

Parents, who are worried because their "Johnny" can't read or read as well as they think he should, will find the author's analysis of the reading controversy a valuable contribution.

# When Johnny Can't Read

By DR. ARTHUR W. HEILMAN  
Director of O.U. Reading Clinic

**W**HEN JOHNNY CAN'T READ—or when he can't read as efficiently or fluently as his parents or teacher think he should be reading—it is not simply an educational problem of the school but it is a social and emotional problem for Johnny and his family.

Whether or not reading, or more specifically reading instruction in American schools, has reached the "national crisis stage" may be an academic question. But to the parent whose own Johnny can't read—this fact itself is a crisis and a major one.

Critics of American education, both professional and sincere, often assure their audience that schools today compare very unfavorably with schools of yesterday in the teaching of reading. What little objective data there is on this subject does not support their thesis so they resort to intuitive evidence or else cite specific examples of failure and make facile generalizations from these.

If the reading habits and reading tastes of the alumni of "yesterday's instruction" are examined we might either have to question the hypothesis of superiority or else point to some sort of perversion of taste and regression in ability since they left the haven of the little red school house.

Some critics, while their aim may be honorable, do a great disservice to parents of children experiencing difficulty in reading when they advance an oversimplified cause for all reading difficulties and an oversimplified cure for all reading problems.

A recent case in point is Mr. Rudolph Flesch and his book *"Why Johnny Can't Read"*, Harper Brothers, 1955. Mr. Flesch's thesis is that the American schools do not

teach phonics; practically no child in America is profiting from reading instruction received in our schools; and if teacher and parents followed his advice on teaching phonics there would be practically no reading problems in our schools.

And further, Mr. Flesch intimates that 99% of all educators whose special interest is reading, are guilty of 20 years or more of educational treason because they do not advocate teaching phonic analysis the way it was taught in 1920.

The real danger in Mr. Flesch's book is that when a parent hears (or reads) someone speaking with the finality that Mr. Flesch speaks with, she is likely to mistake some of what is vehemence for logic. When your child is not reading up to the standards you have set for him you are more likely to listen to the advocate who advances one simple cause—and what appears to be one simple solution to the problem.

While experts may disagree among themselves, the laymen's job now appears to be simplified—decide which expert **KNOWS THE EXACT CAUSE AND EXACT REMEDY AND FOLLOW HIM!** All is well if he is well, but if he is sick in either of his premises (cause or remedy) those of us who follow him blindly will end up fighting in the wrong arena with the wrong weapons against the wrong enemy. While this makes for some excitement in the stodgy field of pedagogy—it is not likely to help your Johnny to learn to read.

Let us attempt to get the problem of reading in proper perspective.

Most teachers would agree that the aim of reading instruction is that every child in our schools should read at a level of effi-

ciency commensurate with his ability or capacity. In the case of many children we are not approximating this goal. The rest of our discussion will attempt to get at the "why" of this state of affairs.

When Johnny cannot read the reason is not likely to be that his teachers did not know the "newest practices" in teaching reading, because these practices have evolved rather slowly. In addition, there are certain sound psychological principles which must be applied to reading instruction and the odds are that his teachers are also familiar with these principles. In fact, you, as Johnny's parents, will see that you are familiar with these principles listed below. How then do reading problems start and grow?

**T**HE REAL PROBLEM in American schools (and homes) is not that teachers and parents are not aware of these principles, but that they do not, or, under certain circumstances, cannot apply and practice them. A number of these principles follow:

1. Reading is a symbolic process. Any symbolic process is very sensitive to pressure. Pressures in this area lead to maladjustments and malfunctioning.

2. Learning to read is an **INDIVIDUAL PSYCHOLOGICAL PROCESS**. However, the circumstances under which teachers work, as a rule, forces them to function as if they were dealing with a "group process."

3. Since reading is an individual psychological process, effective instruction depends

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on individual diagnosis of weaknesses and needs.

4. The most accurate and precise diagnosis is absolutely useless unless it is properly used as a basis for instruction.

5. It is a truism that no person can do that which he cannot do. Therefore, no child should be expected to read at a level of difficulty which he *cannot read*.

6. If there is any validity to the concept of readiness, then the concept of reading readiness must be extended upward to all grades or levels. Some parents and teachers think this concept is applicable *only* to the first grade!

7. If our aim is to *teach reading* then it must be put in the curriculum at all levels and it must be taught deliberately and systematically. We must not stop the systematic teaching of reading with the fourth or fifth grade.

8. In our culture developing facility with written language symbols (commonly called reading) is based on knowledge and experience with spoken language; an ability

to discriminate between these various sounds and at the same time acquire the meanings associated with sounds. This is "phonics" and it has a place in the teaching of reading. These principles, if properly understood and properly applied, would certainly produce much of our present day needed improvement in reading. But simply to enumerate or list these principles or even to memorize them will not get the job done. So let us now take a little closer look at some present day practices which either violate or ignore these principles.

Our first principle was that learning to read is a very complicated psychological process. Reading is language function. It is the manipulation of symbolic materials. Psychologists, and others trained in the observance and interpretation of human behavior, tell us that language or the symbolic process is very sensitive to pressures of any kind. Language usage is the most sensitive indication of personal or emotional maladjustment.

Yet many times in our practices in the

teaching of reading, we proceed as if we were not aware of how sensitive the learning of reading is to various pressures. The school and the culture combine to put many subtle and overt pressures on the child who is learning to read. There is no area of learning in the school where this is more pronounced than in the area of reading.

The society in which we live more or less dictates that this be so. Reading is the first school task in which the child *must* achieve. It is the first school task in which he is either deliberately or inadvertently compared with others in his peer group. It is the first task in which he must compete; and how he fares in this competition has a tremendous impact on his own ego, his concept of himself and the attitude of his peers toward him. But more important, this is the first school activity in which his performance has a direct impact on his *parents' ego*.

While parents may sense the implied threat to their intelligence and maturity if they admit or plead guilty to this charge, yet insofar as they can be coldly analytical of their own motivations and their own personal involvement in Johnny's non-success in reading they know their own feelings are never far below the surface. Parents, too, are part of our society.

Our next three principles are closely related and we might attempt to discuss them together. They are:

1. That learning to read is an individual psychological process.
2. Effective instruction depends on accurate individual diagnosis of each pupil's weaknesses and needs.
3. Diagnosis in itself is useless unless used as a basis for specific instruction.

It is true that children in groups can and have learned to read. For those who learned to read under these circumstances we can safely say that the instruction was adequate for each of these individuals. For those who failed to learn to read we could just as safely say the instruction was not adequate even though the former and latter children might have been in the same group.

It follows that the only logical way in which we could provide adequate individual instruction for those who need it is on the basis of KNOWING what each child has mastered in the reading process and what specific problems or weaknesses he has at the moment. Getting this information about each child is called individual diagnosis. (A good diagnostic test will reveal to the teacher each child's proficiency, or lack of proficiency, in such factors as sight vocabulary; ability to utilize punctu-

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ation; omission or substitution of words; level of comprehension; ability to sound new or unknown words; etc.)

This precise knowledge of each child can be obtained only if the teacher has the time to assemble it. Even then it is useless unless she has the time to adjust or synchronize instruction to fit this individual diagnosis or to use it as a blueprint for individual instruction where needed.

The rub in our American schools is that as enrolments in the elementary schools increased the teacher-pupil ratio increased (or classes increased in size), thus making it impossible, or nearly so, to diagnose, prescribe and carry out individual instruction in all cases where needed.

Perhaps the schools' and teachers' guilt lies in the fact that they continued to pay lip service to the philosophical position that "all children should be educated to their maximum ability or capacity" and continued to go through the motions of teaching reading under circumstances which have been amply proven as not effectively getting the job of teaching done.

The overcrowded classroom and the teachers' inability to give adequate individual attention to individual children leads us to the fifth principle which should never be violated: "No child should be expected to read at a level of difficulty which he cannot read."

Our schools are set up on a "grade level basis," wherein the curriculum of the second grade is more difficult than that in the first; and the third grade is more difficult than the second, etc.

The only logical assumption under which such a system could possibly operate would be the assumption that the child in the second grade has mastered the skills taught in the first grade, the child moving into the third grade has mastered the skills taught in the second, etc.

Yet with this grade level structure established and operating, the schools have embraced the practice of "universal promotion" (or almost universal promotion), regardless of mastery or proficiency of the skills associated with a particular grade.

The teachers perceive the weakness of this procedure yet they insist that parents are to blame—"Parents insist on promotion." Then they ask the same question you are about to ask, "Are you advocating non-promotion?"

**V**ERY FRANKLY, I am not advocating either promotion or non-promotion. In fact, as long as we think in these either/or terms, we cannot possibly resolve

the problem. The real issue can be stated another way. Could not the developmental reading skills for which the first three grades are responsible be divided into many (15-25 or more) levels of competency with the child literally being "promoted" to the next higher level when he has demonstrated proficiency?

This would mean that any given "grade" or classroom would include children working at different levels, but that is exactly what we have anyway. The one advantage to be gained is that the teacher would know what skills a child had mastered and what was preventing him from moving up to the next level of difficulty. Now if he is promoted at the end of a grade, his new teacher would be informed what level of competency he had attained and she would not expect him to read at a much higher level simply because he was physically present in her third or fourth grade class.

When Johnny can't read—particularly when he *really can't read*, parents' and teachers' thoughts turn to remedial reading. The name implies a remedy. What does the term mean—what practices does it embrace?

In the minds of many people, the term is both nebulous and mystical. These people might be quite surprised to learn that there are actually not two types of reading instruction—regular and remedial. There is not a single principle or practice in remedial reading which could not or should not have been used with Johnny in his regular developmental reading instruction.

The only difference between remedial reading and the regular fare is that in a truly remedial program the teacher (or school) does pay attention to the sound principles enumerated above.

A. She knows the child cannot deal with reading if he is emotionally involved, so she attempts to lower tensions connected with reading.

B. She knows he is under considerable pressure resulting from failure in reading, so she tries to build up his confidence (also tries to get his parents to do the same) that will involve changing his attitude toward himself.

C. She gives a complete diagnostic test to find out exactly what the child can do now and what he cannot do. She starts where he is now, not where he should be according to his grade placement. She never expects the child to do the impossible (read something he cannot read). She knows that Johnny is a boy, not a magician.

D. She works with him individually or in a group small enough so that she can tend to his individual needs.

E. She will try to find interesting ma-

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terials and books. She will not pound and drill him with the same old basic reader which has frustrated him so much in the past.

To summarize the remedial reading program, simply embrace and practice the principles which, had they been practiced from the beginning, would have in most cases produced good readers.

But the problem of teaching Johnny to read is not as simple as it once was, for Johnny has developed an emotional attitude toward reading. He hates to read because attempting to read is a constant threat to him. He also senses that he has been a disappointment and trial to his parents because he failed them too. It is a pretty safe axiom to state that IT TAKES ABOUT AS LONG TO UNDO A READING PROBLEM AS IT TOOK TO PRODUCE IT.

This is why prevention is so much cheaper and so much more logical than a cure or "remedy."

### The Engineering Student . . .

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things work in order to understand how to do things. And that's the reason why I think the engineer is increasingly more important.

Jim: I sort of tie in a little bit between Jack and Ed in that I hate the word specialization. I have a fear of it. I want to get out and I want to generalize. My field is oil. I want to generalize and see the whole field of it and work into management I guess. Either in management or in my own company where somebody is not on your back to do this or that all the time. I think the only place where a person can really find that is to be his own boss. Then, if he wants to take a chance and get something done, he can do it. If he wants to work 24 hours a day to get a job done, he can. He doesn't have to shut her down at five o'clock.

Eddie: I don't care about the 8 hour day either. I'd just as soon work to midnight if I'm interested in something.

Jim: Just work as long as you can until you get the job done and then you can rest or just start another job—depends upon what you want to do.

### On Grades and Activities

Jim: I think that extracurricular activities are very important and so are grades. If you are not getting both of them, you are losing out on part of your education.

Eddie: Of course, all of us here are more or less leaning toward the extracurricular

anyway, but I think if I had it all to do over again, I would start and hit the books with a very small scattering of extra activities at the beginning. Then, after your sophomore year, after you have made the grades and after you have got the basis for your learning, then enter into your extracurricular activities and get all the benefits. I think you can get all the benefits during your junior and senior years that you would if you tried to do them all the time. I think that's the mistake that I made, because I don't have as high a grade average as I'd like to have. I started in extracurricular activities too early.

Jack: I just want to go back to what Ed said. We both started when we were freshmen and not only do you lose grades, but by the time you are a junior and senior when you should really be interested in your school, you are tired of it. We've done it and we're tired of it, so that is one of my greatest kicks.

Eddie: Good grades are the basis for all selection of outstanding students here on the campus. No matter how you go, that's the basis and you've got to have good grades no matter which way you go. If you get those good grades, it's a lot easier after that. You won't have to work so hard to get recognition.

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# OFFICIAL BALLOT

## 1956 Election of Board of Trustees of the Oklahoma Memorial Union, Inc.

**VOTING REGULATIONS:** In accordance with Article VIII, (Nominations and Elections) of the Amended Articles of Incorporation of the Board of Governors of the Oklahoma Student Union, the following nominees are candidates for membership on the Union's Board of Trustees. Every paid member of the University of Oklahoma (Alumni) Association is entitled to vote for four (4) of the nominees. The four elected will each serve three-year terms.

**IMPORTANT:** Vote for only four (4) nominees. Ballots must be received on or before May 1 at the office of the Secretary, Board of Trustees, Oklahoma Memorial Union, University of Oklahoma, Norman, Oklahoma. Each ballot must be signed to be valid. (Both husband and wife, if paid members, are entitled to vote. Both may use this ballot, showing a double vote, but both must sign.

### NOMINEES

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| <input type="checkbox"/> Frank Cleckler<br>Oklahoma City | <input type="checkbox"/> Clee Fitzgerald<br>Stillwater   | <input type="checkbox"/> George Shirk<br>Oklahoma City | <input type="checkbox"/> Fred Daugherty<br>Oklahoma City |

Signed \_\_\_\_\_ Address \_\_\_\_\_