

7-1-1977

Professional Concerns

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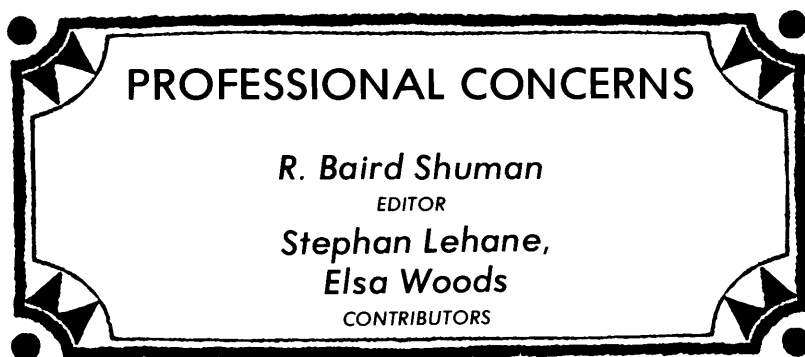
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Recommended Citation

Shuman, R. B., Lehane, S., & Woods, E. (1977). Professional Concerns. *Reading Horizons: A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts*, 17 (4). Retrieved from https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading_horizons/vol17/iss4/12

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Professional Concerns is a regular column devoted to the interchange of ideas among those interested in reading instruction. Send your comments and contributions to the editor. If you have questions about reading that you wish to have answered, the editor will find respondents to answer them. Address correspondence to R. Baird Shuman, Department of English, 100 English Building, University of Illinois, Urbana, Illinois 61801.

Have you ever wished that you could introduce your young kids to the classics in an exciting way? Have you ever wished that you could do a better job in merging writing and reading activities? Have you ever wished that you could do more to individualize reading instruction for your students? Stephan Lehane, who teaches Elementary Education at Duke University, and Elsa Woods, who is Reading Supervisor for the Durham County Schools of North Carolina, have devised an intriguing plan by which students are quickly motivated both to reading and to composition in the broadest sense of the word.

Capitalizing fully on the imagination of young students, the authors have succeeded in getting students to provide exciting outcomes for stories of high adventure. These outcomes are read by other students in the class; however, they are put to a number of other uses as well, all of them having to do basically with improving the student's ability to read.

CLIFF HANGERS AN APPROACH FOR STIMULATING CREATIVE WRITING IN YOUNG CHILDREN

Stephan Lehane and Elsa Woods

"Will Bettye Buckle survive? Will Captain Stonefoot prevail over evil?"

Will the Windship be destroyed? Stay right where you are for the exciting conclusion. But first . . .”

For most of us this may have a familiar ring to it. Either an old-time radio thriller if not one of the closing scenes right out of those classic vintage serials that kept us glued to the silver screen every Saturday afternoon as kids. Yet in this case it's neither a radio show nor a movie. Rather it's a reading program for young children entitled, “The Amazing Adventures of Erik Stonefoot.” The program is based on stories that cover the exploits of Stonefoot as he locks horns with giants, staves off monsters or unearths great lost treasures. Each adventure finds Erik pinned to the wall, in some perilous situation, with the young reader being handed the challenge of writing a creative ending to extricate our hero. One cliff hanger may find Stonefoot about to be attacked by some elephant-size rats while another may have him sealed in a trunk far beneath the ocean. These two episodes are taken from *Gulliver's Travels*. For that matter all the Stonefoot plots are derived from the classics be it *Gulliver's Travels*, the *Odyssey*, or *Beowulf*. Such adventures are encountered by Erik as he voyages to far and forgotten lands by flying his magic cloud, the Windship.

Erik wasn't always this grand soldier of fortune. Initially the story pictures him as being rejected by his chums because he's so inept: hence the name Stonefoot. But our boy wins back his friends with a clever ruse. He gathers all the bits and pieces of string he can find and knots them together into a mile long cord which is then tied to a little white balloon filled with the magic gas, helium. As Erik walks into the playground he lets the little balloon dart up into the sky until it blends right into one of those big white puffy clouds floating overhead. It's not long before someone spots Erik holding a string leading up to a big cloud and yells, “Hey, look at Stonefoot. He's flying a cloud.” Erik is now an instant hero as he lets his friends fly the magic cloud. But all good things must come to an end. With the afternoon's shadows lengthening and the clouds fading into the dusk, Erik muses, “Let the cloud drift away, we can fly them any day.”

This sets the stage for the “Amazing Adventures . . .” Every night Stonefoot recruits a crew of friends and together they are carried off to some far flung adventure by his magic cloud, the Windship.

Invariably Stonefoot and his crew find themselves in some perilous predicament. It is only the imagination of the child which can save them from this horrendous situation.

Very young children, preschool through first grade, may dictate the final chapter in the continuing saga of Stonefoot. Initially this could be done by a small group of children each stimulating the other as the rescue is achieved. By the time the entire class had rescued our heroes there would be several different—but all creative—endings to the drama. Some children might prefer dramatizing their solutions, the teacher taking down their role playing as it proceeds.

Does the rescue need to make sense to adults? Definitely not. In the mind of a child anything is possible. The important issue is for the child to see that he has the power, through his imagination, to save Stonefoot and

his crew—that his thoughts may be expressed, heard, accepted and written for him, or for someone else, to read or hear.

After determining the fate of Stonefoot the story may be read to and/or with the children and they may then illustrate their stories. As pictures are being completed, the teacher may circulate among the students writing a key word, such as *Stonefoot*, on each child's drawing. If desired, the child may select his own word to have printed, or he may print it himself.

With students who are ready for reading instruction the second day may be spent rereading the story individually with the teacher. Words the child can read should be underlined. Words recognized on two successive days may be added to the child's word box to be used later in creating sentences or stories. Other children may use their mimeographed copies of the story as a worksheet on which to find all the words that begin with the sound of *sun*, or *ball*, or *monkey*, etc. Children who need language development may work with the teacher on expanding sentences or substituting vocabulary. Some children may be involved in preparing a dramatization or puppet show of their story. A few children may be matching individual word cards with words in the story. The list for possible follow-up activities is almost endless.

Children who have reached the stage of doing their own writing may create their own conclusions for our heroes. In doing the first one the teacher may want to let them work in pairs or small groups. Once their stories are written, students should read or have read their rescue of Stonefoot and his crew. This reading by others will help students to conceptualize the idea that others can enjoy their thoughts, as well as to realize the necessity for effective communication.

Students may then select words for their word boxes, prepare a book of Stonefoot's latest adventure, write questions to accompany their stories, prepare radio programs, read their adventures to other children or just enjoy the fruits of their creative labors privately.