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Becoming National A Reader

smallest units of speech. Have children break apart and put together the separate phonemes of simple one-syllable words.

- Try connecting this activity to the personality of classmates. For example, use picture cards that represent simple one-syllable words and have each child pick a favorite card. Now, call on a child to hold the picture card up while you say the word. Then say it again, but this time with pauses and claps between each phoneme. For example, Sophia has a picture of a cat. You say, "maa," then you say each phoneme, "k . . . l . . . a . . . t" with a pause and clap for each. Let the class repeat it after you, or let Sophia pick other children to break the word apart.

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Becoming National A Reader

The Beauty of the Alphabet

"It's not just drill and practice so kids can learn how to read good stories," says Ms. Jones, a first grade teacher for more than 19 years. "Some I love reading with children—it means the world to me. But the alphabetic principle is a wonderful thing too, in and of itself."

She is talking to a young woman, a student teacher who appears about 20 years old. This is her first week on the job. Fresh from college, she has a passion for children's literature, and a respect for the necessity of spelling and phonics lessons. But for the principle as a sort of medicine that has to be swallowed rather than something that should be celebrated and loved.

"Imagine," says Ms. Jones. "First, you're just a young child and all the language you hear is a jumble of sound and the words in your picture book are just little black marks. But then one day you notice that there are some small marks—phonemes—that you hear over and over again in different ways in different words around you. Use for example the 'ur' sound. It keeps coming up. You hear it in mommy . . . mailbox . . . milk."

"Then you start to realize that you can manipulate phonemes yourself to make up all kinds of words. You can switch 'hat' and 'bar' and 'air' into 'back.' Now you've got phonemic awareness."

"Then you learn the letters of the alphabet. You've got these 26 lovely figures to record all these small sounds. Now you've got spelling or orthography. Even more thrilling, you can use those letters to recover the sounds that someone else recorded for your reading. Now you've got decoding and phonics."

"What an amazing system our alphabet is—and no one even really knows who invented it! But with the alphabet, everyone can read what anyone else has written, even people who do not know each other."

"That's some way to look at it," replies the student, clearly excited.

"You're darn right it is," says the teacher. "This is the gift I give children—the alphabetic principle. And that's why I love being a first grade teacher."

Ms. Jones walks off to her next class, leaving the student teacher standing amazed and a bit wide-eyed, listening anew to the sounds of children's language echoing through the hallway around her.