



Written by [Sam Blumenfeld](#) on October 15, 2012

Educational History and Professional Ignorance

Back in 1973 I wrote a book on the reading problem, [The New Illiterates: And How to Keep Your Child from Becoming One](#). A decade earlier, in 1962, I had become informed about the reading problem by an attorney friend, Watson Washburn, a New York patrician, who created the Reading Reform Foundation and wanted me to become a member of his National Advisory Council. He was concerned about how reading was being taught in our schools, including the elitist private schools his nieces and nephews were attending. I was then editor of *The Universal Library* at Grosset & Dunlap, and like so many college graduates, I thought I knew a lot about everything. But I knew nothing about the reading problem. So he educated me.



He told me that the schools were no longer teaching children to read with the traditional phonics method but were using a new whole-word approach, in which children were expected to learn to read by memorizing whole words as little pictures. The new method was causing reading problems among thousands of children. Since I had been taught to read by phonics in a New York City public school, I could not understand how or why the educators had changed the way reading was being taught. How could you learn to read without phonics?

My friend advised me to read Rudolf Flesch's book, [Why Johnny Can't Read](#), published in 1955, which revealed the truth about what was happening in our schools and why so many children were having enormous difficulty learning to read. I read the book, was appalled by what the educators had done, and became an active member of the Reading Reform Foundation. Flesch had written:

The teaching of reading — all over the United States, in all the schools, and in all the textbooks — is totally wrong and flies in the face of all logic and common sense.

It was naively expected by many Americans that the mere publication of Flesch's book and the enormous controversy it generated over the issue of phonics vs. the whole-word method in teaching reading would correct a deplorable situation. But it did no such thing. The educators simply circled the wagons and accused Flesch of misinforming the public. Indeed, they were so successful in their opposition that little significant change took place in the teaching of reading. They continued to use the whole-word, or look-say, method, creating even more functional illiterates.

But a significant number of independent and informed parents had read Flesch's book and began teaching their own children at home to read with phonics. But most parents remained as ignorant as ever concerning the reading controversy, accepting the educators' claim that there was nothing wrong with the way they were teaching reading. If their children were having difficulty learning to read, there



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was something wrong with the children. Even the medical profession got into the act. Dr. Rudolph F. Wagner, in his book *Dyslexia and Your Child*, published in 1971, wrote:

The overt symptoms of a child with a specific reading problem are known to anyone concerned with the education of these children: they are poor readers in spite of good intelligence; they are easily discouraged by their failures; they often reverse letters and whole words; they are sometimes held back a grade in school; they are not disturbed in the pathological sense; they are usually in as good health as most of their classmates; and they have no access to the world of the written word with its literary treasures.

Dr. Wagner noted that experts on dyslexia had difficulty identifying the “illness.” He wrote:

Professionally used diagnostic categories likewise are myriad and colorful, to say the least: dyslexia, alexia, learning disability (congenital or developmental), aphasoid, language impairment, strephosymbolia, and many more. To top it all, we even find a fancy Latin name, *amnesia verbalis visualis*, a sort of forgetting visually presented words.

In other words, if a child had difficulty remembering his or her sight vocabulary, he or she was afflicted with a terrible condition called *amnesia verbalis visualis*. Dr. Wagner writes further:

Beyond the observation that children with reading problems have larger numbers of reversals than normal children, it is further assumed that the cause of reversals in poor readers may be due to perceptual difficulties, lack of spatial orientation, and possibly underlying neurological deficiencies of a milder borderline nature.

Apparently, Dr. Wagner was not aware that when a child who has not been taught phonics is required to memorize a sight word as a little picture, he or she does not look at it from left to right since the arrangement of the letters has no particular meaning, which is why reversing letters is so common among dyslexics. When a person looks at a picture, he is attracted to something in the picture that stands out. But since printed words are not really pictures, the learner has a difficult time finding something to remember about the “picture.” That’s why these learners become afflicted with *amnesia verbalis visualis*.

One of the best descriptions of how a dyslexic reads was given by Roger E. Saunders, a psychologist at a conference on dyslexia at the Johns Hopkins Medical Institution in 1961. He wrote:

It is not uncommon to find, particularly in dyslexic children below the fourth-grade level, regardless of their age, words read in reverse, for example *was* as *saw*, *on* as *no*. A single letter may be reversed, as in *dig* for *big*. Often there may be a transposition of some of the letters within a word, for example *abroad* for *aboard*, *left* for *felt*, *how* for *who*. General confusion of words which have only a slightly different configuration abounds, for example *through*, *though*, *thought*, and *quit*, *quiet*, *quite*.... Guesses are frequent, in view of the inability to handle the sounds-symbol system. They grasp for meaning of unknown words on the basis of a few clues the rest of the printed material has furnished. It is also possible that, while working out a difficult word, there may be such a long pause that the meaning of the previously read words will escape them.

In 1973, I decided to write my own book on the reading problem. I wanted to find out who it was who had dreamed up the idea that you can teach children to read English, a phonetic system, as if it were Chinese, an ideographic system. It seemed like such an insane idea. But first, I did an analysis of the *Dick and Jane* reading program, the most popular look-say reading program being used in American schools. I found that the first pre-primer taught 17 sight words; the second pre-primer taught 21 sight



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words; and the third pre-primer taught 20 words. In all, the child was required, before knowing anything about sounds or letters, to memorize 58 sight words before reading the first primer.

After completing my analysis of the entire program I came to the conclusion that any child taught to read by that look-say method could become dyslexic. Indeed, I dubbed a “sight vocabulary” as the “Thalidomide” of primary education. The drug Thalidomide was withdrawn in 1961 when it was found that it caused horrible birth defects.

My research into the origin of the look-say method took me back well into the 19th century. Indeed, I was surprised to discover that the idea of teaching children to read by the sight method originated with the Rev. Thomas H. Gallaudet, the teacher of the deaf and dumb at his Asylum in Hartford, Connecticut. He had been able to teach the deaf to read in a limited way by using pictures juxtaposed with words. He thought that this method could be adapted for use by normal children, thus freeing them from having to drill the alphabet and the letter sounds. He called his book, *The Mother's Primer*. Its first line was: “Frank had a dog: his name was Spot.” Spot would turn up decades later in Dick and Jane!

On August 2, 1836, the Boston Primary School Committee adopted Gallaudet's primer on an experimental basis. The experiment turned out to be a great literacy disaster. Apparently, normal children cannot be taught to read a phonetic writing system as if they are deaf. The entire history of this teaching fiasco can be found in the acrimonious dispute between the Boston Masters and the state Secretary of Education, Horace Mann, a liberal reformer, whose *Seventh Annual Report*, published in 1844, was highly critical of the conservative Boston Masters. Mann favored the new sight method of teaching reading. The Masters replied with their famous *Remarks on the Seventh Annual Report*. This was the beginning of that ongoing debate between liberals and conservatives on education, which is still going on today.

After a year of hot exchanges between the Secretary and the Boston Masters, the latter admitted defeat. They published their final word in a pamphlet fittingly entitled: *Penitential Tears, or a Cry from the Dust by the Thirty One Prostrated and Pulverized by the hand of Horace Mann*. They wrote:

Education is a great concern; it has often been tampered with by vain theorists; it has suffered much from the stupid folly and the delusive wisdom of its treacherous friends; and we hardly know which have injured it most. Our conviction is, that it has much more to hope from the collected wisdom and common prudence of the community, than from the suggestions of the individual. Locke injured it by his theories, and so did Rousseau, and so did Milton. All their plans were too splendid to be true. It is to be advanced by conceptions, neither soaring above the clouds, nor groveling on the earth — but by those plain, gradual, productive, common-sense improvements, which use may encourage and experience suggest. We are in favor of advancement, provided it is towards usefulness....

We love the secretary, but hate his theories. They stand in the way of substantial education. It is impossible for a sound mind not to hate them.

This bold statement of conviction could easily be uttered today by a conservative criticizing the kind of progressive education that now permeates American public schools and is producing rampant academic failure. But I know of no teacher nor educational administrator who has ever bothered to read my book or any of the original documents I have quoted.

The ignorance of the professionals is what has made a total sham of American public education. Their



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ignorance of our educational history is appalling. Dozens of books have been written by conservatives on the failures of progressive education, yet the professional educators simply will not read them because they don't comply with their political agenda. And if they do read them, they learn nothing from them. Self-imposed ignorance is a recipe for continued national failure. It is also a form of treason, for the National Commission on Excellence in Education wrote in its famous *Nation at Risk* report of 1983:

If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war.

That "act of war" against us has been perpetrated by our professional educators. But even that report did nothing to change their plans to continue dumbing down Americans. In other words, the treason continues unabated, with not a single politician being willing to call it what it is.



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