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Responses From Readers

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Responses From Readers



Regarding Testing

As an educator with sixteen years experience teaching lower primary and another sixteen as elementary principal, I am deeply disturbed over MEAP's testing program, possible national testing, and the general overtesting of our students.

In my early school days, my teachers knew what to teach me to get from one point to another. They also knew my strengths and weaknesses which were often checked by informal testing methods. These teachers didn't need a deluge of outside testing every few years to direct their teaching skills or solve my learning problems.

I sincerely believe these same truths apply today. Teachers know how to test, when to test, and what to do with the results without "big business" test-makers foisting their wares into the classroom. Make no mistake about it, test-makers are in business to sell tests for a profit, and they lobby extensively to make the politicians and the public demand more testing.

In 1933, Charles Kettering, a teacher and inventor of car starters, the auto generator, electric cash register, and dozens of other important things as well as being founder of Delco-Remy declared, "The trouble with schools today is that they test too much." Kettering further stated that if inventors were tested every time they tried something, nothing would get invented, and creativity would be destroyed. He expected to fail often in his quests—but, at the same time, to learn from his mistakes.

Concerned educators need to arise and put a halt to this insidious testing syndrome which is destroying students' creativity and the desire to learn.

Another source of concern with national testing is that before you can test everyone's knowledge with a standardized test, you would need to teach a standardized curriculum. Because children have different learning backgrounds, and grow and develop at different times with different capacities, it is impossible to fairly test all students on a given date.

If we overly test we are setting children up for a failure syndrome. It doesn't take a student long to fear tests and their results. When students face too much failure, they will respond with withdrawal or negative behavior. These actions are their security blanket to separate themselves from the whole testing process. Even teacher-made tests can be threatening, but standardized state and national tests are extremely damaging as well.

I urge MRA to take a stand on this subject and demand a halt to Michigan's headlong plunge into the testing abyss. I also urge the Association to sample their membership on this vital issue and then take action based on survey results.

Donald N. Thurber
Author, D'Nealian Handwriting

No Harm, No Foul: Where is the Problem?

This is a response to "The 'Hooked on Phonics' Scam: A Multimillion-dollar Hype" by Foyne Mahaffe printed in the Winter 1993 issue of the *Michigan Reading Journal*. Mahaffe's essay, reprinted from *Rethinking Schools*, begins as a critique of a specific phonics program but soon digresses to become a criticism of issues unrelated to an assessment of program quality.

To the extent that the article criticizes a specific commercial product, I cannot disagree with the author. While I have not personally examined the "Hooked on Phonics" program, I share a professional skepticism of any "quick fix" product designed and marketed by non-professional educators. I have little doubt that there may be serious shortcomings in such a program. However, it is important to separate the valid criticisms of the specific program as it is marketed and the less-than-valid interjection of peripheral issues that allegedly support that criticism.

It seems the author has committed two significant digressions in an attempt to compile a case against "Hooked on Phonics." The first seems to be an undercurrent of criticism of phonics instruction itself. The second seems to be a confusion of the *content* of a program with its educational validity for *skill* instruction. I would like to address each of these issues in an effort to generate discussion among reading educators concerning valid program criticism. But first, I want to address a third, less dramatic but no less central, point: Why the concern about this program in the first place?

If the program is truly worthless or ineffective, it will soon go the way of the Edsel. New products in all fields are constantly being promoted and inferior products invariably fall victim to consumer awareness. In the worst case, a lot of people will spend their hard-earned money to gain only a chance to memorize a few songs and

chants. I think it is important and laudable that the IRA and individual reading professionals have gone on record as opposing what they feel is a non-viable educational alternative. But that is enough. Unless we can demonstrate a *negative* educational impact due to the use of such a program, its existence is, in many ways, none of our professional business.

In the absence of demonstrated negative impact, such a program is *in no way* a threat to professional educators. There is nothing in such a program that will render our students unteachable. If that is the concern, then there must be admitted to be some kind of significant, lasting effect of this program and then it can not be written-off as ineffective (inappropriate, maybe, but not ineffective).

Phonics is one of four basic word attack skills generally taught to readers (in addition to context, structural analysis, and dictionary use). Reading instruction frequently focuses on one or more of these in isolation. However, teachers are well aware that these word attack skills must eventually be connected with deriving meaning from text in order for true reading to take place. A focus strictly on configuration reading only, as was common in the 1950's and 1960's, has long since been discredited by researchers.

In spite of the author's tacit expression of support for phonics instruction ("I teach in a Whole Language school, where phonics lessons are custom made to fit the individual..."), there seems to be a persistent sense that phonics itself is the issue, not just the "Hooked on Phonics program. The author states, "Speed and retention. Though not high goals for reading instruction...". I, and a large number of my fellow educators, happen to feel that retention *is* a major component of reading comprehension. It is arguable that transitory comprehension without retention is virtually meaningless. To a lesser degree, speed (as a reference to

reading rate) is also significant. While faster is clearly not better in all cases, many methodical word-by-word readers do, in fact, improve their comprehension quite substantially as speed and fluency increase.

It should be further obvious that a reader who completes any program and can "only be guaranteed that they will be able to ... recite 510 pages of words and decode the ridiculous sentences in the final book" has a distinct advantage over the reader who cannot decode or recognize anywhere near that number of words. Automaticity in word recognition has been repeatedly shown to be a major component in comprehension success. Furthermore, there is, in fact, no national consensus that "Phonics or any aspect of reading ought not be approached in isolation." The reality is that all skills, whether mental or physical, are typically taught and practiced by breaking down the whole into manageable parts.

The author also spends considerable space criticizing the *content* of the "Hooked on Phonics" program. The issue here is not the content, *per se*, but whether the content provides a valid basis from which to critique a phonics program, which, by definition, is essentially a skill learning/practice component of reading education. Given the nature of *any* overt phonics instruction, the content of the material is essentially irrelevant.

Of even greater concern is the author's contention that references to Christianity somehow render the program of lesser value. "There were other curiosities, too... Christian references are made 15 times, albeit Christmas accounts for 10 of them." What, in the name of God (pun intended), does this have to do with the validity or invalidity of a *phonics* program? In this particular case, the program under scrutiny is produced by a private business and is marketed directly to individuals. This is not an issue of use of public money or public schools. This smacks more of Christian bashing than "Hooked on Phonics" bashing.

The learner's prior knowledge and cultural background are generally accepted to be major factors in determining success in reading any particular text. That has been the primary rationale for the introduction of culturally-relevant materials into the educational arena. There are millions of students (and educators) who clearly identify themselves as Christian. These students also deserve access to materials relevant to their prior knowledge and cultural background. When this occurs through private market phenomena, how does it become an issue of relevance to the educational community? There are at this time a vast array of materials with various cultural and religious treatments available to students, parents and teachers, public and private. That a particular set of materials reflects a "minority" view is neither uncommon nor educationally invalid.

Let me reiterate that my intent is not to defend the "Hooked on Phonics" program, nor to attack the author's views on phonics, religion, or multiculturalism. If "Hooked on Phonics" is educationally invalid, it is clearly within the scope of professional educators to say so. But it is not appropriate for professional educators to attempt to manipulate the content of a program produced by a private company, or to influence the success of that business. If the company is making claims that are not valid, that is a truth-in-advertising concern which is the responsibility of the FTC, not the IRA.

The prestige and validity of our profession is on the line any time we make public statements. When criticisms can be expressed based on valid educational and scientific grounds, they should be made. However, when we resort to innuendo and weak, irrelevant assertions, we well deserve whatever negative public backlash we receive.

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