



Dr. Seuss and Dyslexia

In fact, the official position of the federal government on this issue is summed up in the 1987 Report to the Congress of the Interagency Committee on Learning Disabilities which defined "Learning Disabilities" as follows (p. 222):

Learning disabilities is a generic term that refers to a heterogeneous group of disorders manifested by significant difficulties in the acquisition and use of listening, speaking, reading, writing, reasoning, or mathematical abilities, or of social skills. These disorders are intrinsic to the individual and *presumed to be due to central nervous system dysfunction*. [Our emphasis.] Even though a learning disability may occur concomitantly with other handicapping conditions (e.g., sensory impairment, mental retardation, social and emotional disturbance), with socioenvironmental influences (e.g., cultural differences, insufficient or inappropriate instruction, psychogenic factors), and especially with attention deficit disorder, all of which may cause learning problems, a learning disability is not the direct result of those conditions or influences.



In other words, according to government researchers, all learning disabilities are due to "central nervous system dysfunction," regardless of all other factors, including teaching methods. In fact, the federal government is pumping millions of dollars into research on the genetic causes of dyslexia.

But what if we are able to prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that dyslexia is caused by the teaching methods? Would that alter the course of government research? Probably not, for there was a private researcher in North Carolina by the name of Edward Miller who had already offered such proof to the government, only to be rebuffed by officialdom. After all, if what Miller said is true, then millions of dollars of research money will have been wasted.

Are there people who are born dyslexic? Yes, but they are afflicted with so many other problems that their inability to learn to read is simply only one of them. There are children born with all sorts of handicaps and defects that are recognized at birth or soon after. Some of these handicaps reflect



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neurological problems. But many of these children are quite educable. However, the dyslexia we are talking about is the kind that afflicts children who have come to school with perfectly good speech, hearing, eyesight, equilibrium, etc. In fact, some of these so-called dyslexics are some of the brightest and physically healthiest students in their classes. Miller calls their reading problem "educational dyslexia," that is, dyslexia, or reading disability, caused by the teaching method.

Some parents will ask: How is it that my Johnny began to show signs of dyslexia in the first grade, before he had had any formal reading instruction? Miller found the answer to that question. It all starts at home with preschool readers. Miller discovered that when preschoolers memorize as sight words the entire texts of such popular books as Dr. Seuss's *The Cat in the Hat* and *Green Eggs and Ham*, they develop a block against seeing the words phonetically and thus become "dyslexic." They become sight readers with a holistic reflex rather than phonetic readers with a phonetic reflex. A holistic reader looks at each word as a little picture, a configuration, much like a Chinese ideograph, and tries to think of the word it represents. A phonetic reader associates letters with sounds and can sound out the syllabic units that blend into an articulated word.

What this means is that parents should teach their children to read phonetically before giving them the Dr. Seuss books to read. They should avoid having their children memorize words by their configurations alone, because once that mode of viewing words becomes an automatic reflex, it will create a block against phonics.

In other words, failure to teach a child to read phonetically, but requiring the child to memorize hundreds of sight words produces educational dyslexia. Incidentally, a sight word, by definition, is a word learned without reference to the sounds the letters stand for. Nowadays, publishers are selling books for preschoolers with audio tapes so that the child can learn to read by the sight method without the help of his or her parents. Thus, the child will develop a reading handicap without the slightest idea that what he or she is doing is harmful.

How do we know it's harmful? By what happens when the child enters school and proceeds upwards to the third grade. In kindergarten and the first grade, all will seem satisfactory, for most schools now use the sight method, and a child who enters school having already memorized a large number of sight words will be ahead of those students who haven't. Everybody will be pleased by the child's performance. But as the child moves into the third grade where the reading demands are much greater, involving many new words which the child's overburdened memory cannot handle, the child will experience a learning breakdown.

But the problem, as we have indicated, can also show up in the first grade where the teaching method is phonics-based. This is often the case in many private and religious schools where reading is taught phonetically. If a child enters the first grade in such a school after having already memorized several hundred sight words from preschool readers, that child will most likely have already developed a block against learning to look at words phonetically. That's why we see "dyslexia" among some first graders.

In other words, there are two ways of looking at our printed or written words: holistically or phonetically. If you are taught to read phonetically from the start, you will never become dyslexic, for dyslexia by definition is a block against seeing the phonetic structure of our words. Phonetic readers become good, independent readers because they have developed a phonetic reflex. To them literacy is as natural and effortless as breathing. A holistic, sight reader, on the other hand, must rely on memorization of individual word forms and use all sorts of contextual strategies to get the word right.



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Edward Miller devised a very simple word-recognition test that dramatically illustrates the difference between a holistic and a phonetic reader. The test consists of two sets of words: The first set consists of 260 sight words drawn from Dr. Seuss's two books, *The Cat in the Hat* and *Green Eggs and Ham*, and the second set consists of 260 equally simple words taken from Rudolf Flesch's phonetically regular word lists in *Why Johnny Can't Read*. Both sets of words are at a first-grade level.

A child who is already a phonetic reader will sail through both sets of words without any problem. But a holistic reader might sail through the sight words at high speed with almost no errors, but then slow down considerably and make many errors in the phonetic section even though these are simple first-grade words.

That the words in the two Dr. Seuss books were to be read and learned as sight words was confirmed by Dr. Seuss himself in an interview published in *Arizona* magazine in June 1981. He said:

They think I did it in twenty minutes. That d — ned *Cat in the Hat* took nine months until I was satisfied. I did it for a textbook house and they sent me a word list. That was due to the Dewey revolt in the Twenties in which they threw out phonic reading and went to word recognition, as if you're reading Chinese pictographs instead of blending sounds of different letters. I think killing phonics was one of the greatest causes of illiteracy in the country. Anyway, they had it all worked out that a healthy child at the age of four can learn so many words in a week and that's all. So there were two hundred and twenty-three words to use in this book. I read the list three times and I almost went out of my head. I said, I'll read it once more and if I can find two words that rhyme that'll be the title of my book. (That's genius at work.) I found "cat" and "hat" and I said, "The title will be *The Cat in the Hat*."

Thus, even Dr. Seuss knew that "killing phonics" was a cause of illiteracy in America. But somehow that insight, made by America's most famous writer of children's books, has escaped our educators.

Holistic readers are indeed handicapped by the way they are taught to read. They are taught to look at words as whole pictures, which means that they are not bound to look at a word from left to right. They simply look for something in the word-picture that will remind them of what the word is. Thus they may actually look at a word from right to left, which accounts for the tendency of dyslexics to reverse letters and read words backwards. Also, holistic readers are encouraged by their teachers to substitute words, as explained by a whole-language advocate quoted in the *Washington Post* of Nov. 29, 1986. The headline reads, "Reading Method Lets Pupils Guess; Whole-Language Approach Riles Advocates of Phonics." The article states:

The most controversial aspect of whole language is the de-emphasis on accuracy. American Reading Council President Julia Palmer, an advocate of the approach, said it is acceptable if a young child reads the word house for home, or substitutes the word pony for horse. "It's not very serious because she understands the meaning," said Palmer. "Accuracy is not the name of the game."

When does accuracy become the name of the game in Palmer's system of education? Probably, never, for if you teach children in primary school, through invented spelling and word substitutions, that accuracy is not at all important, they may never acquire a sense of accuracy, unless forced to do so by the demands of the workplace.

By the way, if a child reads the word horse as pony, he or she can't read!

What we do know is that when you impose an inaccurate, subjective ideographic teaching technique on



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a phonetic-alphabetic writing system that demands accurate decoding, you create symbolic confusion, cognitive conflict, frustration, and a learning breakdown. In addition, I strongly suspect that attention deficit disorder, otherwise known as ADD, is a form of behavioral disorder created by a teaching disorder. It is the symbolic confusion, cognitive conflict, learning blocks, and frustration caused by holistic teaching methods that literally force children to react physically to what they instinctively know is harming them. They may not know exactly what it is the teacher is doing that is harming them. But they certainly know that they are being harmed. How? By the simple circumstances of their position.

When they entered school at the age of five or six, these children felt very confident, very intelligent. After all, they had all taught themselves to speak their own language very nicely without the aid of certified teachers or school. And when they enter school, they expect to be able to learn to read with the same competence. And, normally, this is what happens when they are taught to read phonetically and begin to master our alphabetic system.

But if children are taught to read holistically, mastering our alphabetically written words becomes a superhuman task. And because the teaching method seems to defy all logic and common sense, their minds react against such teaching just as their stomachs would if they had eaten some sort of poison. The stomach throws up, rejecting the poison, and I suspect that ADD is a form of mental rejection of pedagogical poison.

What other defense does the child have against pedagogical poisoning? What Ritalin and other such drugs do is lower the defense against such poisoning. The child becomes a docile, defenseless victim of whatever nonsense the teacher is inflicting on the child. And the child is usually dumped into Special Education for the rest of his or her academic career.

According to Lori and Bill Granger, authors of *The Magic Feather: The Truth About "Special Education"*:

Parents of children in Special Education classes have noticed that their kids become more and more passive and dependent the longer they are in Special Education.... Special Education teaches kids how to be failures and to live with being failures. It segregates kids from "normal" kids by putting special labels on them, putting them in separate classrooms, putting them in separate schools, and making certain that not too much is ever asked of them or expected of them....

Evidence for a "neurological" basis for LD is vague at best.... Some of the more revered books in this field, which purport to convey "facts" on the "neurological" basis of learning disabilities, are nothing more than wishful thinking.... Education trade journals are full of debates about learning disabilities that would shock parents of children who have been routinely labeled LD.

Fortunately, homeschoolers are in the best position to guard their children against the kind of pedagogical poisoning that is turning millions of normal children into LDs. Parents can begin teaching their children to read phonetically as early as they and their child wishes. Above all, they must avoid having their preschoolers memorize words holistically without any knowledge of the letter sounds. If you tell children that letters stand for sounds, they will begin to understand what our alphabetic system is all about.



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