larger labels, you can fill each label with one word in upper case and one word in lower case. If you prefer, you could produce two more sets of labels, one with all the words in upper case and one with words in lower case.

Do you know where the following labels would belong?

DAR MAP ŒER DESK GLOB PEN PENSUL BØK NOB LOK HANDUL
EZUL KLOK WAŒ KRΔYONZ LID DRAR ŞELF SET F±L STΔPUL
STΔPLR FLØR POT WUTR FØNTUN GLAS KUP BOTUL

Many words look familiar, even in Unifon. Longer words may be more difficult to learn, but as soon as the child knows the sound of each letter, he can sound out the word with success.

KALENDR BLAKBARD IRΔSR DIKŞUNERI BØKŞELF DARNOB TEŒR
STUDUNT BAKPAK

Children have names and they love to write them. Their parents may balk if they learn to spell their name in Unifon. Children should understand that names may be spelled different ways. When they sound out their own names in the Unifon books they read, remind them to spell their names the way their parents taught them. You may, hopefully

after getting parents' permission, permit your class to make nametags in both Unifon AND correct spelling. These would help students learn how Unifon helps them to sound out words; it would also act as a readiness tool for making the transition to traditional spelling.

After the Christmas vacation, when the children return to school, they should find that all the Unifon labels have been replaced by labels in traditional spelling.

WORD LISTS

Instead of dictionaries at this stage, we offer various word lists for teachers and one for students. Each list is presented in the order of the Unifon alphabet. Look up a word by the way it sounds. Each Unifon word is followed by its traditional form.

Some word lists are offered based on the number of phonemes in each word. One, two or three-letter words are easier to learn. *Keep in mind that certain four-letter words will now consist of only three phonemes, and in Unifon will only use three letters.* Children will find all the no-no words and laugh about them. You must decide how to handle them as you have always done. Expect to encounter them earlier when you teach Unifon, because *children can write any word they can say.*

Make lists of rhymes, to help you design your lessons around words that sound the same. Again, there is little to be gained by using words greater than four or five phonemes during this teaching phase.

Make lists of words that change one letter at a time to make new words. The new letter may be in the front, in the middle, or at the end. These lists will help you move smoothly from the sound-symbol stage to the word reading stage.

UNIFON CODE-BREAKER BOOKS

One word list that children will carry with them beyond their Unifon experience is the Unifon "Code-breaker" books. Each student will need a Code-breaker book when he or she moves to the next grade and another teacher.

Code-breaker books consist of a list of the 10,000 most used words in English. The words are listed first in Unifon order so that a student who is writing something and needs to know how to spell a word (in traditional English—we're done with Unifon except for such special occasions) can look it up in Unifon to find the correct spelling. There are dictionaries available to do the same thing but the task is made more difficult without Unifon. Unifon is effective as a dictionary key to pronunciation if they already know it.

The second half of the Code Breaker book is a listing of the same words in traditional spelling. When a child is reading literature and encounters a new word, the first thing he

should do is look it up here to find out how to pronounce it. The pronunciation, of course, is given in Unifon, and by pronouncing it correctly the child may discover that he already knows the meaning of the new word. This activity prepares them to use a dictionary, along with its dictionary key, to help with their pronunciation.

ILLUSTRATED UNIFON READERS

We do not have access to the Unifon readers that Dr. Ratz used. We need similar readers, however, and are in the process of developing them. The alternative, as we discovered in the Howalton school experience, is to have your students write their own essays and stories.

The Unifon Step One readers will be very short and heavily illustrated. Our goal is to have one or two dozen such stories, each concentrating on a specific reading challenge. If your students create these, they may want to include photos or drawings, like a real book.

The Unifon web site would welcome any Step One writing by your students. These writings could be shared with other teachers and students. It is a great way to begin teaching the subject of Social Studies—to learn about other children in other environments.

Step Two readers will be longer illustrated stories about the child's environment. Here we introduce the first reading material about health and hygiene issues, observations about animals, birds, flowers and trees. simple math puzzles, a bit of history. Here too we introduce topics of fantasy for a smattering of good reading material in Unifon. By combining fiction and fact, we introduce the whole realm of literature to children. The fact that some of it represents subjects they will later study in depth should make little or no difference to them except to discriminate between the fact books and the fiction books.

Step Two readers would be more difficult for you to produce for your class, but if you have downloaded the Unifon fonts and you are a fair typist, you have the tools to create your own stories and textbook material about the subjects you want to teach. The challenge is to use only those words the children already know, or to introduce new words very carefully.

COMPUTER WITH TEXT-TO-SPEECH APPLICATION

This application was created specifically so that children as young as three years old could begin to work with the sounds, words and sentences, using nothing more than a mouse on the computer. There are three levels to this application.

Care must be taken not to stay on the first level very long. Here the child clicks on a Unifon symbol and the "robot" voice speaks the sound it represents. As soon as the child

can recognize the sound of letters you are currently studying, he should begin to combine the symbols into words that he knows.

The second level permits the child to build single words or short sentences by using the mouse pointer to click on the letters he wants to add. Parents may use the keyboard to type the letters by following the keyboard layout chart included with the application. When the child clicks on the "OK" button, the "robot" speaks whatever is in the text box—a word or several sentences. Words that are not spelled correctly will, of course, be obvious.

Level three is more sophisticated. Parent or teacher may type paragraphs at the keyboard or add the letters one at a time with the mouse. You may also choose to type in traditional spelling and have the application convert it to Unifon. This way you need not be thoroughly familiar with Unifon.

Another way you can use the application is to cut and paste words from another document, either in traditional or Unifon spelling, and paste it into this application. If you choose traditional, the application will convert it to Unifon, as before. Again, when you press the "OK" button, the "robot" reads what you have put in the text box. At this level, your text may be an entire chapter from a book, or a full magazine article -- any text may be handled in this manner.

This application can be used for the purpose of reading to the blind. Any literature that is available at the computer may now be converted to Unifon and presented to a blind person in an understandable manner.

One warning: The first version of this resource cannot convert numbers and will simply crash when it encounters one. Be sure to manually spell out numbers before you convert English to Unifon.

COPY MACHINE, SCISSORS, HOLE PUNCH, NOTEBOOKS

Do not overlook the importance of such resources.

One of the most enjoyable activities your Unifon child will undertake is to write his own stories for others to read. For this activity, you will need to copy his story to share with others. To compile stories into a Buildabook (described later), you will need the scissors.

Writing to read is an entertaining way to promote a love for reading to young children. When they can write notes to each other in their "secret code" they are thrilled. Of course, such notes need to be monitored at times, even in first grade.

We have learned that as Unifon techniques and resources were refined, perhaps the most powerful resource of all was to simply *let the children write notes, letters and stories for their peers to read*. Many teachers dropped the other resources and were able to

accelerate Unifon itself. The primary example was Howalton, where Ms. Elizabeth Jones' students started to make the transition from Unifon to traditional spelling by Thanksgiving vacation instead of Christmas.

THE SUNDAY COMICS

Why comics? First, because the words are printed in upper case letters. Second, because kids love them. Third, much of the writing from the rest of the Sunday paper is in lower case. Thus the discovery process moves naturally from the known to the unknown; from Unifon in upper case to traditional spelling in upper case; from there to lower case. The transition is fun, and automatically becomes part of the exciting discovery process.

We do not know who originated this novel idea for Unifon, but we suspect this, too, may have come from Ms. Elizabeth Jones at the Howalton Day School. John Malone does not know where the idea started, and Dr. Ratz does not mention it in her 1966 book. Whatever the source, it is pure genius and this resource works like a charm.

You are not going to introduce any child to this paper. What you are going to do is simply have copies of them available in the room. At some point, one of the children in your class is going to look at these comics and say to himself, "I can read this!" A child who has learned the Unifon alphabet sounds will encounter 23 of the same letters when he looks in the Sunday paper comics section. (You could "cheat" a little and judiciously place the most appropriate comic on the top of the stack—meaning the one with words most familiar to your class.)

After your class discovers Sunday comics they will all begin to make the transition to traditional spelling without further involvement of their teacher until they encounter a new or strange word. Then you will write it on the board for all the class to learn, add it to your list of known words in Unifon, and let them keep reading. Teacher's role now is to help when they need it; otherwise, stay out of the way.

During the transition process you will teach other subjects appropriate for this grade level. It would be good to type portions of the lessons in transliterated Unifon. This means typing one line in Unifon and the one below it in tradspel (upper case only at first). For an example of this, see these pages at the Unifon web site:
[http://www.unifon.org/Joke--Tenjewberrymuds%20\(2\).pdf](http://www.unifon.org/Joke--Tenjewberrymuds%20(2).pdf)
<http://www.unifon.org/Ken%20Anderson.htm>

Before long, you will have the opportunity to introduce your class to lowercase symbols for the traditional letters. They may become curious about the other sections of the newspaper, TV ads in lowercase, or magazines their parents read. Whatever the stimulus, it is important that the child *wants* to know, even if you must lead him in that direction.

When children have made the transition to traditional spelling, they will still be able to read most of the words they encounter. Because they have learned five vowel groups, they will more readily grasp how the sounds work in traditional spelling. The 23 familiar letters are all used the same way in Unifon and traditional spelling. Even the digraph symbols (ch, th, sh, ng) that became one sound-sign in Unifon act in consistent ways, for the most part. Your class has learned this, not by drilling it daily, but by reading comics and enjoying the experience of discovery.

PREPARE YOUR CLASS TO READ

First grade is usually the place where children begin their formal reading education. This presentation will proceed based on that setting after we discuss briefly the differences between students who may be ready to read in kindergarten and those ready to read in first grade.

The kindergarten teacher will evaluate her students to determine who is ready to embark on a formal study of reading. Her approach is to wait until the child voluntarily expresses interest in learning to read. Just as there is no teaching without learning, there is no learning without readiness. Stated another way, you can't teach someone what they are not ready to learn.

By contrast, when a child enters first grade, the formal reading education begins, often whether or not they are ready to read. The majority of students will have reached that point by first grade; that is why it begins there. But some will lag.

Focus on word meaning, not memorizing the unique sounds of each character. The character is only important in its relationship to its neighbors. By keeping your focus on an active movement through the word, you reinforce how the symbols are used and quickly bypass the independent sound-symbol. Dr. Ratz called this the “joy of meaning,”*

The first order of business for a child is to learn the 40 symbols and the sound each represents. To keep the child from being bored while doing this drudgery, you will need many games and memory drills. The goal is for the child to learn each sound-symbol so well that he cannot be misled.

The Treasure Chest is one such activity. This is your collection of familiar objects that represent the 40 symbols. Collect objects for your classroom Treasure Chest that are used as mnemonics in the Alphabet Chart and Flash Cards.

Both Dr. Ratz and Mr. Malone favor calling Unifon a Secret Code. The purpose in this is for the child to treat Unifon as his own special alphabet. Unifon should never become simply a drill. Your challenge is to make it interesting. Children love “detective” work, so give them something to decipher.

Individual attention is vital at this early stage. Some children will learn fast, some will be slower. To be sure each child has learned the sound-signs, you must give him as much time as he needs. Dwell on carefully listening to discern which symbol would best represent the sounds in each word. Each child will respond in his own time.

* Ratz, op. cit., p. 22.

Do not stop reading to a child when the child begins to learn how to read. Read from picture books to develop a concept of order and sequence. Stress left-to-right eye movements. The child will take more interest in the words and stories when he learns that “the printed word is simply a living experience set down on paper.”*

You may think English spelling is so chaotic that all children will have some difficulty reading traditional English. You will not face this problem when you begin with Unifon. The essential difference when starting with Unifon is that the 40 symbols are very consistent. When the transition occurs to traditional spelling, children have 23 of the letters to help them “guess” at an unfamiliar spelling, and they will have their own copy of the Code Breaker book to help them with the spelling of new words. Children will not stumble seriously over new words, the teacher will be there to guide their progress, and each student will have a Code Breaker book.

Break up drill periods with games. Use symbol cards, the Treasure Chest, or flash cards to keep children interested. You will not need to drill as much in Unifon as you do in traditional English. Use the extra time to read aloud to the children. The goal at this stage is to show the child by example that reading equals learning; reading brings enjoyment; reading mirrors life.

What do you read? Whatever you want the children to learn. Funny things, sad things, problems to solve. If a child is interested in the subject, every time you read something to him you reinforce his desire to read for himself. You should read aloud three or four stories each day. Divide your class into smaller groups and invite moms to read to a group.

Remember: September is for you to read, play games, solve puzzles, discover subjects and stories of all kinds. Intersperse these activities with drills and games that focus on learning the 40 sound-symbols.

“Begin school in September so full of what books have to offer and so anxious to present them well that no child can resist you or the books.”†

* Ibid, p. 23.

† Ibid, p. 24.

TEACH THE UNIFON ALPHABET

Plan to spend whatever amount of time your class requires for all the children to learn the symbols so they cannot be fooled. Patience and perseverance will reward you with students who learn to love reading. The time you take now to accomplish that may keep a student from dropping out of school later.

While a student is learning the sound of each symbol, you can reinforce it by having him draw the letter, build words with it, use those words in one or more Buildabooks; and listen to words with that sound as you read to the class. This book is not a lesson plan, as such. You must devise your own. The resources here may be used from the very beginning and throughout the year to reinforce whatever sound and symbol you are studying at the time. That means you must read and become thoroughly familiar with the resources here before you teach the first class.

There is another reason for this suggestion. One student may understand what you are saying, while another is confused. If you present the same symbol in a different way, the second student may understand it better. A third way may reach a third student. No two students will respond alike to every presentation, but it is your job to find one presentation that reaches every child. When you do, write it down, so you know which techniques work for which children. During the course of the year, you may streamline your lesson plans to accomplish the best results with the least effort, the most fun, and the least trauma.

Contrary to some theories of education, we know that vowels are the core of the English language. Dr. Ratz knew that she had to resolve the confusion about vowels in order to teach children to read. This is because we have, in English, 16 vowel sounds and only five letters to represent them. Moreover, through the years we have devised over 800 ways to spell them!

John R. Malone used five groups of vowel symbols, related to the five letters we use for vowels. There are three A symbols for the A group, three E symbols for the E group, and so on.

In her teaching, Dr. Ratz searched for a way to help the children remember each group and settled on names that the children created themselves. You don't have to use them, but our suggestion to you is: don't reinvent the wheel. Use what has been proven to work best on other situations. That is what we are presenting to you below.

1. The SHEEP sounds—A, Δ, Λ—are used in *apple*, *apron*, and *orange*.
2. The LITTLE GIRL sounds—E, E, R—are used in *elephant*, *eagle*, and *fern*.
3. The GIGGLE sounds—I, †—are used in *Indian* and *iron*.

4. The COOKIE sounds—O, Ω, ⓪, ⓪—are used in *octopus, boat, book, owl, and boy*.
5. The SPOOKY sounds—U, Ū, Ū—are used in *umbrella, spoon, and vacuum*.

You are not required to use these mnemonics, but some type of mnemonic will help your children to recall how they were introduced to each group of symbols. Let your class choose how to remember the vowel groups, but be prepared to follow through with their choice. An example by Dr. Ratz is offered below.

Take the apple out of the Treasure Chest and say to the children: “Listen to this sound. It’s like a little sheep saying, ‘AAAAAA.’ Now listen to the word I am going to say: APPLE. Here is an APPLE [holding it up]. Watch as I make the letter for this sound on the board. It goes down, down, and over. [Make it.] Can you make this in the air? [Have the class make the letter A.]

*“Now I am going to give each of you a card with this sound on it while I put our APPLE into the Treasure Chest. [Pass out SYMBOL-SOUND CARDS.] Run your finger over this letter; down, down, and over. Now turn the card over for a surprise. What do you see there? [Children will find an apple pictured, ready to be colored.] Every time you see this [hold up the apple] or this [write A on the board] or this [hold up the letter-card], what sound are you going to think of? ...That’s right, the sound of the little sheep, AAAAAA. Now watch as I make the word. [Write APUL on the board.] Tomorrow we’ll see what happens to the A when we move some lines around. Now I want to read you a story about some little sheep in a far-off country named Australia...”**

When you present each vowel, you may present consonants around it, before and after. It is the vowel, however, that gives a word its openness. (You cannot sing, or even speak, if you leave out the vowels.) Vowels must therefore be stressed during the learning process.

Teach all the vowels in a group before you move on to the next group. This will help to reinforce the visual element that relates the symbols to their groups.

The next day plan to review what you learned about the first A sound and introduce the second symbol, the long Δ. Point out that the line across the A has moved to the bottom of the new symbol, and drill on the new sound this symbol makes. Now the apron goes into your Treasure Chest, since this represents the sound of the second A in the group.

Depending on how well your class responds to this introduction, you may also want to introduce the third Λ, and place an Orange (please, not a real one!) in your Treasure Chest. Of course, you could pass out orange slices for the class to consume.

Before you introduce the E vowels, it would be a good idea to add some consonants. Your selection of consonants should be based on 1) how well they each work with the

* Ibid., p. 27-28.

other vowel groups, 2) how frequently they are used in English, and 3) how consistently they are used, because we want to avoid confusion for now. From the literature we have converted, the most used consonant sound-signs are T, N, D, S, L and R.

Use the word lists to find some words using these consonants with all the vowel sounds. Using B and T, for instance, and limiting our list to words with three sound-signs, you can form the words BAT, TAB, BΔT, BΔB, and BΛT (bat, tab, bait, babe, and bought). When you teach the E group, you can add BET, BET and BRT, one of our favorite Sesame Street characters. With the I group you get BIT and B±T. From O you can use BOT (short for robot) and BQT. This leaves out three of the five O sounds, but by the time you reach the O group, you will have taught other consonants to use with those vowels. Finally, from the U group, B and T may be used for BUT, TUB, BUT, TUB and BUT (beaut or butte work, but I recommend you teach the word butte if you use this combination.)

Those are not all the words you can build with B, T and one of the 16 vowels, only those that have three phonemes and three letters in Unifon. You can imagine that when you allow the students to have a vote on which words they want to use, your lesson plans may need to be revised on a daily basis, but the children will learn faster. If you insist on the structure you will provide them with a hard and fast lesson plan and you will remove the creative impulse from the children.

As you continue to alternate new vowel sounds and symbols and add a consonant here and there, the children should be using all their new words in stories, notes, games, exercises—anything to reinforce the joy, understanding and retention of the sound-sign relationships.

Adding an S to the symbols of the second day will give you BAS, BAL, and BASBAL (base, ball, and baseball, a six-letter word in Unifon). At this time you could write a sentence on the board to display new words: TUDA WE LRND FU WRDZ FAR _____ AND _____. In this case, Unifon for baseball and baseball bat would be added, to remain until they were exchanged for new words in the days that followed. Soon you may need to replace this one sentence with a list of the new words the children learn on a given day. You can review them in a drill, or have students use the new words in a sentence, or devise another game to reinforce the latest vocabulary in writing and reading.

Some of the characters you present, especially the characters for the digraphs *ng*, *th* (voiced and voiceless) *sh*, *ch* and *zh*, will also need some mnemonics to help your class recall the letters. Notice that three of the letters have a slash—Z, Ç and Š—and that the Ø has a tail.

It is vital that the words you teach have real meaning for the children in your class. If your students choose some of the new words they learn, they are more likely to know the meaning, more likely to be able to recall them better. All new letters should be

assimilated into words the children can use in their writing, and they must be encouraged to write them to share with the rest of the class.

A few children may master the sound-signs in a week. Let them help the slower students. The slowest ones may take three months. The next subject we discuss will be how to merge individual sound-signs together into meaningful words and sentences; but you will be doing this from the very first experience with Unifon and the word “apple.”

MERGE SYMBOLS TO MAKE WORDS

Unifon is a phonetic alphabet; phonetics is 100 percent of every word constructed in Unifon. Students are not learning a few sight vocabulary words, but how to write and read their entire vocabulary, often more than 12,000 words when they enter first grade. Like students in Spain, Italy, Finland, and other countries who learn from phonetic alphabets, they can learn this in three months or less.

Children will learn that some words may have two different meanings: BUDI BER WAKT AN HIZ BER FET. You must guide the student to understand how the meaning is derived from the position in the sentence, not from the way the word is spelled. We learn this the same way we learned to discern among reign, rain and rein.

Vowel groups help students spell better when they make the transition to traditional spelling. Some of you will find it very difficult to understand how you can make a good speller by starting out “wrong”. The surprising fact is, when children make the transition to standard spelling, they love to make fun of the “old people’s spelling,” and they tend to remember it better that way.

Starting with Unifon, children learn the words as they sound, so there is no longer any conflict with words that look alike and sound different. The most offensive ones are the “ou” and “ea” combinations. See how they become unique in Unifon, much easier to distinguish one from another.

though	ḡQ	feather	FETĤR
through	ḡRŪ	read	RĒD
thought	ḡΛT	steak	STΔK
tough	TUF	beau	BQ
bough	BQ	heart	HORT

The most used vowel phonemes from each of the five groups are familiar ones—A, E, I, O and U. When a student makes the transition to standard spelling, these are the letters he will find most often being used in the same way they were used in Unifon.

Merging letters into words may be the most difficult step in the learning to read process. The goal of traditional teaching is to build sight vocabularies, essentially ignoring the inconsistent spelling of the words. About half of the students in any class will accomplish this goal and learn the 250 words they are supposed to learn during the first year. Typically, those who fail to accomplish this goal are then put in “at risk” classes and their parents are told their child is retarded “and will never learn to read.” That was the fate of Daralee Regnier, whose testimony now opens the Unifon web site. But today Daralee enjoys teaching reading to “at risk” students because her mother found Dr. Margaret Ratz, in Sarasota, Florida, still teaching Unifon with amazing results. Dr. Ratz worked with Daralee and a few other students during the three summer months between first and

second grade. When Daralee entered second grade, she could read at fifth grade level, and was never again called “retarded” by her retarded teachers. She graduated from college and is now teaching reading to at-risk students.

If you noticed one thing from the above paragraph, it should have been that about half of any given class will learn to read when they are taught sight vocabulary. Don’t you think it is strange coincidence that the NALS study that we discussed earlier found that nearly 50 percent of our population is functionally illiterate? I do not believe that is a coincidence. Learning sight words will work for 50 percent of the students, thus maintaining the status quo. The school systems then place the slow 50% in special classes in order to maintain their “standards of excellence” required by the No Child Left Behind Act. That is unacceptable in today’s high tech, worldwide competition.

Yes, it is often a struggle for youngsters to learn to read phonetically. It is, however, no more difficult than learning sight words. More students can learn if they start with Unifon, and more of them can read, write and spell correctly when they make the transition to traditional spelling. Would you rather have your child—or the class you teach—read 250 words after the first grade, or 8,000 to 12,000?

The struggle at this point is worth it. You, the teacher, must ensure that there is a minimum of what Dr. Ratz called “the huff and puff stage.” How you do that will depend on you and the student; I cannot tell you a great secret to make it happen. There are teachers who make even drudgery fun; I had one of those in first grade, Ms. Leona Trout. It seems to be a rare gift, but if you have it, this would be the time to use it. Once the children overcome this hurdle, the task of reading gets much easier for them. Keep it as much fun as you can.

While Unifon does not require students to memorize sight words, when you stress the meaning of a word as we suggest here, you are helping the child to accomplish that goal. We want students to begin that process, but we do not want them to concentrate on doing that with an alphabet they are going to abandon after three or four months. Some of the shorter and most frequent words will quickly become sight words; it cannot be helped. Just remember that sight vocabulary is never a goal, it is just something that happens to some people. The other half of the class will be able to read and understand, but they will do it by sounding out the words.

From the time it is first taught, a child should know that A is not a sound that is used alone, but only within a word, like apple and bat. That is what we mean by emphasis on the sound as part of a word that has meaning for you. The key to merging a letter into a word is to leave the individual symbol as soon as the student understands it. Review it, yes; but always shift immediately to putting that symbol in the context of a meaningful word.

When the child learns that there are only 40 sounds in our language, and that he knows how to write all of them, he understands that every word he knows is available. That is knowledge; that is power. That empowering knowledge builds confidence and pride of

accomplishment. It is simply a trait that, once exposed, will carry a person throughout life.

“Sounding out a word” is a necessary process for some children. In Unifon, this should only last for two or three weeks at the most. If a child still struggles to sound out a word after that, he does not fully grasp the sound-signs. This is in indication that you need to reinforce that part of his learning process. Students need to understand the symbols so well that the sounds tend to “slide” into words, the words into meaningful sentences for them. The struggle with huffing and puffing should be kept at a minimum. Review the sound-signs with the games, puzzles and flash cards.

Avoid drilling on individual syllables. Say the sound, but immediately work it into a word and stress the word meaning. Vowels are the sounds that last longest, and each syllable of a word has a vowel. Teach the child to move past the consonant to sound the vowel, for it is the vowel that shapes each word.

You might introduce a new word by recalling the previous day’s lesson. “Yesterday we learned the sound the sheep makes, the **A** sound. Now let’s learn a new sound. Watch my lips and listen carefully. [Write a **T** on the board to the right of the **A**.] I’m going to combine the two sounds to make a word. **AT. AT. AT.**”

Each time you say the new word, underscore with your hand the signs as you make the sound. “Now you say it.” Ensure all the students can properly produce the **AT** sound. Help them to recognize that the two signs and the sounds they represent make a word that means something to them—*at*. “Now let’s add another new sign for the sound **B**. We’ll put this new sound before the **A** to make another word. This time I want you to tell me what the word means when I say it.”

Say the sound **B** three or four times, then put it into the full word. “**BAT. BAT. BAT.**” Again, move your hand under the letters as you speak them slowly. Have the children speak the word several times. “Now can someone tell me what that word means?”

You may expect children to recognize the name of the stick used to hit a baseball. You should also prepare for those who say it is a flying creature that comes out at night, especially around Halloween. Here is your challenge, then. You may be led in one of two directions, and either one is correct. You must learn to go with the flow. You are going to let the class tell you what they are interested in, bats to hit baseballs or bats that fly at night. Why? Because if they are interested in the subject, they will be eager to learn other words that relate to that subject.

Let’s say you are lucky and the children mention baseball. Here is a perfect opportunity to teach the other sheep sounds, **Δ** and **Λ**, along with the **L** and **S**. Six new letters in one day may seem like a lot, but if your children are interested, many of them will retain it. Tomorrow you will work with these new letters, whether or not you introduce any more new ones.

Possible Unifon words you could make with these letters: AT, BAT, BAS, BAL, BASBAL, SA, LAT, LAS, LAST.

If your class wants to talk about flying bats, consider introducing the “giggle” sounds next, I and ±, along with some new letters that will work for a bat story—F, S, N, T, D, Z and L. Perhaps you could interest them in baseball the first day and flying bats the next. That would be ideal, because of the easy introduction of new letters and the review of those already introduced.

Words that relate to flying bats: AT, BAT, BATS, B±T, BIT, FL±, N±T, D±N, FL±Z, F±ND. Now we can even make some useful sentences: BATS FL± AT NIT. BATS D±N AT NIT. BATS FIND FL±Z AT N±T. ƒU BAT BIT ƒU FL±.

You are off and rolling on your journey to reading. In two or three days—even a week—your students have learned several sound signs, learned how to make several meaningful words with them, even write a sentence or two with the words they have learned. This is a far cry from the Dick and Jane days.

In another week or two your students will be writing short stories using any word in their vocabulary. They will need help from you, of course, because they are still learning new signs for the sounds, and they are uncertain which signs are equal to which sounds. But because you have their interest, they will learn. Because you help them with the new words they want to know, they will learn.

Huffing and puffing will be minimized if the child is eager to use a word he doesn't know. Because he wants to learn it, he will remember it. Reading will become more easy with constant practice and exposure to the sounds and their signs. The sooner your student becomes thoroughly familiar with the sound signs, the sooner he will be able to write any word he can say. That is your goal at first, to write and read anything the child desires.

“Consonants really fall into place before and around identifying vowel combinations.”* Vowels are the primary clues we have to understand words. We want the child to recognize vowels almost automatically as he scans the printed page. Dr. Ratz believed we should point out the vowels to a child who is struggling with a word. For instance, “That's an A sound you're headed for. It means *grass for animals to eat.*” Let the student supply the word PASÇR.

While children are working with Unifon, spelling is not important, only the logic of sound signs. You can help the child assemble lists of words that have meaning for him. For instance, one list may contain things to eat. Within the vowel group of A sounds, there are several items. To APUL and ARINJ, our first words, we can add KAK,

* Ibid, p. 34.

KANDI, APULSAS, STAK, and HAM. A list of things to wear would include APRUN, SAL, PANTS, HAT, KAP, LAS. Under things to do we could list PLΔ, DANS, RAP, PAT, LAF, STAND, RΔK, TΔK, BΔK and MΔK.

Rhyming words help a child to learn the combinations of sound signs. Avoid nonsense syllables, however; we instead want to stress words that have meaning and collect as many of those as we can in the short time we will be working with Unifon.

WRITE THE LETTERS

Unifon is essentially a “write-to-read” program. As you teach each letter, teach the child how to draw that letter. In all cases, teach vowel clusters first, and you add consonants based on the needs of the children. Most of the following two pages will be familiar to you, since 23 of the letters are the same ones we use now. Always give the following directions—and, of course, follow them yourself:



Down, down and over.

Leave the mouth open on Λ.

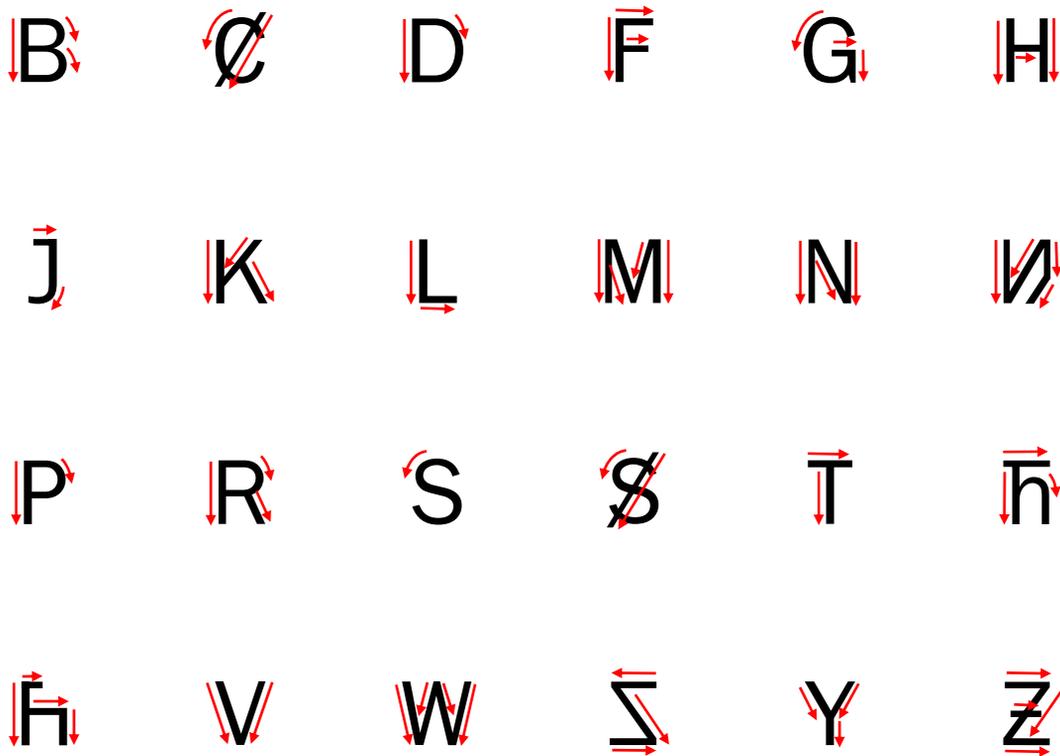


Down, over,
over, over

Over, down
over, over

Down, over,
over, around,
down





Maintain standards of excellence—straight, clean lines and curves. Each letter must be recognized by the other students in the class. As one student reads another student’s writing, they will help to correct the letter drawing errors, but you need to teach the correct way from the outset, practice it very carefully yourself, and support the corrections required when other students are having trouble reading someone’s writing.

When you introduce the letters, draw them in the air and have the children do the same. Letter charts and flash cards can be printed and handed out to the children. Have the children trace each letter they learn in these sizes.

You may wish to hand out letter drawing paper to help students learn to draw the Unifon characters. You do not need a middle line, however, because all the Unifon characters are uppercase. On the chalkboard, make top and bottom lines only.

Children should practice writing on paper and on the chalkboard.

SHARE WRITING WITH BUILDABOOKS

The “buildabook” series was a vital part of the Unifon projects. Buildabooks gave the children a way to create stories and word lists, and to share these with their peers. It gives you, the teacher, an opportunity to bring the art teacher on board. Today, it gives you and your students an opportunity to share their creative output with other Unifon students across the country by sending them to the Unifon web site, at www.unifon.org.

Buildabooks serve several purposes:

1. Readiness. Each buildabook implies a starting place for oral language development.
2. One-on-one interface. Students expressing their innermost thoughts and feelings well help you to better understand their needs and abilities.
3. Appreciation. By writing and illustrating their own books, children begin to value the contributions of others, and understand how pictures can help explain the text.
4. Understanding. Class and ethnic boundaries disappear as children experience and share the creative work of their classmates.
5. Tracking experience. Present a commentary by the children of their early school experiences that they can treasure for the rest of their lives.

As soon as children have started to blend words and know most of the symbols, they can create their own books. The buildabook series that Dr. Ratz started is, of course, unique to Unifon. Students would not be able to begin such a book until third or fourth grade under any of the present curricula. With Unifon, however, they begin before the end of September to create their own notebooks, full of what thrills them about life.

The early buildabooks begin with a few printed lines, just to get children started to think about the subject. In the beginning you may need to read the lines to them, because they will only be familiar with a few of the sound signs.

Buildabook One

“Here I am” is the first opportunity for a child to express himself in writing (and illustrations) and feel approval about his creative efforts. Here he will share his own world. This is vital to his sense of self-worth, so let’s digress for a moment.

The readers my generation started with were the Dick and Jane stories. Dick and Jane were WASPs, a term which means white, Anglo-Saxon and Protestant, and suggested the stereotype of middle-class America at the time. Nobody gave a thought to how people of another ethnic background would feel when they read these books. Many children could not relate to Dick and Jane; and whether or not they realized it, they developed feelings of inferiority when they would read about these suburban kids and their pets.

Unifon changes that for children. Every child has endearing life events to tell us about. In doing so, he discovers that other people are interested in his life. As he learns self-respect about his own environment, he also learns tolerance, because he develops an interest in his classmates who may not live in a similar environment. This was not a stated goal of the Unifon projects, but rather an important, positive surprise advantage that was discovered in the process of using Buildabooks.

Self-respect comes when a child accepts the fact that differences in size, shape or skin tone are okay, and that he is unique and someone who is worth knowing. Buildabook one is the child's self-portrait in words and pictures, the beginning of his self-respect. Teacher and students will determine how much time is spent on "Here I Am" before moving on, and it may vary from class to class.

Buildabook Two

"Up, Down and Over" is the second Buildabook. Its purpose is to develop the child's awareness of things on our planet—up, down or across the surface. Airplanes, spacecraft, submarines, mines, cars, truck, trains—all are fair game in this book. You may think of it as a way to discuss various jobs and what it takes to do them well. You may also think of it as a look at transportation.

The children in your class will have great ideas of their own, often based upon the jobs their parents do. Again, it is important to encourage their appreciation because their sense of dignity through labor is nourished by it. Some children will have pictures for this notebook. Others will draw their illustrations.

Buildabook Three

"My Inside World" introduces us to the child's home, his family background, his lifestyle, his favorite (and most hated) foods, recreational activities. This is a good opportunity for you to present health issues, fire or water safety, how to handle emergencies—anything related to the home. The child creates a notebook and you present your first textbook. If you do your job well, the child may never know he is studying hygiene, or home safety.

Buildabook Four

"My Outside World" gives the child an opportunity to feel good about where he lives, whether it's in the country or the city, on a ranch, a farm, or in the suburbs, Because he is writing about his own environment, and learning about that of his classmates, he is not confronted with culture shock. He feels at home creating stories about his personal surroundings. The real purpose of this Buildabook is for the child to understand that "life's real joy depends not on where you live, but on what you put into living, wherever you may happen to be."^{*}

* Ibid, p. 37.

Buildabook Five

“My Town” describes the streets, favorite stores, people the child sees at work in the community. No more Dick and Jane to make a child feel inferior. These are his streets, his neighbors, his neighborhood. He knows the Dick and Jane who live here, and that brings to him a sense that his world is okay, and that he is a special part of it.

Once a child learns to appreciate his own neighborhood, he is more likely to take an interest in someone else’s home turf, rather than form gangs to protect his little corner of the world. All ethnic backgrounds have interesting and unique lifestyles and celebrations that are worth knowing about. We start with the one most familiar to the child and branch out from there to encompass a worldview that is inquisitive, positive and tolerant of others.

Buildabook Six

“This is My Country” is a book that begins with some awareness of the child’s country, or of his parents’ country if it is not the United States. Awareness and respect for our heritage and ancestry is an important part of being proud of who we are, of self-respect. It is this stepping-stone that permits children to accept and appreciate people of other lands and cultures.

This was the final book in the series created by Dr. Ratz, but she suggested that it should not be the last. From here, teacher and class should continue to build books about various subjects of special interest to the class this year. The wise teacher will continue the series in such a way to introduce whatever textbook subjects she decides to teach next.

It is also vital to understand that when children begin to make the transition to traditional spelling, that doesn’t mean they should stop “building books” to share with their peers. You may want to create a Buildabook for every subject of study. Remember, after Christmas, your children will be able to read third, fourth, sometimes fifth grade books. Not only will they be able to read these books, but they will have a love of reading and a real desire to read and write.

Let them read, silently or to the class. They can prepare and share book reports just as the older children do. Let them do that. Be prepared with textbooks about whatever subjects you can introduce to them. They will read. You will help and guide.

A word about help. When a child encounters a new word in tradspel, you have an opportunity to present the “Code Breaker” book and show him how to use it. You can look up a Unifon word to see how it is spelled traditionally. Be prepared to laugh with the children as they discover how strange and funny the “old folks” spelling is. Or if a child

does not know how to pronounce a word in traditional spelling, you can look up that word and the Unifon will show him how it should be pronounced.

However you choose to introduce the Buildabook series, the most important concept is to open doors to worlds of experience. You choose how much or how little time to devote to each book. It is better to spend quality time exploring a subject, however, than to skim through all the books before Christmas.

It is not necessary to use all the Buildabook series in Unifon. The concept and process has just as much value after Christmas, when they move to traditional spelling. Involve the art teacher in some team teaching effort, to give the children another avenue of self-expression.

“You can teach the child, through these books, the most important thing he will ever learn in this world: that he is someone worth knowing.”*

* Ibid., p. 38.

WRITE AND READ CLASS WORKS

CHILDREN GET THEIR FIRST writing experience with the first Buildabook. Your Buildabook series will be somewhat structured, a formal request for students to provide specific information for each of the books. Their first practice making letters will come with this discipline. They will be motivated to quickly learn how to draw the letters, because they want their friends to read what they write.

At this stage of their development, children will learn three concepts.

One, they will focus on each letter as they draw it. This will reinforce the sound-sign correspondence in the child's mind. Because you present letters in vowel groups, consonants may also be presented in groups that look similar, for both drawing and writing purposes. A little forethought will enable you to teach more effectively.

Two, the child will learn how to draw (and use) 23 letters in Unifon that he will use to draw and write in traditional spelling later on. Of those, the 18 consonants will be used in the same way when the transition is complete.

Three, a child learns the most important lessons you can teach—to communicate in words that mean something to him. Through writing and reading, he opens his world to his friends, and he learns to share and appreciate their world as well.

In addition to the Buildabook series, however, there are many other opportunities for children to write. At this stage, it is vital to let them begin their creative writing efforts—short stories, poems, any “editorializing” they want to make about any part of the world they live in. Writing personal thoughts and sharing them with their friends can be a way of sharing their deepest feelings about life and their surroundings, even therapy.

Be prepared for whatever they bring to the table, because it will surprise you. Regardless of where you live or where you grew up, at this age the children you teach will write (and read) things that will make you laugh and cry with them. You will become a very important person to them because you have given them this opportunity to express themselves.

In a larger sense, it may be this early opportunity to be open about their life experiences, hope and dreams, problems and issues they face at home and at school, that will carry them through life. Perhaps learning to vent at this stage will be the thing that stops them from committing suicide at that critical moment in their lives. Perhaps they will choose to communicate their thoughts (“blog?”) instead of taking drugs or selling them.

Statistics show that poverty and prison are two of the greatest conditions that confront illiterates. Unifon, because it reaches even the slower students, will help to raise our literacy rate. Where Unifon began the reading and writing part of education, we have

found no instances of crime or poverty. There may be such instances, but we know of none.

To be honest, we do not hear from many Unifon students, because they do not remember an alphabet that they used for three months in first grade and then abandoned. We continue to seek information about anyone who started with Unifon.

Of those we could track, the following represent more likely statistics than jail or poverty. We know a psychiatrist, a city planner, a jewelry designer, a reading teacher, a college professor. We know one who was declared “retarded,” whose mother refused to accept that decision and sought out Dr. Margaret Ratz. We know of an entire kindergarten class that graduated from high school two years early.

To date (December, 2006), there is no documented downside to the Unifon experience, but much evidence to warrant its consideration. And the search goes on.

READ BOOKS IN UNIFON

Care must be taken at this stage. You walk a fine line, choosing whether to limit Unifon books or to encourage them, based on the needs of individuals in your classroom. Starting with Unifon, children will want to read anything they can read. The problem is that reading too much in Unifon will cause them to “over learn” the alphabet and have trouble making the transition to traditional spelling.

The long Christmas recess helps, because you plan to return having abandoned Unifon—its stories, its classroom labels, its demonstrations—everything. But what about those students who learn Unifon in one or two weeks. What do you do before Christmas, with them?

The best thing we have found for the early learners is to make them teacher helpers, one on one, for the slower students. All your students will love this experience. They can help each other write stories to share. The slower student should read more often than the fast one.

Currently available at www.unifon.org there are only a few books in Unifon. Neil Stewart has written two short children’s stories in Unifon. I have converted Robert Louis Stevenson’s *A Child’s Garden of Verses* and Louis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland* into Unifon. Soon available will be Anna Sewell’s beloved *Black Beauty*. Several other books are planned, as spare time permits. None of these should be considered vital to place in front of a student. As in a library, they should be made available for students who are interested in that subject.

Short stories are better in the beginning. This would include some of the poems from *Garden* and Neil’s stories. Each chapter of *Alice* is more or less complete, but gives a little incentive to keep going forward, but that would be an acceptable next choice. One advantage of *Alice* is that the illustrations are also public domain, and can be colored.

As the Unifon web site collects stories from children, we will make them available for you to download and share with your class, along with other book-length features we convert.

Consider how the Unifon experience will compare to your current set of teaching resources at this stage in a child’s development. It will help you to understand both the parallels and the divergence involved in a Unifon classroom. Perhaps it will help to erase some of the insecurity you may feel about starting a Unifon project.

At the pre-primer stage in a normal classroom, you would offer pictures, easy words and simple sentences. In the Unifon classroom, this stage involves letter charts, name cards, labels for room objects and very short stories, most often suggested by the teacher. At this stage you may also introduce *Buildabook one—Who Am I?* To prepare children for writing, you could help them to label pictures in Unifon.

At the primer stage, you make or duplicate stories of one or two lines, or a page. In a Unifon classroom, this would involve reading portions of familiar stories in Unifon. The children can read well enough to get through a line or two about their favorite character. Children can label parts of pictures now. Stories developed from the words used for the labels form the beginnings of a basic vocabulary.

Dr. Ratz included in her book this suggestion from one of her Unifon teachers: Fold a paper in half, with a simple Unifon story printed on one side. The child would then use the words from this story to write a new story, and then read it to the teacher.*

When your traditional classroom would work on an advanced primer or first reader, the Unifon classroom would be working with longer stories written in Unifon. As soon as a child reaches the word-reading stage, he can work on stories in Unifon.

At the reader stage, Unifon intermediate storybooks are used, or chapters from longer books. Students should be reading aloud from such books now, sharing with the class and helping each other. You, the teacher, will begin to build units based on special interests generated by student stories.

When a student is fluent in reading Unifon, and can read Sunday Comics well, some easy books in traditional spelling may also be brought into the mix. Since these are in lower case, however, you will need to control how the child is exposed to standard print media.

It will not be as difficult as you may imagine. Children who have mastered Unifon in a short time will have fun laughing at “the old folks” spelling—and they usually find traditional spelling easier to learn because of its strangeness.

The most important thing children bring to the table during the transition is a lack of fear, because they have learned to love reading and writing in Unifon. Now their “secret code” is going to be replaced by the words their parents know best, and they will be able to read all the words their parents read, in newspapers, magazines and books. That world is open to them, and they will be anxious to explore it. Moreover, having had rapid success with Unifon, they will have the self-confidence to forge ahead into the unknown, whatever that brings.

Children in a Unifon class build their own books. While they will want to read stories about other people and other cultures, their own experience is the first social studies course.

What else do you want to teach children during this time? In the first month, you are working on the alphabet, words, simple sentences. But when you arrive at the point where children should read and write any word they can speak, you need something for them to read, and something for them to write about. What then?

* Suggested by Carole H. Obrecht, M. Ed, first grade teacher at Serena Hills School, District 161, Flossmoor, Illinois.

Our suggestion is to begin textbooks, in whatever subject you—or they—wish to learn. These would be written in Unifon, so the word count would be larger than in traditional spelling at this level. What do you tell your first graders about arithmetic, or science, or geography? Put it into print, in Unifon, and help them read it.

The combination of reading stories and textbooks by other people, while learning to write stories about your life and your experiences that you can share with friends, is something you must experience yourself to appreciate the power of a phonetic alphabet. Whatever pictures or illustrations you can duplicate will be great subjects for a little story, whether it is fiction or fact.

When is a child ready to read books? Almost as soon as he knows “that **BUG** spells a word and that **JIMI BUG JUMPT FAR JO** says something,” according to Dr. Ratz.* At the same time, he is ready to write.

Student stories should be permitted much freedom, with little help from the teacher. Encourage character building, variety of expression. Let children develop their original ideas and watch their confidence grow.

A word about words. The words a child knows depends on his world, not yours. Be prepared to discuss the use of any street language a child may introduce in his story, but try not to be judgmental. Where you draw the line will vary from one classroom to the next, from one teacher to the next. How you handle the language children bring into their stories will differ from class to class as well. You tread a fine line here between freedom of expression and the responsibility to refrain from language that will offend others.

You will also find that Unifon children, in writing about their families, will let some skeletons out of the closet. Again, you walk a fine line. Prepare to deal with the issue, but try not to be judgmental and harsh. Is it more important for the child to express himself or to refrain from telling family secrets?

When a child discovers that he is able to read, let him read. Don't force the issue. Learn the sound-signs, put them into words and short sentences, and let the child discover how letters make words, and words make sentences, and sentences make stories. Then simply turn him loose with books in Unifon.

A child may struggle with the sound-signs and words of the first book. The second one will be easier for him. By the third book, he should be fluent in Unifon and reading with little or no hesitation, even when he encounters new words. The ability to correctly sound out new words will do more to instill self-confidence than anything else you will ever teach, and the love of reading will continue for a lifetime.

* Ratz, op. cit, p. 45.

Dr. Ratz warns of some potential problems if you start small groups at this time. In particular, she emphasizes that small groups of five or six children all stumbling over words, can be counter-productive. Instead, she recommends the early reading stage should be primarily between one student and the teacher. The teacher is needed more to help each student over his own hurdles. For his part, the student has one his own problems to handle, not those of his classmates. When that is out of the way, you can effectively form groups and make them work for you.

In the beginning, you may need to write your own Unifon books to read. While I do not recommend that you violate any copyright law, you may need to get ideas for stories from published books. Short stories for first graders need only be a few sentences. Stories written by first graders themselves will also be a few short sentences at first.

To have text converted from English to Unifon, send an email request to the author, ken@xtreme-ed.com. If you are willing to share your story, we can offer it at the Unifon web site. Longer works may be published in both Unifon and standard print, and Unifon Press stands ready to work with authors and publishers to that end. If you supply a story with illustrations, we may consider offering it for sale.

Please include some factual stories. Short bios of famous people, or snippets of science, history, arithmetic, health or social studies for children to read. In short, write your own textbooks and teach any subject you would normally teach in first grade. You do this anyway when you write lesson plans. Now you only need to write your lesson plans in a child's vocabulary. After all, when a child knows the Unifon alphabet, he can truly read any word he can say.

Do not teach spelling while children are using Unifon. The only concept you teach related to spelling is that the child must write words just as he speaks them. If that includes a Spanish or other ethnic accent, it's okay. Unifon is written in sound-signs. Very few people speak correct English. For instance, both former President Jimmy Carter, a nuclear physicist, and President George W. Bush, a Harvard graduate, do not pronounce the word "nuclear" correctly according to the dictionary keys. So while Unifon in print would look and sound like NŪKLIR—two syllables—many people say NŪKYULR—three syllables. If a child writes a word in Unifon using the sound-signs he has learned from his parents, that is correct Unifon, even when it does not match the dictionary.

Please understand, the converted Unifon that you will find in our texts and stories will follow the dictionary key, as it should. The only exception would be when something is printed in dialect—using regional preferences. We do that now in formal literature. We are permitted to take certain liberties with spelling if we insert words in quotes, because we are trying to convey the sound of the speaker. So it is with Unifon written by a child. He is trying to convey his thoughts as he would say them, and when he gets the sound-signs correct, he has achieved the goal for Unifon—to write anything he can say.

When you print a word for children to learn, show it in Unifon the way it should be spoken—according to the dictionary key. Some children will learn to say it correctly, some never will. Present it correctly anyway. After that, if they use the word in a story and spell it the way they sound it out, that is correct for their story. In fact, if another child can read the story and sound it out the same way, it tells you the reader understands the sound-signs. You have achieved the correct result from this student.

As with all stories, ask questions to ensure the student understands what he has read.

While you have children writing, it is not too early to discuss structure and purpose of writing, or character development. Give them some clues. They don't know what analogy means, but you could ask, "What does it mean to be tall as a giant?" or "How thin is 'skinny as a rail'?"

Work to develop a timeline to a story. Ask what happened first? Then what? Without teaching the vocabulary, get the idea across so their stories begin to take better shape.

Consider having first graders pretend to be reporters, each for a day. Teach the child to ask who, what, when, where, why. One child can interview other children who participate in class that day, take notes, and report to the class about the experience. In your critique, point out how the students handled the who, what, when, where and why of essential reporting.

Dr. Ratz points out that the objective is to help children become "critical enough to refuse to be led by careless, prepackaged, or deliberately misleading printed materials."^{*}

* Ibid., p. 47.

SLIDE INTO TRADITIONAL SPELLING

How can you tell when a child is ready to transfer to traditional print?

- When the child reads fluently in Unifon, without memorizing a passage, he is ready.
- When the child can read words without obvious sounding-out of the letters, he is ready.
- When the child can write and read his own stories easily, or the stories of his peers, he is ready.

The single best way to transfer from Unifon to standard print is to let the child discover for himself that he can read the Sunday comic section of the newspaper. To do this, you must have a collection of Sunday comics for them to look at.

The reason this is so effective is that 1) comics are printed in uppercase, 2) they already know 23 of the letters, 3) most of the vocabulary is simple enough for them to understand, 4) the pictures help convey the meaning, and 5) this is what their parents read, so they realize they are close to the real world in print. They will be excited at the discovery and they will be anxious to discover more.

There is nothing as motivating as success. When a child discovers he is a successful reader, he is motivated to read more. He will therefore learn what he needs to learn in order to achieve that goal, a goal he has set for himself. When someone is thus self-motivated to learn, your most important teaching job is done.

The Code Breaker book is helpful during the transition period. The first half of the book is for children who need to learn how to pronounce an unfamiliar word. They can look up the word as it is found in their reader, and find the Unifon pronunciation guide that tells them how to pronounce it. The second half of the book is for a child who knows how to say the word he wants to write, but needs to learn the correct “old folks” spelling. Part Two of the Code Breaker book lists words sorted by the Unifon alphabet, for this purpose.

Dr. Ratz recommended having some large print, well illustrated books in standard print available for those who are ready to transfer to traditional spelling. The materials should be ready for them when they are ready to explore that realm.

When a child joyously approaches you with his discovery that he can read traditional print, your job changes. Let him read until he has difficulty. Then show him the Unifon spelling, either by printing it on the chalkboard or by showing him how to look it up in his “Code Breaker” book. And this is the time to explain that “old folks” spelling sometimes uses a C for the S sound or the K sound, or sometimes uses a G for the J

sound. The digraphs—ch, sh, and ng—will be more easily transferred because they are consistently used. They may only remember the exceptions because they are strange and illogical, but they will remember them. Not only will they remember the words, but they will also remember the strange way we have of spelling them.

The transition will happen very fast. You will have plenty of time to explain all the exceptions they encounter, and they will laugh about our funny spelling. The reason your students will progress so fast is simple, really. They have been successful in reading their special code; now they want to read their parents' code, too. They feel grown up, they feel a sense of accomplishment, and they no longer fear new challenges.

Your most difficult decisions will involve when to “wean” a child from Unifon. You cannot let them remain comfortable just sounding out words. They must attach meaning to words. It is the meaning a child grasps that will prompt him to explore a book for more information.

When children begin the transfer, you must meld the Unifon experience into the lesson plans you find more comfortable. Check word drills to see where each child belongs in his progression, but do not dwell on word drills if a child does not have a specific need you can identify.

First and second grade readers are abundant now, and the children use them during the early part of their transition. But if a child elects to branch off to a much more difficult book, rather than discourage him, be prepared to help him use his Unifon experience and references to guide him through the tough words.

When parents moved before Unifon was abandoned, children had some problems adjusting in a school without Unifon. The Code Breaker books are intended to accompany students who make such a move, and the resources available to you now are also available to his new teacher. Indeed, the internet can offer solutions for such issues today that were not available in 1966, or even 1996.

In every phase of your reading program, think of preparing your children for the larger world of tomorrow, in flexibility, in critical thinking, in true enjoyment of all that we know at present. You will be building a sure foundation for them, with school the center, but not the boundary, of each child's learning.

*Margaret S. Ratz, PhD**

Read again the poignant testimony of Daralee Regnier, at the Unifon web site. Ms. Regnier was one of those 50 percent of students who have trouble with word recognition. What happened to her happens every year to roughly half the students in nearly every school system. Because funding depends on accomplishment, when students do not meet the artificial standards set by the school system, they are declared “unteachable,” or “retarded,” or given some other pseudo-designation that sets them aside as inferior. The net result for the school is that it is permitted thus to maintain a “standard of excellence”

* Ibid, p. 50.

in the community, and acquire the government funding the school needs in order to maintain its status quo. Meanwhile, a life is wasted, a mind discarded. What a travesty!

Ms. Regnier writes, “Margaret Ratz turned my life around.” That says a lot. What speaks volumes, however, is the fact that a mother went to bat for her child, who was declared unteachable, and was able to find Margaret Ratz, in retirement, still teaching Unifon. Ms. Regnier searched the Internet for the name of her teacher to find us, she did not remember the alphabet. When she began teaching at-risk children to read, she understood how important that summer with Dr. Ratz had been.

Such is the legacy of Margaret Ratz, Elizabeth Jones and John R. Malone.

How do you want your students to remember you?