Literacy Investigated

Have you ever known a person who could neither read nor write? Could you imagine being locked into a world where you couldn’t read the daily newspaper or send an e-mail to your best friend? Unfortunately, this is the life many adults and children face each day.

Now one starts to wonder, how does a person learn to read and comprehend language effectively enough to live in modern society? Recently, I sat down with my five-year-old neighbor to help him complete his homework. Being in kindergarten, his homework consisted of several flash cards and a small book with minimal words on a page to read. I watched in amazement as he flipped through the flash cards and began sputtering out sounds. I quickly asked him to stop and explain what he was doing. Being the bright child he is, Josh looked at me and said, “These are letters. You put them together to form a sound. You should know this since you’re a teacher.” Yes, I suppose I should have known. However, my ignorance became knowledge once I saw him put the “ck” onto the end of “ba” and pronounce the word back. Josh continued to work through this skill each day and quickly mastered phonetic sound. Having done this, he was now ready to read more difficult books.

The question that now arises, is phonics the right way to teach reading? Having taught only one year, I don’t feel qualified to give an educated answer, so I will base my opinion on my personal experience. As a child, I was especially fond of books and loved for my mother to read to me. She would often sit down with my favorite books and lead me into a world of wonderful fantasy, thus

Maria C. Blackburn
RE 5040
beginning my love for reading. Each night when we sat down to read, Mom would begin by reading the title of the book and then opening it to the story. As she read, Mom would follow the words with her finger so that I was made aware of each word as she said it. I can vividly remember wanting to read the way she did.

I’m sure sometimes Mom was just too tired to read, but that never kept her from opening a book when I asked. Being only a small child, I had no concept of printed material, but I did know when she skipped sentences, pages, or changed words to try and hurry through the book when it was bedtime. It hadn’t taken me very long to memorize my favorite books.

My aunt Rita also helped instill my desire to read. She always read to me when I came to visit. Two of my favorite books, The Rattle Rattle Dump Truck and Miss Suzy the Squirrel were books that her son had outgrown and passed down to me. I wonder now how she had the patience to sit and read a book she had probably read a million times before.

As I grew older, I began to learn that the printed material on the page consisted of letters, the letters made sounds, and the sounds helped to form words. This is when I had my first lesson in phonics.

My desire to read was strong. I went to daycare and then to preschool where the teachers recognized my desire and nurtured it. I learned my alphabet, learned to print it, and learned many of the sounds that the letters made.

The beginning of my kindergarten year in school I was unhappy that I didn’t know how to read. Even though I didn’t understand that I wasn’t lagging
behind, I set a goal to quickly learn to read. The rest of my year was filled with wonder as I did learn to read. I remember the yellow paperback books that Mrs. Greene, my teacher, sent home for me to read and the feeling of disappointment when I discovered there weren’t many words on each page.

Being in a K-1 combination class was a wonderful thing. Once I had mastered the small yellow “baby books,” I was allowed to join a reading group with the first graders in my class. How exciting it was to know I had finally succeeded in my quest to learn to read!

As an adult and teacher, I see the importance of effective reading more than ever. This summer I tutored a third grade boy. The boy is a struggling reader whose parents came to me distraught when the second grade teacher said he was falling behind. After our first session together, I realized that this student had very little concept of phonics. He struggled to put two or more letters together to make a sound. I found myself becoming frustrated, not at the child, but at myself for not knowing how to “fix” this problem. Having few college courses that actually focused on reading, I resorted back to only what I could. I sat for hours making up flash cards similar to those used by my neighbor. I used these cards to drill him and realized soon that my efforts were in vain. This child needed the basics, most of what he had missed the first years of school.

Back at square one, I bought alphabet flash cards and began with the sounds of the alphabet. After mastering this skill, I resorted once again to the homemade flash cards I had tried earlier. I sat in amazement as I realized he knew sounds but had no idea to use the sounds to read an unfamiliar word. We
worked about five weeks to break the memorization habit and learn to apply what he knew to reading. Was I successful? To be honest, I think I was somewhat successful but not completely. As a new teacher, I had my first experience with failure. I have no doubt that this student will learn to read effectively and fluently, but it will take time and energy from him, his parents and future teachers. One can only hope that in time someone will find the key that unlocks the mystery, which will help him succeed in becoming a better reader.

My experiences with phonics are few, but I realize the importance of teaching phonetic sounds as early as kindergarten. I sometimes wonder what the debate is concerning the teaching of phonics. I understand that mere phonics is not the only way to teach reading. There must be other factors in learning to be an effective reader such as basic sight word recognition. Being a new teacher, I don’t claim to have all the answers or to even know what is the right way, but even now when I come across an unrecognizable word, I catch myself trying to sound it out. Being somewhat of a perfectionist, I had rather not skip it and being somewhat lazy, I’d rather not take the time to use a dictionary.

I believe that spelling also plays a key role in the reading process. Teaching a child to hear a word, listen to the sounds and put the letters together to form a word leaves putting the words together to be able to read. It seems to me that advanced spellers are also fluent readers.

Writing seems to also be an integral part of literacy. I value writing and my ability to do so. I often keep a journal to record daily events, feelings and thoughts. The things I write may be trivial to most people, but I value them as an
important part of my life. Journaling helped me through my first year teaching when some days I thought I couldn’t survive another moment. My journal was tucked away in my filing cabinet where I could read it whenever I needed the encouragement to make it through the day.

Sadly, there are many people in the world who cannot read and write. After discussing this with a family member, I came to realize that my own grandparents were members of a generation where many children missed an education. My grandparents lived in an area where schools were few and parents were more concerned about having their children to help out at home. Fortunately, both my grandparents had a strong desire to learn and both were self-taught. This simply proves that a desire to learn plays a large role in the obtaining of an education. Whether or not my grandpa would have learned better with instruction in phonics, I do not know. I know that it is possible to learn to read without any formal instruction at all.

To me literacy is more than just knowing how to read and write. It involves being skillful enough to successfully compete in present day society. To function in today’s world, one must be equipped with the knowledge to absorb at a very fast pace the many new techniques that he/she is exposed to daily.