



Written by [Sam Blumenfeld](#) on December 23, 2012

Readingate: The 100-Year Coverup of Educational Malpractice, Part 2

The Progressives were in favor of the new method of teaching reading advocated by John Dewey because it fit nicely with their philosophy of education. They strongly agreed with Dewey, whose aim it was to change the focus of education from the development of individual intellectual skills to the development of cooperative social skills. The object of socialism had been from the very beginning to remake man from the competitive being of capitalist society to a cooperative being in a collectivist state. Education was considered the best way to achieve this transformation. Indeed, President Obama's idea of transforming America is in line with the Progressive aim to create a socialist America.



Dewey's famous Laboratory School at the University of Chicago (1896-1904), in which his ideas were tested on children, led to the writing of his book *School and Society*, which became the bible of Progressive education. His ideas were later implemented at the Lincoln School (1916-1946) at Teachers College, Columbia University, in New York, where Dewey was invited to set up shop and set the direction for teacher education.

There he joined his two colleagues, James McKeen Cattell and Edward L. Thorndike, who became the chief architects of progressive education. Having received his Ph.D. in psychology under Wilhelm Wundt in Leipzig, Cattell became head of the Department of Psychology, Anthropology, and Philosophy at Columbia in 1891. Thorndike, who had studied how animals learn at Harvard under William James, completed his Ph.D. at Columbia University in 1898 under the supervision of Cattell. In 1899 he became an instructor in psychology at Teachers College, where he remained for the rest of his career, developing his human-animal training program known as the S-R, or Stimulus-Response, learning process.

The Lincoln School, which opened in 1916, with support from the Rockefeller-founded General Education Board, became the experimental school for Teachers College. John D. Rockefeller, Jr., who admired John Dewey and his radical education ideas, donated \$3 million to the school. He also sent four of his five sons to the school to be educated under the new progressive philosophy. All four boys, subjected to the new method of teaching reading, became dyslexic.

Jules Abel, in his book on the Rockefellers, revealed what the new teaching method did for the boys' literacy:

The influence of the Lincoln School, which as a progressive school, encouraged students to explore their own interests and taught them to live in society has been a dominant one in their lives.... Yet



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Laurence gives startling confirmation as to “Why Johnnie Can’t Read.” He says that the Lincoln School did not teach him to read and write as he wishes he now could. Nelson, today, admits that reading for him is a “slow and tortuous process” that he does not enjoy doing but compels himself to do it. This is significant evidence in the debate that has raged about modern educational techniques.

David and Winthrop also became dyslexic. David went on to become a banker and philanthropist, while Winthrop became a philanthropist and the 37th Governor of Arkansas. Their wealth made it possible for them to deal with their reading handicaps by having great secretaries.

The tragedy is that there are millions of Americans like the Rockefeller boys who must endure the crippling consequences of educational malpractice.

But what borders on the criminal is that these professors were aware that their teaching methods were causing “reading problems,” but they refused to stop using them, and their disciples continue to use them to this day. Indeed, they were politely but emphatically warned in February 1929 by Dr. Samuel T. Orton, a neuropathologist, in an article in the *Journal of Educational Psychology* entitled, “The ‘Sight Reading’ Method of Teaching Reading as a Source of Reading Disability.” Dr. Orton couldn’t have been more critical of the new teaching method. He wrote:

I wish to emphasize at the beginning that the strictures which I have to offer here do not apply to the use of the sight method of teaching reading as a whole but only to its effects on a restricted group of children for whom, as I think we can show, this technique is not only not adapted but often proves an actual obstacle to reading progress, and moreover I believe that this group is one of considerable educational importance both because of its size and because here faulty teaching methods may not only prevent the acquisition of academic education by children of average capacity but may also give rise to far reaching damage to their emotional life.

Orton had discovered all of this in the 1920s while investigating cases of reading disability in Iowa, where the new teaching method was being widely used. But the professors of education decided that Orton didn’t know much about education and went ahead with their plans to develop and publish their new basal reading programs. Later they made use of Orton’s own medical diagnoses and terminology to identify what was wrong with the kids having trouble learning to read. But they never admitted that it was the teaching method that caused these problems to begin with.

And so, as early as 1929, the educators had had explicit warning from a prominent physician that the new whole-word method could cause serious reading disability. And they certainly must have known about the Gallaudet experiment in Boston in the 1830s and ‘40s. Despite this, the new basal reading programs, with their delightful illustrations, turned out to be huge commercial successes for the publishers as virtually overnight whole school districts switched to Dick and Jane, Alice and Jerry, Janet and Mark, Jimmy and Sue, Tom and Betty, and other whole-word basal series that were making their professor-authors rich. By the way, no one seems to know why, in the midst of the Great Depression, American schools suddenly decided to spend millions of dollars on a new experimental teaching method that had yet to prove its efficacy.

By the 1940s, however, the new method’s harmful effects were quite evident. Schools everywhere were setting up remedial reading departments and reading clinics to handle the thousands of children with reading problems. In fact, remedial teaching had blossomed into a whole new educational specialty with its own professional status.



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Researchers, seeking the causes of this epidemic of reading disability, began to develop a whole new lexicon of exotic terms to deal with this previously unknown educational phenomenon: congenital word blindness, word deafness, developmental alexia, congenital alexia, congenital aphasia, dyslexia, strephosymbolia, binocular imbalance, ocular blocks, dyslexaphoria, ocular-manual laterality, minimal brain damage, and anything else a gullible public would accept.

What were the cures recommended for these horrible conditions? *Life* magazine, in a major article on dyslexia in 1944 (April 10), described the cure recommended by the Dyslexia Institute at Northwestern University for one little girl with an IQ of 118: thyroid treatments, removal of tonsils and adenoids, and exercises to strengthen her eye muscles. It would have been a lot easier and cheaper to simply teach the little girl the letters and sounds of the alphabet in an intensive phonics program.

With the boom in remedial teaching also came the creation of professional organizations to deal with reading disability. In 1946 the National Association for Remedial Teaching was formed, and two years later, the International Council for the Improvement of Reading Instruction. The professors must have laughed all the way to the bank, having enormous fun deceiving an entire nation.

At this point, one might ask, how could these progressive educators get away with this blatant educational malpractice in a free country where parents and elected representatives are supposed to have ultimate control over the public schools? Rudolf Flesch gave the answer in [Why Johnny Can't Read](#):

It's a foolproof system all right. Every grade-school teacher in the country has to go to a teachers' college or school of education; every teachers' college gives at least one course on how to teach reading; every course on how to teach reading is based on a textbook; every one of those textbooks is written by one of the high priests of the word method. In the old days it was impossible to keep a good teacher from following her own common sense and practical knowledge; today the phonetic system of teaching reading is kept out of our schools as effectively as if we had a dictatorship with an all-powerful Ministry of Education.

Apparently, government-monopoly education, even without a dictatorship, is quite capable of stifling dissent. In the matter of reading instruction, what we have had to contend with is a private monopoly of professors of education within a state-controlled and -regulated system. These professors have had a strong economic and professional interest in pushing and keeping their textbooks and methodology in the schools, and the state system made it easy for them to create a monopoly and maintain it indefinitely.

Teacher certification laws require young teachers to be trained by these professors, who not only prepare the curriculum for teacher training but also hold sway over the professional journals the teachers read and the organizations they join. In addition, the professors of education are organized professionally along national lines and therefore can assert a nationwide influence over the teaching profession as a whole. They also had the help of the National Education Association which published numerous articles in its *Journal* in favor of the new teaching method.

What was the reaction of the professors of education in 1955 to [Why Johnny Can't Read](#)? Unlike the parents who praised the book, the professors denounced Dr. Flesch in no uncertain terms, accusing him of misrepresentation, oversimplification, and superficiality. At the same time they decided to consolidate the two previously mentioned reading organizations into one major professional organization: the International Reading Association. In a few short years it would become the



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impregnable citadel of the whole-word method, protecting the professors' vested interests not only from Dr. Flesch but from all other critics who would dare question the professors' wisdom.

So if you've wondered why reading instruction in America has not gotten better since the publication of *Why Johnny Can't Read*, there's the reason. The profession is simply too well insulated from public or parental pressures. Today the International Reading Association has about 60,000 members, publishes three professional journals, and holds an annual convention that draws as many as 13,000 attendees. It will be holding its 58th Annual Convention in 2013 in San Antonio. If you peruse the *Reading Teacher*, the IRA's journal for classroom teachers, you will see how complex the teaching of reading has become. Complexity has become the reading establishment's defense against a return to anything as simple and effective as intensive, systematic phonics.

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