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# AN ASSESSMENT OF PHONICS KNOWLEDGE IN SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHERS

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In recent years, much attention has been given to the phonics skills of teachers and prospective teachers. Beginning in the early 60's with Aaron (1960), Gagon (1960), and *The Torch Lighter: Tomorrow's Teachers of Reading* (Austin & Morrison, 1961), it was noted that teacher training programs were deficient in the area of phonics training, and that, resultantly, prospective teachers showed a deficit in their knowledge of phonics. These results have been upheld by Ramsey (1962), Schubert (1962), and Spache and Baggett (1965), all of whom found that experienced teachers and/or prospective teachers showed a marked deficit in the basic phonics skills required of elementary school pupils. As recently as 1970, Janet Lerner (1970) conducted similar research which demonstrated that this same group knew little more than the pupils they were intended to teach.

Though these findings all refer to teachers of normal children, the problem would seem even more crucial if it were found to exist in a population of teachers of exceptional children. Frequently, children labeled mentally retarded, emotionally disturbed, and learning disabled have major academic and/or behavioral problems which are associated with reading achievement. With regard to mentally retarded youngsters, two studies (Bliesmer, 1954; Dunn, 1954) have shown that these children have lower reading achievement levels than brighter, normal children with the same mental ages. Also, it has been suggested that many youngsters labeled retarded are actually learning disabled children with normal intelligence who have been misplaced as a result of group test scores which presuppose reading ability as a requisite for taking the test (Clemmens, 1969).

The cyclical relationship between emotional disturbance and reading achievement has never been fully understood. Hewett (1967) postulates that reading is an extremely beneficial tool in gaining the recognition which fosters socialization skills and a positive self-concept. Both factors contribute heavily to the healthy development of the personality. Carried a step further, Sanford (1967) and Bower (1967) suggest that the socialization and fantasy values of reading may be a deterrent to juvenile delinquency. These hypotheses find support in a summary of research on emotionally disturbed children cited by Eisenberg (1966). The conclusions reached indicate that school problems are the major presenting complaint received at children's psychiatric clinics and that physicians studying reading retardation have

noted a high association between this factor and concomitant emotional disturbance.

The enigma of emotional disturbance and reading achievement is further compounded with the introduction of the term learning disabled. Eisenberg (1966) suggests that the inability to read may be, in and of itself, a major component of emotional disturbance, and it has long been recognized that inability to read is the major academic deficit of children labeled learning disabled (McCarthy & McCarthy, 1969).

The reading achievement problems which seem to be inherent in retarded, disturbed, and learning disabled youngsters, as well as their consequences, seem to imply a great need for special education teachers to be especially adept in techniques which are required to successfully teach academic skills in the reading area. This coupled with the recent trend of school systems toward adopting phonetic reading series seems to make basic phonics knowledge a crucial skill for this particular population of teachers. This is especially true in light of the fact that the phonetic approach has been shown to increase reading achievement in both disturbed and mentally retarded youngsters, and in the primary grades, the learning disabled (Warner, 1968).

The purpose of this study was to evaluate the phonics knowledge of prospective special education teachers to determine whether deficiencies do in fact exist in this population. The need for such research seems obvious in light of the above findings derived from samples of teachers of normal children. Should the same deficiencies be found in this population, massive implications are evident for the future direction of pre-service and in-service education, as well as for the prognosis of the special education concepts of mainstreaming and competency based teaching.

### *Methods*

A sample of 34 special education majors were used as subjects in the study. This included all spring semester students taking Remedial Reading, a course in the teaching of reading which is required of all special education majors at Virginia Commonwealth University. The sample included 13 graduate and 21 undergraduate majors in the areas of learning disabilities, emotional disturbance and mental retardation. Many of the graduate students were experienced teachers working toward a Master's Degree while holding a full time teaching position. None of the subjects will receive further training in the teaching of reading as a part of their degree program.

The criterion measure used to test basic phonics knowledge was Lerner's *A Fonix Kwiz* (1968), which is a 50 item, multiple choice test designed to measure basic phonics knowledge in the following areas: consonants, vowels, syllabication, accents, silent letters, usage of the "y" sound, terminology, phonic generalizations, and general phonic knowledge. Public school children are generally expected to know these skills prior to completion of the sixth grade.

During the final week of the semester, the examiner asked all subjects to complete the test during class time as part of the course requirements. Within the defined population, there was 100% participation in the study. Following data collection, each test was scored according to the scoring procedures outlined by the author of the test.

### *Results*

The results of test scoring showed that the prospective special education teachers had severe deficits in their knowledge of basic phonics. As is demonstrated in Table 1, the total group showed a mean score of 53.23, with a standard deviation of 13.39. The range of scores was from a low of 22 to a high of 84. When viewed as separate groups, the graduates performed slightly better than the undergraduate group. A possible explanation for this finding is the fact that several of the graduate students are teaching in a system which has adopted a phonetic reading series, and they may have gained some familiarity with phonics through instructing children in their own classroom. Even so, 27 of the subjects scored under 68, which is considered below the Poor range according to the test rating scale. Four subjects scored within the Poor range, no one scored within the Fair range, only one of the subjects scored within the Good range, and none of the subjects was rated as Excellent.

TABLE 1  
Means and Standard Deviations of Teacher's Scores

Group	N	Mean	Standard Deviation
Total group	34	53.23	13.39
Graduate students	13	58.0	14.21
Undergraduate students	21	50.28	11.94

The surprisingly low results evidenced by this study suggest a grave need for further investigation in this area of competency as it relates to teachers in the field of special education. If, in fact, this sample population is indicative of the phonics knowledge of a majority of teachers in the field, there seems to be an urgent need for the problem to be addressed through teacher training programs at both the pre-service and in-service levels.

With current trends in special education moving rapidly in the direction of mainstreaming, it is more important than ever for the teacher of mildly handicapped children to both remediate underachievement in reading quickly, and utilize the child's reading ability to maximum potential. With the growing popularity of phonetic reading programs and the development of independent reading skills, it is extremely unlikely that this can be done without the teachers having a thorough understanding of the reading skills

they are intended to teach. Along with these trends is the impetus to establish competency based education programs and principles of accountability in the teaching of exceptional children. It will be impossible to achieve either of these goals until the academic competencies required of children are in the full command of their teachers and until an analysis is performed on those constituencies required of teachers to effect changes in reading behavior for which they are to be held accountable. If in-service and pre-service teacher training does not address itself to the basic skills which special education teachers must have, there is a danger of judging reading programs, teaching methods, and other aspects of modern pedagogy as unsound, while never reaching the root of the problem. Meanwhile, special education children are likely to pay for the deficits with reduced reading achievement levels.

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