

Are Torrance Schools Teaching Phonics?

By DR. J. H. HULL

Children in the classrooms of the Torrance Unified School District are probably receiving better instruction in phonics and more of it than their parents did. This is a pretty big statement to make, but, if we take a look at the then and now of the situation, we can build a strong case to support it.

Those of us whose ages have mellowed to or near the half-century mark can well remember when the teacher would write, in her best Palmer method, the letters of the alphabet on the blackboard. Snapping her hickory pointer at each letter, the class would pronounce in unison "ah . . . buh . . . ouh . . . duh . . ."

Products of this method became letter-by-letter, word-by-word readers with all the halting and stammering that went with it. Youngsters were certainly in trouble when they ran across such words as "though," "although," "night," and other non-phonetic words, which make up almost 20 per cent of the English language.

DURING the late 1920's educators, considering only the shortcomings of this method, took an "all or nothing at all" attitude toward the teaching of phonics. The "sight word" method was introduced, and for almost 20 years, most youngsters were graduated with the ability to read and understand only the words or phrases they had memorized. They had little or no verbal skills with which to attack a word phonetically.

Since they were unable to memorize all of the thousands of words in the English language, they were unable to read words not previously drilled into their vocabularies, to say nothing of understanding their meanings.

BY THE LATE 1940's teach-

ers as well as parents recognized the shortcomings of the "sight" method and with a "Whoa, just a minute!" attitude began to turn the educational buggy around. Most schools heeded the cries and wails of "Bring back phonics" and developed stronger phonics instruction; but they did it silently—almost secretly. The trouble was that schools either failed to let the public know that they were doing it or called phonics by another name.

The "Sputnik" event, shaking the pride of all Americans, resulted in an immediate microscopic examination of all phases of public education. Admirals, generals, and college professors who viewed themselves as the "Saviours of American Education" deluged the public with speeches, books, and magazine articles, branding our system and praising European education. As a result, the schools and everything about them have become a "hot issue," taking a first priority in news interest and political promises.

DURING THE past several State and local elections, candidates for public office have promised to "put phonics back into the classrooms" if elected. Upon learning that phonics never left the classroom, many of them in order to save their political faces now say, "Well, we need more phonics in the classroom."

School districts like Torrance have been plagued with thousands of so-called "new" phonetic materials from hundreds of publishers and authors who have seen the opportunity to peddle their wares by jumping on the phonics wagon. These pressures are not likely to subside until the taxpayers are informed about the methods and materials they have paid for and are now being used.

HERE ARE some answers and facts about phonics that are long overdue. Out of the hundreds of books, brochures, films, etc. that have been carefully evaluated by teachers

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and administrators at the Educational Materials Building, few if any were found to contain anything new — not one contained anything more or different from the carefully planned phonic material now available in the new State reading series text books.

From the kindergarten through the eighth grade, Torrance children are taught phonics. The areas taught may be disguised with educational double talk, like "Auditory Perception," "Rhyming," "Visual Discrimination," "Definitions," "Likenesses," "Structural Analysis," "Phonetic Analysis," "Visual Recognition," "Configuration Clues," "Syllabication," etc., but it all adds

up to the makings of an excellent program of phonic instruction.

THE IMPORTANT fact is that the information is available in the teacher's guides of the two State basic reading series, which have already been paid for by the tax dollar. The teaching of phonics has

always been a vital part of the reading program of the Torrance Unified School District since its beginning in 1947 and will continue to be so. If and when the State text books fail to include enough material for the best phonics program available, we will look elsewhere.

THE TORRANCE HERALD 11

JANUARY 24, 1963

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