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Editorial Comment

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EDITORIAL COMMENT

Ken VanderMeulen

Yesterday, when I read an editorial by Marvin Stone (U.S. News & World Report, September 7, 1981, p. 76) which claimed that American education is in trouble because we are not teaching phonics in beginning reading, I wanted to run and rant and rave. I was filled with anger. I wanted to shout "We have devoted our lives to learning what works in teaching initial reading, and you tell your readers this! U.S. News & World Report is a highly respected magazine, read by thousands of people with education, and the editor hands them a shibboleth!

The idea that children are not learning to read because they have not been taught the sounds representing letter combinations is simply not true. To see cause-and-effect relationship here is illogical. To ascribe a cause for decline in the verbal section of a "standardized" test and blame the nation's teachers for allowing it to happen is to be unaware of the nature of education in America.

We have somewhere near 20,000 school districts in the United States. Therefore, any description of reading education must take our multiple societies into account. Great groups of immigrants, for instance, who used to study to become "American" now are retaining their cultural heritage. Can we blame teachers for that? And can we blame the teachers for the trend toward huge schools where teachers and students remain strangers to one another? Are teachers at fault for the bureaucracy and the impersonal technology that has resulted? Let's talk about the basic factors, the fundamental things on which learning to read and liking to read are really based.

Let me suggest this thought: "Children who read were read to." You see it on bumper-stickers. It is a basic truth. Parents set their child's attitude about reading, and all that teachers can do is to continue nurturing the enthusiasm for printed stories—or try to repair the damage in attitude that parents have done. Phonic rules can't build a rich and deep wanting to learn. Teaching phonic principles is not a way of making children excited about expressing their ideas. Phonic drill doesn't build a curiosity about little plants and animals. Nor can phonics teach children how to share time and attention, working together in security and harmony.

Research shows that the teaching of phonics is important at certain stages, when the child asks for help, and phonic generalizations can be brought in. The teaching or use of phonic rules never did literally disappear from educational practices, as stated in the Stone editorial. Many methods were evaluated and re-evaluated, as were the materials teachers used. Research relating to methods, materials, and the psychology of teaching

has led to more reading, better reading, by more students (per 1000 enrollees) than ever before. We have come to learn, through research and experience, that the teacher's relationship to the student is much more important to that child's future in reading than any method or material that can be purchased.

Taxpayers, however, do not generally read research. They read popular magazines and newspapers, which carry columns that are injurious to the welfare of American education. Why is it that negative charges always get more attention than constructive truths? Marvin Stone's editorial will not solve problems, and will certainly not help teachers teach. For over thirty years, we have read these criticisms of the American education system (as if it were a single entity). Readers have apparently believed everything they read, because we are witness to the wrecking of the relationship between towns and their teachers.

Schools are instituted on mutual trust and respect; the child must be the recipient of guidance and affection at home AND at school, or the system DOES NOT WORK! Journalists who continually write about failure of the schools (when they are judging by a fraction of one area) are doing our nation a major disservice.