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March 17, 2004

Letters

Some Are Too Busy For 'Reading Wars'

To the Editor:

There are so many people laboring every day in urban schools across the country, trying to rescue children and youths challenged by family and financial circumstances. Personally, I don't know of anyone working in these circumstances who spends much time engaged in the bickering and polemics surrounding the so-called "reading wars."

Truth be told, while some of our national leaders argue about how to teach reading, many schoolchildren are slipping through the widening cracks in the academic pipeline and, as a consequence, are losing hope. They cry out to adults, to educators, and to communities for leadership and help—but their voices continue to be drowned out by the cacophony of special interests.

It is in this context of the real-world circumstances of urban education reform that I write. My words should not be read as slamming the reputations of Kenneth Goodman, who I dearly appreciate for all that he contributes to reading theory and practice, or of G. Reid Lyon, who, based on speeches I have heard, remains earnest in his attempts to improve schooling in this country. What I decry is the time lost engaged in these arguments—no matter how well-intentioned.

Based on my experience working in partnership with urban school districts, it is not the reading pedagogy or the reading program used that makes a difference in the lives of students. What makes a difference is the teacher: the skills that he or she brings to the classroom that can translate theory into practice, that can integrate high standards, sound pedagogy, and good

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content into teaching mediations to accelerate learning. The research is clear that the teacher remains the single most important school-based factor in terms of student achievement. Borrowing from the effective catchphrase of BASF commercials, "school-based practitioners don't make the reading programs, we just make them better."

I might add that a few of us have had the good fortune of being trained by Dorothy Strickland (also mentioned in your article) during our doctoral studies at Teachers College, Columbia University. This is where the ideas of "balanced literacy" methods first emerged for us, and where we were challenged to maintain an unshakable belief in the capacity of all students to succeed at the highest levels.

To test the application of teaching methods with high expectations, all we had to do was walk a few blocks from campus to schools in Harlem. There we were able, using the broad principles of balanced literacy (a blend of phonics and whole language), together with other methodologies, to break the academic ceiling for inner-city children.

Rather than pointing fingers and playing education's version of the "gotcha" game, can we not remember that, in respect to reform, we are primarily talking about the education of children of color who live in poverty? The arguments between leaders such as Mr. Goodman and Mr. Lyon never take hold in affluent communities. Why do we continue to tinker with the educational experiences of those most in need?

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