

# THE REVOLT AGAINST DICK AND JANE

By ARTHUR S. TRACE, JR.



A QUIET REVOLUTION is going on in elementary schools throughout the country, including many schools in Ohio. More and more elementary school teachers, with the blessing of their principals and reading supervisors, have abandoned Dick-and-Jane type reading programs in favor of more efficient reading materials which teach students to read faster and which offer them more challenging reading fare than non-stories about non-heroes like Dick and Jane.

The era of Dick and Jane began some 40 years ago when professional educators abandoned the phonics method of teaching reading (whereby students learned to read words from the sounds of the letters) in favor of the whole word or look-and-say method (whereby students memorized the design the words make on the page without reference to the letters). The look-and-say method, or

look-and-guess method, as it is often called, proved to be so inefficient that the vocabulary of the readers had to be reduced drastically from that of the McGuffey and other such readers of pre-look-and-say days. Furthermore, the words also had to be repeated over and over again until first and second graders had their designs memorized, so that selections were necessarily dull and repetitious. In addition, professional educators fell under the influence of the "life adjustment" philosophy of education which insisted that the minutiae of community living should be taught on school time. Thus the stories in the new readers had to take place right around home and consisted of the non-adventures

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*Reading Without Dick and Jane* received a most commendatory review in the *University Bookman*, edited by Russell Kirk, Winter Issue 1966.

of sanitized suburban anti-heroes like Dick and Jane and Alice and Jerry, who lived in an artificial middle-class suburban community in which nothing interesting could possibly happen. For some 40 years virtually all American children were brought up on look-and-guess methods of teaching reading and up on Dick-and-Jane type readers, which contain some of the worst writing ever to appear in print.

As a result, many children, if they were bright at all, learned quickly to dislike their readers and in many instances to dislike all reading. Even worse, many students did not learn to read well at all. Only a few years ago the National Council of Teachers of English estimated that 4 million of our elementary school students are poor readers. To counter these accusations, our professional educators began to produce countless studies which showed that the reason so many children read badly lay not with the look-and-guess method or the Dick-and-Jane type readers but with the children themselves. The difficulty, they insisted, was that poor readers were emotionally disturbed, half-blind, dimwitted, maladjusted, undernourished, glandularly deficient, or ill treated.

Some teachers and school administrators and even some professional educators knew all along, however, that the basic difficulty was not the children but the Dick-and-Jane type reading programs, which by 1950 had become so universal in American schools that reader series which used a basic phonics approach and which offered interesting and challenging reading selections were almost impossible to obtain.

In the last decade, however, a few school authorities who were appalled at the poor reading performance of their students began to experiment once again

with phonics and saw for themselves the vastly superior results that it produced. They saw that when students were taught the sounds of the letters from the very beginning, they could quickly learn to "sound out" the many thousands of words which were already in their speaking vocabulary and they could therefore read highly interesting stories and poems almost from the beginning.

As phonics gradually grew in popularity during the past few years, more and more systematic phonics programs began to appear on the market. Even the Dick-and-Jane type readers had to introduce a little bit of phonics here and there because the look-and-guess method was so obviously a failure, though even to this day there are some 20 Dick-and-Jane type programs on the market which still use predominantly look-and-guess methods, which employ a crippling vocabulary control apparatus, and in which the reading selections are virtually worthless.

Meanwhile, thorough and objective studies have been carried out in recent years which were designed to test the comparative merits of the phonics method and the look-and-say method. The results of these tests are summarized in a careful article published in THE JOURNAL OF EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH for May, 1965. This article shows that of the ten most thorough studies comparing the effectiveness of the two methods, none found the look-say method to be superior, two showed no great difference between the two, and eight showed the phonics method to be decidedly superior. These findings have encouraged many elementary schools to switch over to a phonics method using one or another of the new phonics reading programs which have begun to appear on the market. Some of these new

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reader series, like *The Open Court Basic Readers*, published by the Open Court Publishing Company of LaSalle, Illinois, and the *Lippincott Basic Readers* published by the Lippincott Company of Philadelphia, offer students extremely interesting and challenging selections far beyond what most other students get, and more important, they are learning to read well regardless of their physical ailments or the color of their skin or the kind of home they come from. Such reading programs are opening whole new worlds which remain closed to students who must suffer along with Dick and Jane and Baby Sally and their backyard barbecues and visits to car wash establishments.

This does not mean that all school systems are racing to adopt a basic

phonics program and all the advantages that accompany it. In big cities especially, reading supervisors tend to be dyed-in-the-wool look-and-guess experts who will defend Dick and Jane to the death. Many principals, reading supervisors, and even teachers in many smaller school systems feel equally strongly that the Dick-and-Jane approach to reading is the best.

Nonetheless more and more school authorities are coming to recognize that the Dick-and-Jane type reading program is a space-age horse and buggy and are revolting against it. This fact alone offers serious grounds for optimism that the battle against the semi-literacy of millions of American school children will at last be won.