



John Dewey and the Decline of American Literacy (Part 2)

In John Dewey's article of 1898, "The Primary Education Fetich," in which he warned his progressive colleagues that "change must come gradually," lest it arouse violent resistance on the part of parents and taxpayers, he outlined his plan for how all of this was to be carried out. He wrote:

What is needed in the first place is, that there should be a full and frank statement of conviction with regard to the matter from physiologists and psychologists and from those school administrators who are conscious of the evils of the present regime.... There are already in existence a considerable number of educational "experiment stations," which represent the outposts of educational progress. If these schools can be adequately supported for a number of years they will perform a great vicarious service. After such schools have worked out carefully and definitely the subject-matter of the new curriculum — finding the right place for language studies and placing them in their right perspective—the problem of the more general educational reform will be immensely simplified.



One of the supporters of Dewey's program was John D. Rockefeller II, who put four of his sons in one of the "experiment stations," the Lincoln School, which managed to turn the four boys into dyslexics. All of which proved that Dewey's program of destroying literacy worked like a charm.

And so, the plan for educational reform was quite clear: first find the "right place" for reading instruction in the primary grades and "the problem of the more general education reform will be immensely simplified." In other words, children who couldn't read needed a new dumbed-down curriculum to accommodate this overall decline in literacy.

Note Dewey's suggestion that what was needed first was a "full and frank statement of conviction ... from physiologists and psychologists" that could be used to convince teachers and principals of the need to downgrade literacy in the primary grades. This need was actually supplied by one Edmund Burke Huey, a professor of psychology who had studied under G. Stanley Hall at Clark University and did his Ph.D. dissertation on the psychology and physiology of reading. His book, *The Psychology and Pedagogy of Reading*, published in 1908, became the bible of look-say, whole-word instruction. Huey



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wrote:

[A]s child nature is being systematically studied, the feeling grows that these golden years of childhood, like the Golden Age of our race, belong naturally to quite other subjects and performances than reading, and to quite other objects than books; and that reading is a "Fetich of Primary Education" which only holds its place by the power of tradition and the stifling of questions asked concerning it....

What is this "Golden Age of the race" in which there was no need for books or reading? Before there was literacy there was no civilization. Was that the Golden Age? This is the sort of intellectual quackery that was going to be used to destroy "stifling" tradition in the primary school. Huey continued:

In an article on "The Primary Education Fetch" in Forum, Vol. XXV, [Dewey] gives his reasons for such a conclusion. While the fetich of Greek is passing, there remains, he says, the fetich of English, that the first three years of school are to be given largely to reading and a little number work. . . . Reading has maintained this traditional place in the face of changed social, industrial, and intellectual conditions which make the problem wholly different....

Against using the period from six to eight years for learning to read and write, Professor Dewey accepts the opinion of physiologists that the sense-organs and nervous system are not adapted then to such confining work, that such work violates the principle of exercising the fundamental before the accessory, that the cramped positions leave their mark, that writing to ruled line forms is wrong, etc. Besides, he finds that a certain mental enfeeblement comes from too early an appeal to interest in the abstractions of reading.

Huey then suggested that children be taught to read through the same sort of stages that the human race went through before the alphabet was invented. He writes in the quack's sanctimonious, all-knowing style:

The history of languages in which picture-writing was long the main means of written communication has here a wealth of suggestion for the framers of the new primary course. . . .

It is not indeed necessary that the child should be able to pronounce correctly or pronounce at all, at first, the new words that appear in his reading, any more than that he should spell or write all the new words that he hears spoken. If he grasps, approximately, the total meaning of the sentence in which the new word stands, he has read the sentence.

So here in 1908, we have a justification for teaching children to read without accuracy. It is obvious that Dewey knew exactly the kind of reading that would destroy high literacy, and reduce young readers to word guessers. Huey goes on:

Usually this total meaning will suggest what to call the new word, and the word's current articulation will usually have been learned in conversation, if the proper amount of oral practice shall have preceded reading. And even if the child substitutes words of his own for some that are on the page, provided that these express the meaning, it is an encouraging sign that the reading has been real, and recognition of details will come as it is needed. The shock that such a statement will give to many a practical teacher of reading is but an accurate measure of the hold that a false ideal has taken of us, viz., that to read is to say just what is upon the page, instead of to think, each in his own way, the meaning that the page suggests. . . .

Until the insidious thought of reading as word-pronouncing is well worked out of our heads, it is



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well to place the emphasis strongly where it belongs, on reading as thought-getting independently of expression.

Huey's words are an exact definition of the philosophy behind Whole Language, the most recent reading program of the progressives. So, there you have the look-say, whole-language philosophy of reading summed up very neatly in 1908 by Professor Huey, whose book is still considered the authority on reading instruction. It is not known whether Dewey or Huey had ever taught a child to read. They certainly made no references to such experiences in their writings. But their views have dominated reading pedagogy in the teachers colleges of America since then.

In 1991, the authors of *Whole Language: What's the Difference*, defined reading as:

Whole language represents a major shift in thinking about the reading process. Rather than viewing reading as "getting the words," whole language educators view reading as essentially a process of creating meanings.... It is a transaction, not an extraction of the meaning from print, in the sense that the reader-created meanings are a fusion of what the reader brings and what the text offers.

In other words, today's whole-language teachers are completely faithful to the view of reading as given by Dewey in 1898 and Huey in 1908.

Naturally, it took some time before the new philosophy of reading could be translated into textbooks for the schools. The development of these textbooks took place mainly at the University of Chicago and at Teachers College, Columbia University, in New York. In Chicago it was William Scott Gray, protégé of the [Wundtian](#), [Charles H. Judd](#), dean of the school of education, who laid the groundwork that paved the way for the [Dick and Jane](#) reading program written by William S. Gray and Zerna Sharp. At Teachers College, it was Arthur I. Gates, protégé of [Edward L. Thorndike](#), father of behaviorist educational psychology, who produced the Macmillan reading program.

These books were ready for the schools by 1930, and were widely promoted throughout the education system by a series of articles in the National Education Association's Journal, a virtual mouthpiece for the progressives who had taken control of the NEA earlier in the century.

That the new teaching methods caused reading problems was already known by 1929, when Dr. Samuel T. Orton wrote an article, "The 'Sight Method' of Teaching Reading as a Source of Reading Disability," which was published in the *Journal of Educational Psychology* in February 1929. In fact, it was known as early as 1914 that the sight method and the phonics method produced two different types of readers: subjective and objective.

Educational psychologist Walter Dearborn in his 1914 monograph, "Perception and Reading" states:

The chief differences between these types are said to be that the objective readers have a rather narrow span of attention in reading, but see accurately what they do see, and seldom guess or "read into" the material perceived, and that the subjective readers have a wider span, are influenced more by words lying in indirect vision, depend on relatively meager visual cues such as large word wholes, and that they are more likely to misread because of the large apperceptive element which they supply to the reading. (Archives of Psychology, No. 30, 1914, p. 42)

That was written in 1914. Today we recognize the subjective reader as one who has been taught by the whole-language method and has developed a holistic (whole-word as picture) reflex, while the objective reader, taught by intensive, systematic phonics, has developed a phonetic (letter sounds) reflex. A child



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with a holistic reflex has acquired a built-in obstacle to seeing the phonetic structure of our alphabetically written words, and thus is technically “dyslexic.” The only cure for that school-induced dyslexia is the replacement of the holistic reflex by a phonetic reflex which requires months of intensive remediation.

As Pavlovian psychologists know, it is impossible to have two conflicting, mutually incompatible reflexes at the same time. That is why it is so important to make sure that all American children develop a phonetic reflex. But as long as whole-language is the way most American children are taught to read, we will continue to experience a high level of reading disability.



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