

Dear Reading Selection Committee,

After using the Baratta-Lorton Reading Program for one year in kindergarten, I would like to share my thoughts about it with you.

At the beginning of the year, I was struck with how easily the children learned the sounds. For the first month, the program consisted of reading the book Dekodiphukan, which introduces the 44 sounds. This took a total of about an hour a day, including about 10 minutes each day on reviewing the sounds. After we read the book, we spent time on blending, using a direct instruction approach. By mid-November, the least number of sounds learned by a child in my room was 36. (Please note that I have a very average group, with 8 children qualifying for Title I.) Compare this with children who are taught the alphabet for 10 minutes every day of the school year and don't learn 26 of our traditional alphabet names and sounds.

I believe that the process for learning the sounds using Baratta-Lorton accesses the right brain, which is the part of the brain that all five-year olds are familiar with. On the other hand, kindergarten students are not always ready to learn well with their left brain, when they are asked to absorb abstract symbols for abstract concepts that they aren't interested in. I think we do students a great disservice by drilling them on alphabet that has no meaning and use to them before they are ready to learn.

In Baratta-Lorton, children learn to blend sounds into words as soon as they have learned 5 to 8 sounds. They begin with two-sound blends. There are numerous two-sound blends available in our language. Conversely, there are few, and even fewer useable, two-letter words. Some children spend only days on two-sound blends and are then ready for three-sound blends. However, some children have trouble remembering and sequencing, and so do not move to three-sound blends until they are ready much later in the year. Baratta-Lorton easily accommodates both learning situations.

In our traditional way of teaching, we have to begin teaching reading with three-sound blends. Having seen some of the difficulties this can create for the child who is not developmentally ready, and our lack of resources to help this child prepare, I feel very strongly that Baratta-Lorton provides me with a valuable tool by being able to start at the two-sound blending level.

By May, when we tested with Lippincott, I was struck with two realizations. The first is that every child considers themselves a reader. Every child in my class attempted every problem throughout

the test. Ordinarily, only my top five or ten students will even feel like they can try a test that ask them to read words. This year, however, every child tried, and every child was able to read at least one word. Nearly half read four or more of the six words on the test. The other wonderful observation was the extent to which my students could encode, or spell. On the spelling subtest, 16 children spelled one or more words correctly; 8 children scored 4 of 6 (I do not have an outstanding class); and 7 children even spelled swim correctly.

Katie and I made a decision to present letters, but not to drill or push them. I found, however, that even before we began presenting letters, the children were learning them. I think this is because the children were feeling comfortable with the concept of reading, because they knew what it meant to read, and because they saw themselves as readers. The sounds were easy to learn because they already had a concrete concept of the sound. I feel that my students have made as much growth in letter/sounds as they would have had I been using our traditional methods.

I am delighted with the grouping and station format of the program. There are times that the children do not manage their time or behavior at the level that I would like. However, I find that this is usually solved by slightly changing the format of the stations, or moving an individual child to a more advanced level. The materials are so appealing, that the children are anxious to use them.

There are so many aspects of this program that are exciting and meet my needs. It is non-competitive. It is developmentally appropriate. It combines direct instruction and independent activities. It is appropriate for all learning styles. It is right-brained. It integrates encoding very naturally. It is broken into much smaller steps than our language and alphabet would allow us to teach. The children learn independence from me, and interdependence on their classmates.

After using Baratta-Lorton for a year, the only thing that I feel it lacks is a literature base. However, what I want to use and teach from a literature standpoint is something that I need to choose and develop personally, and I would prefer not to have it selected and dictated to me. And therefore, I am very happy to be developing and integrating the Whole Language part of my program myself.

I think that the reading committee needs to consider the Baratta-Lorton program very seriously as an adoption at the kindergarten level. It is easily blended at first grade level with any other program. In asking the six teachers that used it last year if they were planning to use it again next year, I got a very strong and definite YES.

During the last year or two, every professional article or book that I pick up dealing with early childhood education says that we need to return to a more traditional kindergarten style, and leave the workbooks, the competition, and the academics for later years. I don't think that we can follow these recommendations in this community and school for a variety of reasons, but I feel that we harm a certain segment of our population by expecting them to work at a level that they are not developmentally ready for. I personally feel like the Baratta-Lorton gives the academic base that the community and school system expects from kindergarten. AND it gives us a program and tools to teach it to children at the level that a particular child is prepared to learn.

I feel like we are respecting the child, their individuality, and their self-esteem, by using this program. And it's fun!

I hope you will consider this letter, and feel free to ask me questions or visit my program.

Sincerely,

Linda S.