

Phonics

[Linguistics](#), [Language](#)



When we throw away phonics as the first and primary method of decoding and switch to whole word (whole language) method, we are telling our kids something that isn't true. We are saying that there is no code — that there is no order to the development of language. That words themselves are the blocks of the language. But words cannot be used as parts of a whole. In other words, you make words from letters but you don't make new words by splicing two or three other words together. So, in fact, words are not the blocks of the language — letters are!

Whole language advocates believe that all children will learn to read naturally, just as they learn to talk and walk; that simply immersing children in good books is all that is necessary to produce fluent and capable readers. Phonics advocates, on the other hand, believe that all a child needs to become a fluent reader is a healthy dose of phonics in kindergarten and/or 1st grade, that is, exposure to a sequential and explicit phonics program that teaches the alphabetic code and how it works to represent speech.

Unfortunately, this "Great Debate" between the whole language proponents may make fun of the "drill and kill" of phonics and tell parents not to worry if a child isn't reading by 3rd grade. In fairness, whole language teachers and researchers have made all educators and parents more aware of the importance of immersing children in outstanding children's literature (both before, during, and after formal reading instruction). Whole language and phonics camps has resulted in more than a generation of school children losing out on some critical knowledge that is essential to reading well.

Either philosophy practiced in isolation deprives children of experiences that are critical to becoming literate adults. This causes another problem — the

problem of thinking. If we begin by the whole word method, we are encouraging a number of practices. We encourage and reward memorization and we encourage estimation — if you don't know the word, guess. In fact, by allowing students to think that meanings are interchangeable, that if you don't know what it really means, guessing is okay, we are pretending that words don't have specific meanings. But every word stands for one, and only one specific concept. It is not true that any old meaning will do. It is not true and it is not fair to the student to imply it is.

It says that accuracy is not important and that fuzzy or "sort of" thinking is all right. So we encourage kids to memorize and match, tell them that accuracy is not important, forgive and allow fuzzy thinking and pretend that creative (inventive) spelling is fine. Then what happens? High school, university, college and life happen. Students end up thinking associational, not conceptually. They can't problem solve, don't take academic risks, need structured programs and lots of help and guidance — all of which hinder the development of real self-esteem.

They don't "get it," don't make the connections or see the relationships. They are disorganized, not motivated, sometimes confused, angry or defensive. They are not achieving their potential because they haven't learned how to think critically. Ask any high school English or Math teacher, go to a university and inquire of the English, philosophy, business or psychology departments, or speak to business leaders, about the literacy of many recent graduates. You will see we already have this problem. It's not going away; it's going to get worse. And it begins when we cast the first seeds of doubt in the untouched minds of our children.

A child who has learned to speak already knows completely and probably without the words to defend himself or herself) the importance of accuracy. Watch kids play and observe how carefully they keep each other accurate. Even understanding a single word means that that child understands that there is something the same as other words but that there is an important something different as well and that children are capable of understanding that difference. Those children insist on clarity, honesty, and integrity in his or her dealings with the world. Then we tell children to ignore all that he or she knows about how to learn.

We say accuracy isn't important and that our written language doesn't have a code. Some schools forbid teachers from telling kids that words are made up of letters which have specific sounds. In other words, we imply that how children have been using his or her mind is wrong. What they figured out for themselves can't be trusted. They are wrong for life! If one thinks of the amount of struggle an adult goes through in order to understand life and then considers that this same struggle is occurring daily in the hearts and minds of our children, one might begin to see why it is so important for them to feel that they are capable of understanding.

Their very survival depends upon it. But our reading programs pull the rug out from under our children. We discount the achievement of their minds and the confidence and pride they have developed as a result of that great achievement. In fact, what a child accomplishes in learning to speak is probably the greatest achievement of his or her life. It is certainly the hardest. Instead of celebrating this great achievement — one that required precision, logic, understanding — we tell them to memorize and trust. We

drive a spear into the very soul of their self-confidence and feelings of self-esteem and it is no wonder that they prefer to memorize and live in a structured universe. If their own minds are not safe or competent then the only other option is trust and follow. But it's just a reading program, you say. And teachers love kids and want to help them and school boards don't want to cause problems, they want to educate kids as effectively as possible.

Yes, all that may be true, but it doesn't change the facts all the good intentions in the world will not change the principles of a bad program and will not lessen the severity of its effects. Whole word or whole language reading programs are not teaching our kids to read well and are a major part of the reason why students are not thinking more clearly and effectively. We have known how to teach kids to read for centuries. Modern teaching methodology has produced creative and effective teachers. A good reading instruction program contains both phonics and whole language, but it doesn't combine them or do them at the same time.

In Conclusion, Phonics needs to be taught separately, directly, and systematically to students — not in the context of reading literature. But, children need daily exposure to good literature through reading aloud, discussion of the stories, and introduction to new knowledge and vocabulary. Once they learn phonics they need to practice what they have learned daily to become skilled readers. Let's use these strengths to marry excellent teachers with effective programs.