

THE ROLE OF PHONICS  
IN THE PRIMARY READING PROGRAM

by

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## INTRODUCTION

The teaching of reading has been and continues to be of vital concern to the people of this country. Although the importance of reading in the American society has been recognized since early colonial times, there has been an increased interest in recent years. The need to be informed in the various fields of knowledge makes it imperative that both children and adults develop greater proficiency in reading. Reading skills considered adequate a century ago do not meet the demands of today's world.

Teaching the child to read has been a major responsibility of the elementary school. The primary grades, in particular, have devoted more attention to reading than any other phase of the curriculum.<sup>1</sup> Hildreth emphasized the significance of beginning reading when she stated:

This is the most critical period in the child's career because his subsequent progress depends so largely on the skills learned and the habits formed during the first three or four years. If reading gets off to a good start in Grades 1 and 2, the child's future growth in literacy is fairly well assured.<sup>2</sup>

An alarming number of pupils, despite efforts to teach every child to read, have not attained satisfactory reading ability. Poor reading has been the most frequent cause of failure in the elementary school, especially in the first and second grades.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Albert J. Harris, How to Increase Reading Ability (New York: Longmans, Green and Company, 1961), p. 3.

<sup>2</sup>Gertrude Hildreth, Teaching Reading - A Guide to Basic Principles and Modern Practices (New York: Henry Holt and Company, Inc., 1958), p. 198.

<sup>3</sup>Albert J. Harris, How to Increase Reading Ability (New York: Longmans, Green and Company, 1961), p. 3.

The child who fails in reading experiences failure in practically every other field, remarked Adams.<sup>1</sup> In view of the fact that reading is both a subject of instruction and a tool for the mastery of other areas of the curriculum, the ability to read well has been regarded as the first requisite for securing a good education.

Some critics believe the present day reading instruction to be inferior to that of past years in the United States and that now provided in other countries. Even though reading authorities have presented facts contrary to this contention, the criticism and additional factors have resulted in the formulation of recommendations for improving the reading program. One of the most frequent suggestions pertained to the teaching of phonics.

#### STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The purpose of the study was to determine the role of phonics in the reading program of the primary grades. The writer (1) desired to examine the historical development of phonics in the teaching of reading; (2) wished to determine the values and limitations of phonic instruction; and (3) wanted to obtain the views of authorities concerning the approaches used in teaching phonics.

#### LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The broad nature of the topic necessitated that limitations be placed on the study in order that specific aspects of phonics could be

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<sup>1</sup>Fay Adams, Lillian Gray, and Dora Reese, Teaching Children to Read (New York: Ronald Press Company, 1949), p. 4.

investigated. The study was confined to the primary grades with emphasis on beginning reading. Information for this report was restricted to library research.

#### DEFINITION OF TERMS

Basal reading program. The basal reading program refers to that part of the reading program principally concerned with the systematic teaching of the fundamental reading skills.

Phonetic analysis. Phonetic analysis means the analysis of words into the elements that correspond to speech sounds.

Phonetics. Phonetics is the science of speech sounds.

Phonic readiness. Phonic readiness means the time when the child is sufficiently mature to work successfully with phonics.

Phonics. Phonics pertains to phonetics as applied to the teaching of reading.

Phonogram. A phonogram is a letter or group of letters used to represent a speech sound.

Sight vocabulary. Sight vocabulary has reference to the words that the child recognizes as he reads, without resort to word analysis techniques.

#### RELATED LITERATURE

During the past few decades one of the most controversial issues in reading instruction has concerned the place of phonics in the teaching of reading. Heilman stated:

The justification for discussing phonics in isolation lies in the premise that there is considerable confusion and insecurity among a number of elementary teachers with regard to teaching phonics.

This premise is supported by investigations which indicate that teachers consistently state that their greatest instructional need is an understanding of phonics.<sup>1</sup>

Gans pointed out that as in dealing with most aspects of education individuals express strong feelings and firmly held convictions but possess little information about phonics.<sup>2</sup> A similar idea was presented by Betts who said, "So many unfounded and unsubstantial statements have been made by the 'so-called experts' that teachers find themselves very much confused and uncertain as to how they should use phonics in teaching reading."<sup>3</sup>

#### THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF PHONICS IN READING INSTRUCTION

Knowledge of the history of phonics, contended Heilman, would be helpful in understanding some of the attitudes, misunderstandings, and problems in American education today.<sup>4</sup> Phonics was not used until 175 years after the initial settlement of the colonies in 1607. Following the Revolutionary War, Noah Webster, one of the patriots concerned with promoting the unification of this nation, analyzed the English language into sound elements as a means of eliminating the diversity of dialects.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Arthur W. Heilman, Principles and Practices of Teaching Reading (Columbus, Ohio: Charles E. Merrill Books, Inc., 1961), p. 210.

<sup>2</sup>Roma Gans, Fact and Fiction About Phonics (Kansas City: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1964), p. v.

<sup>3</sup>Emmett A. Betts, "A First Essential: Phonics," The Reading Teacher, IX (December, 1955), p. 66.

<sup>4</sup>Heilman, op. cit., p. 211.

<sup>5</sup>Mila Banton Smith, "Phonics Then and Now," Education, LXXV (May, 1955), p. 560.

The American Spelling Book or the Blueback Speller, the first phonic book copyrighted in 1782, became one of the most influential books used in the teaching of reading.<sup>1</sup>

Webster's method of phonics, which consisted of isolated drill in pronouncing sound elements, had as its purpose teaching the correct pronunciation of words. Teachers noticed that learning the sounds of letters also aided the children in recognizing words. Eventually, the patriotic emphasis on phonics subsided. However, the sounding technique continued to be used as a means of word analysis.<sup>2</sup>

Although Samuel Worcester had advocated its use as early as 1828, the word approach to beginning reading did not attract widespread interest until a number of American educators had observed the Prussian educational system.<sup>3</sup> The first readers based on the word method were written by Bumstead in 1840 and Webb in 1846. Smith asserted that there was opposition to teaching the sounds during the period 1840 to 1860, but a majority of schools continued to use the phonic method.<sup>4</sup>

Rebecca S. Pollard, in her manual on the Synthetic Method published in 1889, expressed dissatisfaction with the word approach in this way:

Instead of teaching the word as a whole, and afterward subjecting it to phonic analysis, is it not infinitely better to take the letters for the starting point, and with these sounds

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<sup>1</sup>Paul Witty, Reading in Modern Education (Boston: D. C. Heath Company, 1949), p. 3.

<sup>2</sup>Mila Banton Smith, "What Research Tells Us About Word Recognition," Elementary School Journal, LV (April, 1955), p. 440.

<sup>3</sup>Witty, op. cit., p. 5.

<sup>4</sup>Mila Banton Smith, "What Research Tells Us About Word Recognition," Elementary School Journal, LV (April, 1955), p. 441.

lay a foundation firm and broad, upon which we can build whole families of words for instant recognition?<sup>1</sup>

The Pollard Method included these recommended procedures:

1. Drills in articulation were to precede any attempt at reading.
2. Single consonants were 'sounded'.
3. Drill on word families was stressed.
4. Diacritical markings were introduced in the first grade.

This highly organized approach to teaching reading was of special significance because a number of widely used reading texts reflected the influence of these ideas.<sup>2</sup>

The Pollard, Ward, and Gordon systems were based on the final blend method of phonics in which the initial consonant is blended with the phonogram. Edward G. Ward's Rational Method, introduced in 1894, differed from Pollard's plan in that it required the mastery of eighty-four sight words before any reading was undertaken. Intensive phonic training was delayed until after reading had been introduced. Gordon incorporated the concepts of both Ward and Pollard.<sup>3</sup>

The manual for the Beacon readers, published by Fassett and Norton in 1912, also emphasized that sight words should precede the use of phonics. The new initial blend method, in which the initial consonant is blended with the vowel and then into a whole word, was explained in detail.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Anna D. Cordts, Phonics for the Reading Teacher (Chicago: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1965), p. 213.

<sup>2</sup>Heilman, op. cit., p. 212.

<sup>3</sup>Cordts, op. cit., pp. 216-218.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., pp. 218-219.

Cordts stated that from the time of Pollard until 1926, the various systems of phonics had these characteristics:

1. They were based on the synthetic approach to phonics, which began with the smallest units, namely the individual sounds, which were blended into larger units and finally into the word whole.

2. The sounds of letters, vowels, and consonants were taught in isolation.

3. Their objective in teaching phonics was to enable the children to sound out the unfamiliar words in reading.<sup>1</sup>

As early as 1910, educators had pointed out the possible limitations of confining reading instruction to intensive drill on phonics.<sup>2</sup> A number of factors including experimental research in education, the influence of newly established principles of child development, and the application of psychology to reading instruction contributed to a decreased emphasis on phonics at this time.<sup>3</sup>

Writers expressed a difference of opinion relative to how extensively phonics was used in the 1930's. Harris stated:

Misunderstanding of the research on phonics caused many schools to swing during the 1930's from somewhat of an overemphasis on oral reading and phonics, to an even more undesirable total elimination of phonics instruction, or to reliance upon incidental or accidental learning of word analysis skills.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Ibid., pp. 219-220.

<sup>2</sup>Arthur I. Gates, Teaching Reading (Washington, D.C.: American Educational Research Association of the National Education Association), p. 23.

<sup>3</sup>Wila Banton Smith, Reading Instruction for Today's Children (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1963), p. 192.

<sup>4</sup>Albert J. Harris, How to Increase Reading Ability (New York: Longmans, Green and Company, 1961), p. 362.

According to Betts, school readers did offer systematic help on phonics as an aid to word identification.<sup>1</sup>

Since the 1940's, there has been renewed emphasis on phonics as a means of independent word perception.<sup>2</sup> By 1960, there was a trend in many school systems toward variable amounts of phonetic analysis activities as a part of the basic reading program or as a valuable section of a remedial program.<sup>3</sup>

Smith pointed out that an examination of courses of study, the basal reader manuals, and professional literature provides evidence that phonics is being taught at the present.<sup>4</sup>

#### JUSTIFICATION FOR TEACHING PHONICS

##### The Importance of Phonics

There was near unanimity among writers that phonics has a definite place in the reading program. These authors emphasized that the disagreements do not pertain to the value of phonics but rather what phonetic elements should be taught, the sequence in which these should be introduced, and the selection of the methods and materials to be utilized.

Dolch expressed the following view on the teaching of phonics:

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<sup>1</sup>Emmett Albert Betts, "Phonics and Related Word Perception Skills," Education, LXXV (May, 1955), p. 549.

<sup>2</sup>Mila Benton Smith, "What Research Says About Phonics Instruction," Journal of Educational Research, LI (September, 1957), p. 1.

<sup>3</sup>David H. Russell, Children Learn to Read (Chicago: Ginn and Company, 1961), p. 303.

<sup>4</sup>Mila Benton Smith, "Phonics in Beginning Reading: Review and Evaluation," The Reading Teacher, IX (December, 1955), pp. 75-76.

Phonics have a recognized place in the teaching of reading. Despite many complaints about the ineffective teaching of phonics, there is common agreement that the child who cannot sound out the new words he meets is tremendously handicapped in any independent reading.<sup>1</sup>

In 1961, a number of nationally known educators prepared the following statement on the place of phonics in the reading program:

We consider phonics as one of the essential skills that help children identify printed words that they have not seen before and then to understand the meaning these words represent. Without phonics children cannot become self-reliant, discriminating, efficient readers.<sup>2</sup>

Data secured in numerous experimental studies indicate that phonics is important in reading. Agnew, who investigated the effect of phonics on the reading of primary pupils, pointed out that phonetic training increases independence in recognizing words previously learned, aids in unlocking new words by giving the reader a method of sound analysis, encourages correct pronunciation, and improves the quality of oral reading.<sup>3</sup> Tiffin and McKinnis concluded that the functional mastery of the principles of phonics is significantly related to reading ability.<sup>4</sup> In 1964, Cutts cited recent research, particularly that at Boston University, which

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<sup>1</sup>Edward W. Dolch, "Phonics and Polysyllables," Elementary English Review, XV (April, 1938), p. 120, cited by Emmett A. Betts, Foundations of Reading Instruction (Chicago: American Book Company, 1946), p. 615.

<sup>2</sup>Learning to Read: A Report of a Conference of Reading Experts (Princeton, New Jersey: Educational Testing Service, 1961), p. 3.

<sup>3</sup>Donald C. Agnew, The Effects of Varied Amounts of Phonetic Training on Primary Reading (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Research Studies in Education, No. 5, 1939), pp. vii-50.

<sup>4</sup>Joseph Tiffin and Mary McKinnis, "Phonics Ability: Its Measurement and Relation to Reading Ability," School and Society, LV (February, 1940), p. 191.

indicates that children taught letter names and sounds score significantly higher on reading achievement tests.<sup>1</sup>

Some specific phonetic techniques employed by the child in the primary grades as listed by Harris are:

1. He makes use of the first letter or two and the general shape or configuration of the word.
2. When utilizing consonant substitution he notes that the word is similar to a word he knows except for one or two letters, the sounds of which are familiar.
3. He applies phonic rules.
4. He thinks of the word family to which the word belongs.
5. He sounds the word out by groups of letters and blends the sounds together.
6. He sounds the word letter by letter and then blends the sounds together.<sup>2</sup>

An examination of the literature revealed that phonics makes its major contribution when used as a word attack skill. Many writers pointed out that the problems associated with word analysis appear to increase as the child's interests expand and the reading material becomes more difficult. Though continuing to grow, the sight vocabulary seldom, if ever, includes all the words needed for independent reading.

The reader is forced to use the word attack skills individually and in combination when the sight vocabulary becomes inadequate. Most writers maintained that a multiple approach to word analysis utilizing

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<sup>1</sup>Warren G. Cutts, Modern Reading Instruction (Washington, D.C.: The Center for Applied Research in Education, Inc., 1964), p. 24.

<sup>2</sup>Albert J. Harris, How to Increase Reading Ability (New York: Longmans, Green and Company, 1961), pp. 326-327.

context clues, word form clues, phonetic and structural analysis, and the dictionary encourages the reader to use the most appropriate procedure or procedures. The multiple approach plan is based on the assumption that a word should be attacked analytically only when it cannot be recognized as a whole.<sup>1</sup>

Burrows stated that, considering present knowledge of child development and the nature of reading, word analysis should not be restricted to the phonetic approach.<sup>2</sup> Beery reported that the National Society for the Study of Education yearbook committee viewed phonics as only one means of word recognition. The committee did not sanction some of the complex programs of phonetic analysis because they isolate practice from the reading situation, emphasize overanalytic techniques, consume time that should be devoted to reading itself, and initiate set ways of attacking words.<sup>3</sup>

Gates, who recommended the use of phonics along with the other word attack skills, summarized the problem this way:

The great mistake in American teaching has been the assumption that phonetic skill was all important and sufficient, that the other types of training could be neglected, and the more phonetic experience the pupils got the better.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 325.

<sup>2</sup>Alvina Treut Burrows, What About Phonics? (Washington, D.C.: Bulletin No. 57 of the Association for Childhood Education International, 1951), p. 16.

<sup>3</sup>Althea Beery, "Development of Reading Vocabulary and Word Recognition," Reading in the Elementary School, Forty-eighth Yearbook, Part II, National Society for the Study of Education (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949), p. 180.

<sup>4</sup>Arthur I. Gates, The Improvement of Reading (New York: Macmillan Company, 1935), p. 238, cited by Agnes G. Gunderson, "Simplified Phonics," Elementary School Journal, XXXIX (April, 1939), p. 593.

### The Limitations of Phonics

Several writers, though advocating the inclusion of phonics in the teaching of reading, emphasized that its use has many limitations. These deficiencies were more apparent when phonics was used either as an approach to beginning reading or as a single method of teaching.

Some of the major criticisms as summarized by DeBoer and Dallman are:

1. Since English spelling is relatively unphonetic, many words cannot be unlocked by means of phonetic analysis.
2. The study of phonics places the emphasis upon a mechanical, rather than meaning, approach to word recognition.
3. To teach a child enough phonics to help him become proficient in deciphering or remembering words through phonetic analysis, so much instruction is needed that the time spent on other phases of reading instruction is likely to be reduced below a safe minimum.
4. Teaching of phonics destroys interest in reading.
5. Readers in the process of becoming adept in phonetic analysis of words are likely to become slow readers.<sup>1</sup>

In addition to the criticisms stated by DeBoer and Dallman, Betts presented these indictments:

1. Overemphasis on phonics as an aid to word recognition produces 'word callers'.
2. Unnatural articulation is often produced by unwise phonic instruction.
3. Phonic skills do not carry over into normal reading situations.
4. Not all children can profit from the usual phonics instruction.

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<sup>1</sup>John James DeBoer and Martha Dallman, The Teaching of Reading (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1960), pp. 83-84.

5. The usual letter-type phonics instruction does not carry over to the pronunciation of polysyllabic words.<sup>1</sup>

Questions have been raised in regard to the rationale of certain practices used in teaching phonics in the primary grades. In view of the abundance of phonic elements included in the reading program major consideration should be given to those used most frequently.

Several investigators attempted to discover the phonograms which occur most often in reading. McKee pointed out that the phonograms at the beginning and ending of words are more useful than those in the medial position. Some phonograms are rendered relatively useless by the fact that each of them is used for several different sounds.<sup>2</sup>

Smith expressed the view that phonic instruction emphasizing blending consonants with the family name is of limited value.<sup>3</sup> Dolch found that 11.6 per cent of the words contained these family elements.<sup>4</sup> Heilman stressed that this did not mean that the teaching of word families should be entirely eliminated because many of these words appear frequently in beginning reading.<sup>5</sup>

Teaching the child to look for small words in larger ones as a routine word analysis procedure seems to be inadvisable, stated McKim.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Emmett Albert Betts, Foundations of Reading Instruction (Chicago: American Book Company, 1946), p. 615.

<sup>2</sup>Paul McKee, The Teaching of Phonetic Analysis, A McKee Reading Bulletin (Chicago: Houghton Mifflin Company), p. 4.

<sup>3</sup>Mile Banton Smith, Reading Instruction for Today's Children (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1963), p. 203.

<sup>4</sup>Edward W. Dolch, "Sight Syllables Versus Letter Phonics," Elementary School Journal, XLI (September, 1940), p. 38.

<sup>5</sup>Heilman, op. cit., p. 216.

<sup>6</sup>Margaret G. McKim, Guiding Growth in Reading (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1957), p. 296.

Heilman pointed out that many small words retain some degree of pronounceable autonomy in single syllable words but lose this characteristic in words of more than one syllable.<sup>1</sup>

There was a diversity of opinion in regard to the value of specific phonic generalizations included in basal series and phonic books. Clymer determined the utility of forty-five phonic generalizations taught in the primary grades. Only eighteen of these met his criterion of 75 per cent utility. He pointed out that such common rules as, 'When two vowels go walking, the first one does the talking,' provide the correct pronunciation less than 50 per cent of the time. Clymer concluded that programs presenting a large number of generalizations are open to question.<sup>2</sup>

Spache advocated the exclusion of those generalizations not essential to the teaching of phonics. He declared, "Certainly teaching children a number of rules which frequently fail to function or work only in a relatively small number of words cannot be justified."<sup>3</sup>

Harris stated:

English is a sufficiently irregular language from the phonic standpoint to make it unwise to follow the rules blindly. Teachers must lead children to expect exceptions and use intelligent trial and error when the first attempt to solve the word does not make sense.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Heilman, op. cit., p. 213.

<sup>2</sup>Theodore Clymer, "The Utility of Phonic Generalizations in the Primary Grades," The Reading Teacher, XVI (January, 1963), pp. 252-258.

<sup>3</sup>George D. Spache, Reading in the Elementary School (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, Inc., 1964), p. 297.

<sup>4</sup>Albert J. Harris, How to Increase Reading Ability (New York: Longmans, Green and Company, 1961), p. 328.

Many of the criticisms of phonics originated in the early part of this century when highly systematized synthetic methods of phonics were used.<sup>1</sup> Often the indictment should be against the misuse of a practice rather than the practice itself.<sup>2</sup> Spache expressed the view that the final arguments against phonics on the grounds that it encourages undesirable habits of word analysis and produces slow, uninterested readers may be refuted by a more careful choice of the materials of instruction and by giving increased attention to relevant psychological principles.<sup>3</sup> Likewise, DeBoer and Dallman believed that the limitations of phonics could be reduced in seriousness or eliminated if phonetic analysis were taught according to recommended practices.<sup>4</sup>

#### APPROACHES TO TEACHING PHONICS

##### Readiness for Phonics

After the concept of general reading readiness was accepted, attention was focused on readiness for phonics. The term phonic readiness has been defined as the time when the child is sufficiently mature to work successfully with phonics.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>David E. Bear, "Phonics for First Grade: A Comparison of Two Methods," Elementary School Journal, LIX (April, 1959), p. 394.

<sup>2</sup>Heilman, op. cit., p. 215.

<sup>3</sup>George D. Spache, "A Phonics Manual for Primary and Remedial Teachers," Elementary English Review, XVI (April-May, 1939), pp. 147-150, 156, 191-198; cited by William S. Gray, "Reading," Review of Educational Research, X (April, 1940), p. 91.

<sup>4</sup>John James DeBoer and Martha Dallman, The Teaching of Reading (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1960), p. 84.

<sup>5</sup>Nils Eanton Smith, "Phonics in Beginning Reading: Review and Evaluation," The Reading Teacher, IX (December, 1955), p. 79.

A number of studies were conducted to determine the stage at which phonic instruction should be introduced. Arthur concluded that a mental age of six and a half years is the optimum time for phonic instruction. However, some gains in phonic ability were made at a mental age of five and a half.<sup>1</sup>

Dolch and Bloomster reported that children of high mental ages may fail to acquire phonic skill, but those with low mental ability are almost certain to fail. These researchers suggested that a mental age of seven years seems to be the earliest time at which a child can be expected to use phonics.<sup>2</sup>

Sexton and Herron found that phonics was of very little or no value during the first five months of reading instruction, began to be of some help during the later part of first grade, but was more beneficial in the second grade.<sup>3</sup> Most of the training in phonics should be deferred until grades two and three, concluded Garrison and Heard.<sup>4</sup> Winch, in a study

<sup>1</sup>Grace Arthur, "A Quantitative Study of the Results of Grouping First-Grade Classes According to Mental Age," Journal of Educational Research, XII (October, 1925), p. 178.

<sup>2</sup>Edward W. Dolch and Maurine Bloomster, "Phonics Readiness," Elementary School Journal, XXXIX (November, 1937), pp. 201-205.

<sup>3</sup>Elmer K. Sexton and John S. Herron, "The Newark Phonics Experiment," Elementary School Journal, XXVIII (May, 1928), p. 701.

<sup>4</sup>H. C. Garrison and H. T. Heard, "An Experimental Study of the Value of Phonics," Peabody Journal of Education, IX (July, 1931), pp. 9-14, cited by Alan H. Robinson, "Phonics Instruction--When? What? For Whom?" Reading as an Intellectual Activity, International Reading Association Conference Proceedings, Vol. 8 (New York: Scholastic Magazines, 1963), p. 226.

of teaching beginners to read in England, also suggested delaying phonic instruction until grade two. However, children in the English schools were a year younger.<sup>1</sup>

There were numerous statements in the literature about the impracticality of beginning phonic instruction before a mental age of six and a half or seven. While readiness for phonics can be developed earlier, stated Smith, authorities agree that intensive use of phonics should be delayed until the second grade.<sup>2</sup>

Durrell and others disputed some of the earlier studies and practices in regard to phonic readiness. In a recent report based on four doctoral dissertations, Durrell challenged the importance of mental age as it relates to phonics. Three of the investigators found a low correlation between mental age and the ability to use phonics. Durrell recommended teaching phonics to all pupils at the beginning of the first grade but with provision for individual needs.<sup>3</sup>

Both Harris and Spache commented that some of the earlier theories regarding mental age for phonic readiness seemed debatable in view of the fact that McKee and others have introduced this phase of reading earlier.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup>W. H. Winch, "Teaching Beginners to Read in England: Its Methods, Results, and Psychological Bases," Journal of Educational Research Monographs No. 8 (Bloomington, Illinois: Publishing School Publishing Company, 1925), p. 185; cited by Alan H. Robinson, "Phonics Instruction--When? What? For Whom?" Reading as an Intellectual Activity, International Reading Association Conference Proceedings, Vol. 8 (New York: Scholastic Magazines, 1963), p. 226.

<sup>2</sup>Mila Banton Smith, "Phonics Then and Now," Education, LXXV (May, 1955), p. 565.

<sup>3</sup>Donald D. Durrell, "First Grade Reading Success Study: A Summary," Journal of Education, CXL (February, 1958), p. 3.

<sup>4</sup>Albert J. Harris, How to Increase Reading Ability (New York: Longmans, Green and Company, 1961), p. 329, and George D. Spache, Reading in the Elementary School (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, Inc., 1964), p. 383.

Harris believed that the Dolch-Bloomster phonic test presented the child with a more difficult task than that encountered in connected, meaningful reading. Thus, the phonic readiness of first graders had been slightly underestimated.<sup>1</sup>

The evidence indicated that no definite statement can be made in regard to the stage of a child's development when phonics is most profitable. Readiness for phonics is an individual matter dependent on many factors, stated Smith. She listed the following criteria as a guide for determining the time at which children should begin sounding letters as a means of determining the pronunciation of words:

1. Children should develop an interest in reading and a desire to read before working with such technical aspects as sounding letters.
2. Children should acquire the attitude of reading for meaning in sentences, phrases, and word wholes before having their attention directed to the analysis of words into sound elements--an activity which might distract temporarily from their meaning concepts.
3. Children should have practice in visual and auditory perception which skills are fundamental to the use of phonics.
4. Children should first acquire a reading vocabulary of word wholes sufficient to represent the letter sounds which are later to be taught so that they may generalize from known words those sounds needed in unlocking new words.
5. It is important to make a start in the type of reading which is conducive to the establishment of good eye movement before having the children concentrate on the smaller units within words.<sup>2</sup>

DeBoer and Dallman emphasized that the conclusions reached in the studies are based on averages and should not be used as a substitute for

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<sup>1</sup>Albert J. Harris, How to Increase Reading Ability (New York: Longmans, Green and Company, 1961), p. 329.

<sup>2</sup>Mila Banton Smith, Reading Instruction for Today's Children (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1963), p. 211-212.

the trained observation of the teacher in determining if a child is ready to receive phonic instruction.<sup>1</sup> The teacher has the responsibility of providing for individual differences by adapting the methods and materials to the needs and interests of the pupil. The following aspects of phonic readiness identified by Harris should be helpful in appraising the background of the child:

1. The child should be able to hear that there is a difference between words that sound somewhat alike.
2. He should be able to detect whether two words begin with the same sound or not.
3. He should be sensitive to rhymes, should be able to pick out words that rhyme, and should be able to supply words to rhyme with a given word.
4. He should be able to hear similarities and differences in word endings.
5. He should be able to hear similarities and differences in middle vowels.
6. He should be able to listen to the pronunciation of a word sound by sound and fuse or blend the sounds mentally so as to be able to recognize the word intended.<sup>2</sup>

At any given age some children are less mature than others in the ability to make and apply inferences from phonic instruction. More of the stimulating activities which make up a good program for all around child development rather than more intensive phonics should be provided for these children.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>John James DeBoer and Martha Dallman, The Teaching of Reading (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1960), p. 104.

<sup>2</sup>Albert J. Harris, How to Increase Reading Ability (New York: Longmans, Green and Company, 1961), pp. 330-331.

<sup>3</sup>Burrows, op. cit., p. 19.

### Phonics in Beginning Reading

Smith classified the many approaches to the teaching of phonics into two general categories:

1. Those in which the child is taught to recognize whole words for a short time as a preliminary to teaching phonics.
2. Those that start the beginning reader directly in learning the sounds of letters.<sup>1</sup>

Teaching a sight vocabulary. A majority of reading authorities favored teaching a sight vocabulary first because of evidence indicating this to be the more effective method, reported Smith.<sup>2</sup> Spache suggested that the whole word method should precede the use of phonics for the following reasons:

1. There is some evidence that early instruction in phonics is apt to be ineffectual with children under the mental age of six and one-half to seven years.
2. Too early introduction of phonics may tend to make children dependent upon letter sounds as their major or only technique of word recognition. Rapid recognition and, hence, rate of reading are impaired by this dependency.
3. Too early or too great an emphasis upon phonics may make pupils read over-cautiously, slowly, and too analytically. These habits are difficult to overcome and may interfere with the normal development of rate and comprehension.
4. The habit of rapid word recognition by a variety of clues is of permanent value in reading development. Therefore, it should be established early and none of the several clues taught, such as phonics, should be permitted to interfere with or displace this essential habit.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Mila Banton Smith, Reading Instruction for Today's Children (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1963), p. 198.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>George D. Spache, Reading in the Elementary School (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, Inc., 1964), p. 297.

Phonic training seems to be most beneficial after the child has acquired a sight vocabulary of the words included in beginning reading books, emphasized Dickson.<sup>1</sup> In 1939, Gunderson stated that there was a tendency to prolong the period of preliminary preparation and to postpone the teaching of phonics until the child learns to notice similarities and differences in words and acquires a sight vocabulary of from sixty to a hundred words or more.<sup>2</sup> Burrows, who summarized twenty years of research, commented that many reading authorities agree on a minimum of twenty-five to one hundred sight words as a prerequisite to word analysis.<sup>3</sup>

Some educators have opposed delaying phonics until a sizeable sight vocabulary is acquired. They insisted that it is difficult for the child to recall a number of words when general appearance and context are the major clues. McKee thought that the phonetic elements learned during the time that the first preprimer is being read could be used as an aid in remembering words already taught by the sight method or as a means of identifying unfamiliar words.<sup>4</sup>

Olson expressed the view that acquaintance with the sounds and names of letters is necessary to the development of a basic sight vocabulary. He concluded that it is difficult to justify the memorization of seventy-five words prior to instruction in word analysis.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Belle L. Dickson, "Trends in the Teaching of Phonics," California Journal of Elementary Education, V (August, 1936), p. 56.

<sup>2</sup>Agnes G. Gunderson, "Simplified Phonics," Elementary School Journal, XXXIX (April, 1939), p. 594.

<sup>3</sup>Burrows, op. cit., p. 18.

<sup>4</sup>Paul McKee, The Teaching of Reading in the Elementary School (Chicago: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1948), p. 200.

<sup>5</sup>Arthur V. Olson, "Growth in Word Perception Abilities as it Relates to Success in Beginning Reading," Journal of Education (February, 1958) p. 36.

Artley recommended that phonic principles should be taught in a systematic and sequential manner as soon as the child develops an initial vocabulary sufficient to enable him to discover phonetic understandings from the known words.<sup>1</sup> The following view by DeBoer and Dallman reinforces Artley's contention:

Phonic analysis should follow experience with sight words, and it should be introduced as soon as it appears useful in helping to bring about instantaneous recognition of whole words. The child should continually be encouraged to add new words to his sight vocabulary, but instruction in the likenesses and differences in phonetic elements in words should begin fairly early in the process of learning to read.<sup>2</sup>

DeBoer and Dallman, Dolch, McKee, and Smith suggested that the pupil is ready for simple phonic concepts after he learns two to four words which begin with the same consonant sound.<sup>3</sup>

A phonic approach. In recent years some have advocated an increased use of phonics in the initial stages of learning to read. Henderson, who disagreed with a group of educators on the place of phonics in the reading program, said:

There is evidence that phonetic elements and principles of word analysis can be introduced and emphasized through meaningful application prior to memorizing any group of words

<sup>1</sup>A. Sterl Artley, "Phonics Skills in Beginning Reading," Education, LXXXII (May, 1962), p. 531.

<sup>2</sup>John James DeBoer and Martha Dallman, The Teaching of Reading (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1964), p. 95.

<sup>3</sup>John James DeBoer and Martha Dallman, The Teaching of Reading (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1960), p. 86; Edward W. Dolch, "Phonics in the First Grade," Elementary English, XXXII (December, 1955), p. 517; Paul McKee, The Teaching of Reading in the Elementary School (Chicago: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1948), p. 200; and Nila Banton Smith, Reading Instruction for Today's Children (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1963), p. 202.

by sight. The first and most vital step toward making the pupil independent in reading is taken when phonetic analysis is introduced before the pupil becomes dependent upon the memorization of words.<sup>1</sup>

Some of the most frequently mentioned reasons for using a phonic approach as listed by Heilman are:

1. In learning to read the child should develop analytic skills from the beginning. The sight word method delays the introduction of phonic analysis too long.

2. Children in the first grade can learn both the phonic elements in words and generalizations covering many situations. When they learn these, they have a valuable and useful tool in all reading situations.

3. It follows that with these skills children become independent in their reading much earlier, and there is less need for rigidly controlled vocabulary and constant repetition of the same words in text materials.

4. Data indicate that, after the first year, children taught by the phonic method perform a variety of reading tasks much better than do comparable groups taught by the sight word method.<sup>2</sup>

The three common procedures utilized in teaching phonics are those intended for use before, instead of, or as a supplement to basal readers, reported Harris. He maintained that the claims of outstanding results attributed to the use of the newer phonic methods should not be accepted until verified by independent investigation.<sup>3</sup>

Several researchers compared a phonetic approach with an eclectic approach to beginning reading. Henderson, Sparks and Fay, and Morgan

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<sup>1</sup>Learning to Read: A Report of a Conference of Reading Experts (Princeton, New Jersey: Educational Testing Service, 1961), p. 3.

<sup>2</sup>Heilman, op. cit., p. 237.

<sup>3</sup>Albert J. Harris, Effective Teaching of Reading (New York: David McKay Company, Inc., 1962), p. 61.

and Light compared the Phonetic Keys to Reading to basal readers.<sup>1</sup>

Henderson's data showed a definite advantage for the Phonetic Keys to Reading in comprehension, vocabulary, and spelling.<sup>2</sup>

The study by Sparks and Fay revealed that the phonic group was superior in reading comprehension and vocabulary at the end of the first grade. At the conclusion of the second grade the phonic method showed superiority in reading comprehension, but there was no significant difference between the two groups in vocabulary. By the third grade there was no apparent difference except the slow learning group which had used the basic reading program showed slight superiority in reading comprehension. One year later the group which had been taught by the basic reading program appeared to be superior in reading accuracy. Sparks and Fay concluded that the intensive program of phonics used in the Phonetics Keys to Reading method apparently produced no better results than did the basal reader approach.<sup>3</sup>

Research by Morgan and Light revealed that generally the results favored the phonetic approach through grades one and two. These writers

<sup>1</sup>Margaret G. Henderson, "A New Phonics Approach to Primary Reading Instruction," Chicago Schools Journal, XXXVII (1956), pp. 141-147, cited by Albert J. Harris, How to Increase Reading Ability (New York: Longmans, Green and Company, 1961), p. 81; Paul E. Sparks and Leo C. Fay, "An Evaluation of Two Methods of Teaching Reading," Elementary School Journal, LVII (April, 1957), pp. 386-390; and Elmer F. Morgan and Morton Light, "A Statistical Evaluation of Two Programs of Reading Instruction," Journal of Educational Research, LV (October, 1963), pp. 99-101.

<sup>2</sup>Margaret G. Henderson, "A New Phonics Approach to Primary Reading Instruction," Chicago Schools Journal, XXXVII (1956), pp. 141-147, cited by Albert J. Harris, How to Increase Reading Ability (New York: Longmans, Green and Company, 1961), p. 81.

<sup>3</sup>Paul E. Sparks and Leo C. Fay, "An Evaluation of Two Methods of Teaching Reading," Elementary School Journal, LVII (April, 1957), pp. 388-390.

commented that their findings and that of Sparks and Fay did not support Henderson's contention that the phonetic program produced superior readers by the end of grade three.<sup>1</sup>

After reviewing similar research Harris reached the following tentative conclusions:

1. The intensively phonic methods have not been proved to have better results than the basal reader methods, especially when comparisons are made at and above third grade.
2. Since the basal reader method has not come out ahead in any of these recent studies, authors of basal readers may well consider a somewhat earlier and more intensive program of word analysis instruction than has been common in the 1940's and 1950's.
3. Much more research is needed before the questions of how and when to teach word recognition skills will be settled.<sup>2</sup>

A number of authors in summarizing their discussion comparing a phonic approach to a basal reader approach of teaching beginning reading quoted Gray who stated:

One of the lessons taught by these findings is that the use of a given method produces superior results in the phases of reading which it emphasizes. In selecting methods for use at any stage of reading development, teachers should be guided by a clear knowledge of the various types of progress that pupils should make at a given time. As a rule, some training in phonics is of value in helping primary grade pupils to recognize printed words which are phonetic in character and familiar in oral conversation.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Elmer F. Morgan and Morton Light, "A Statistical Evaluation of Two Programs of Reading Instruction," Journal of Educational Research, LV (October, 1963), pp. 100.

<sup>2</sup>Albert J. Harris, How to Increase Reading Ability (New York: Longmans, Green and Company, 1961), p. 82.

<sup>3</sup>William S. Gray, "Reading," Review of Educational Research, X (April, 1940), pp. 79-106.

The Need for Supplementary Phonic Materials

There were various views in regard to whether the basal series made adequate provision for teaching phonics. "In spite of what critics, and those ignorant of the facts, may say to the contrary," stated Hoggard, "adequate provision has been made for the teaching of phonics in the acceptable readers currently used in the public schools, provided the plan and intent of the authors is known and followed by the teacher."<sup>1</sup>

Sparks and Fay concluded that a basic reading program provides sufficient phonic training. They added that the practice of using the Phonetic Keys to Reading for a separate period or to supplement a basal reader series should be seriously questioned.<sup>2</sup>

Witty and Sizemore concluded that the nature and amount of phonic instruction required is debatable. They observed that many reading programs give enough attention to meet the needs of most children, but some children may need added practice.<sup>3</sup>

Durrell mentioned that most of the commonly used basal readers provide a program adequate for the average and superior pupils. However, other materials are required for children needing extra practice.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup>J. Kendall Hoggard, "Phonics in Directed Reading Activities," The Reading Teacher, IX (December, 1955), p. 90.

<sup>2</sup>Sparks and Fay, op. cit., p. 390.

<sup>3</sup>Paul A. Witty and Robert A. Sizemore, "Phonics in the Reading Program: A Review and Evaluation," Elementary English, XXXII (October, 1955), pp. 355-371.

<sup>4</sup>Donald D. Durrell, Improving Reading Instruction (New York: World Book Company, 1956), p. 230.

Likewise, Harris pointed out that phonic materials designed for use as a supplement to the basal series are helpful in remedial and corrective work and for those children needing more intensive phonic training.<sup>1</sup>

#### Sequence for Teaching Phonics

Suggestions about the sequence for phonetic analysis ranged from recommendations for incidental guidance as the child reads to proposals for a planned program developed in a definitely organized manner. Some authors suggested that the teacher's manual for basal readers often provides the best guide to sequence.

DeBoer and Dallman stated that grade levels are an undesirable criterion for determining sequence. They added that the order for teaching the various phonetic skills should be stated in levels of achievement rather than by grades since pupils vary in readiness for different phases of phonics.<sup>2</sup> Although it is undesirable to make exact stipulations as to the level at which an idea should be presented, most of the new phonic principles are usually introduced by the end of the third grade.<sup>3</sup>

DeBoer and Dallman expressed the view that a variety of sequences are appropriate provided the following general principles are considered:

1. There should be progression from the simple to the more complex.
2. Other things being equal, the more frequently used elements and generalizations should be taught before the less frequently used.

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<sup>1</sup>Albert J. Harris, Effective Teaching of Reading (New York: David McKay Company, Inc., 1962), p. 205.

<sup>2</sup>John James DeBoer and Martha Dallman, The Teaching of Reading (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1960), p. 89.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 90.

3. Provision should be made on each level for the maintenance of skills acquired on the preceding level.<sup>1</sup>

Harris agreed with DeBoer and Dallman in regard to the possible use of numerous sequences. However, Harris recommended that usually the initial consonants should be taught first, followed by final consonants, long vowels, and short vowels.<sup>2</sup>

Initial consonants should be taught first because they are easier, the child needs to start at the beginning of words to prevent reversals, and often the clue obtained from the initial letter in addition to the context makes further analysis unnecessary.<sup>3</sup>

The reasons for teaching consonant sounds prior to vowels as given by Gray are:

1. There is a more regular correspondence between consonant sounds and letters than between vowel sounds and letters.

2. Consonant letters are important in word perception because they form the distinguishing framework of printed words.

3. Knowledge of the consonant sounds can be used almost immediately by the beginning reader to help him recognize unfamiliar printed words in context.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 89.

<sup>2</sup>Albert J. Harris, How to Increase Reading Ability (New York: Longmans, Green and Company, 1961), p. 330.

<sup>3</sup>Josephine Tronsberg, "The Place of Phonics in Basal Reading Instruction," The Reading Teacher, VIII (October, 1954), p. 19.

<sup>4</sup>William S. Gray, On Their Own in Reading (Chicago: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1960), p. 35.

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Certain limitations were inherent in the conclusions of a report of this type. Apparent discrepancies in the research data made it difficult to reach valid conclusions. The conclusions, in view of the constant changes in the findings of research, are tentative and restricted to this report.

There appeared to be almost unanimous agreement that phonics has a place in the primary reading program. Most writers indicated that phonics is important as a part of the total word recognition program consisting of context clues, word form clues, phonetic and structural analysis, and the use of the dictionary. One of the major values accruing from the effective utilization of phonetic analysis is an increased independence in attacking unfamiliar words.

Although it was generally conceded that phonics is valuable, there was not complete agreement relative to what should be taught, the sequence to be followed, the methods and materials to be used, and the amount of phonics needed.

Authors concluded that not all children need the same amount or kind of phonic instruction. Neither do all children profit in the same manner from the teaching of phonics.

Writers generally agreed with regard to the need for phonic readiness. However, they differed relative to the nature and extent of phonic preparation required.

A majority of the authors emphasized that the development of a sight vocabulary should precede the utilization of phonetic analysis.

Research did not indicate a consistent superiority for either the basal reading series or the phonic approach. Also, there was a difference of opinion as to the advisability of providing phonic instruction in addition to that included in the basal reading program.

Several writers pointed out the necessity for extensive research before many of the questions about phonics could be answered.

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THE ROLE OF PHONICS  
IN THE PRIMARY READING PROGRAM

by

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B. S., Kansas State University, 1952

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AN ABSTRACT OF A MASTER'S REPORT

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The purpose of the study was to determine the role of phonics in the reading program of the primary grades. The writer (1) desired to examine the historical development of phonics in the teaching of reading; (2) wished to determine the values and limitations of phonic instruction; and (3) wanted to obtain the views of authorities concerning the approaches used in teaching phonics.

Library research was used as a means of obtaining information about the study.

One of the most controversial issues in reading instruction during the past few decades has concerned the place of phonics in the teaching of reading. Most of the disagreements pertained to what phonetic elements should be taught, the sequence in which these should be introduced, and the selection of the methods and materials to be used.

Following the Revolutionary War, Noah Webster introduced the use of phonics as a means of eliminating the diversity of dialects. After the patriotic emphasis on teaching phonics subsided, educators continued to use the sounding technique as a means of helping children attain independence in attacking words.

The highly organized phonic approach advocated by Rebecca S. Pollard was influential for a number of years. By 1910, educators had pointed out many of the deficiencies of the intensive phonic methods.

Since the 1940's, there has been renewed emphasis on the teaching of phonics.

There appeared to be near unanimity among writers that phonics has a definite place in the reading program. Phonics is of major value when used as one of the word attack skills.

Many limitations were found to exist when primary reliance is placed on phonics in the teaching of reading. Several authors questioned the value of some practices used in teaching phonics.

Early studies indicated that the child is not ready for phonics until he attains a mental age of six and one-half to seven years. However, some writers suggested that phonics can be used successfully at an earlier age.

Numerous writers suggested that a sight vocabulary should be developed before instruction in phonics is introduced. In recent years some have advocated that phonics should be used in the initial stages of reading.

Research indicated that neither the basal reader nor a phonetic approach is superior in the teaching of reading. A diversity of opinion existed in regard to supplementing the basal reading series with phonic material.

Suggestions concerning the sequence for phonics varied from recommendations for incidental guidance as the child reads to proposals for a planned program developed in a definitely organized manner. In general, there was little agreement in regard to the order for teaching phonics.

Writers stressed that more research is necessary before many of the questions about phonics can be answered.