



Susan Mandel Glazer

## Issues in Literacy & Learning

# To Phonic or Not to Phonic?

*That may be the question, but there's no one right answer*

**W**e've all heard, again and again, that phonics is the basis for learning to read. The philosophical pendulum swings from one point of view to another. One school of thought attests that readers must learn phonics in order to learn to read; another insists that whole words need to be learned first.

### Which is right?

Neither is correct – nor incorrect. The word phonics is a derivative of the word phonetics, which is a branch of linguistics that deals with speech sounds of a language. In the *American Heritage Dictionary, Third Edition* (1997), phonics is defined as “a method of teaching elementary reading...” And that is the problem. Phonics is not a mode of teaching reading; rather, it is a method of teaching the sounds of our English language. Some believe that learning to make the sounds signified by the letters makes learning to read easier.

### A childhood anecdote

During my preschool years, I was able to listen to my mother read storybooks several times and remember them. This amazed my teachers, confirming my mother's notion that her child was gifted.

Expectations ran high, but first grade brought problems with reading and writing. Reading, for the first four months of school, consisted of phonics instruction. We learned a sound for every letter of the alphabet, every day. We recited each letter sound in front of the class. I couldn't sound out, so I was doomed.

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Finally the day came when our teacher, Miss Maybe, announced that we were going to read whole words, beginning with our names. “Sound out your name, Susan,” she said. This made no sense since I'd written and read my name since the age of three. But I tried. “Ssss-uuu...” “No, dear, it's 'sah-oooh-zan.' Now say it with me.”

After several tries, I was able to sound out my name. It was no longer “Susan,” but “Sah-oo-zan.”

Miss Maybe had us sound out our names daily. “Kalman,” she said as she wrote my classmate's name on the chalkboard, “please read your name.” “Ka-alma-en,” he said. “No,” she corrected. “Read it as if you are telling someone your name. You are sounding it out, not reading it.” “But that's what you told us to do!” he exclaimed. “You say to sound out my name every time I write it, too.”

### Means to a beginning

Kalmen and I were “over-phoniced.” Miss Maybe didn't realize that phonics is a means to an end, not the end itself. She forgot that reading poems, singing songs and telling stories with repetitive language are necessary steps in guiding children to read. These are the prerequisites that help children recognize for themselves that letters have interesting sounds.

### Some sound suggestions

**1** Read poems and stories daily that build awareness of sound-letter relationships. Many books focus on conso-

nant and vowel sounds. Others emphasize word families or diagraphs. Here are a few of my favorites:

#### Letter Sounds

*Big Brown Bear's Up and Down Day* by David McPhail (Harcourt, 2003)

*Dazzle the Dinosaur* by Marcus Pfister (North-South Books, 2000)

#### Word Families


*Kate Skates* by Jane O' Connor (Grosset & Dunlap, 1995)

*The Cat in the Hat* by Dr. Seuss (Random House, 1957)

*Phonics ought not to be considered a subject in school, or a determiner for reading success for all children.*

**2** Hang a large sheet of paper in an easily accessible spot. If, for exam-

ple, B is the letter of the day, read *Big Brown Bear's Up and Down Day* at story reading time. Within 15 minutes of reading the book, while your students are involved in other things, go to the chart. Don't stop them from what they are doing; talk “to yourself,” saying something like, “I have a B word I am writing on the chart. My B word is beautiful.” Return to your other activities, musing aloud, “I wonder if anyone else has a B word to write on the chart?” Invariably, your students will follow suit and write their words on the chart as well.

When children don't recognize a word, phonics can serve as a tool for helping them figure out the words they are reading and spell words they are writing. However, phonics ought not to be considered a subject in school, or a determiner for reading success for all children. 

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