



Why Johnny STILL Can't Read

Fifty-six years ago, in 1955 to be exact, the most significant book about American education was published and, with very good reason, caused quite a stir. It was written by Rudolf Flesch, who had come to America to escape the Nazis in Vienna, became highly fluent in English and got a Ph.D in English at Columbia University. The book was entitled *Why Johnny Can't Read*. It became a best-seller and rankled the entire education establishment. In it Flesch explained why so many children in American schools were having such a difficult time learning to read.



He wrote:

“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.”

He then went on to explain how, in the 1930s, the professors of education changed the way reading was taught in American schools. They threw out the traditional alphabetic-phonics method, in which one learns how to sound out new words, and replaced it with a new sight, whole-word, or look-say method that teaches children to read English as if it were Chinese. He said that when you impose an ideographic teaching method on a phonetic reading and writing system you get dyslexia, or reading disability.

Flesch's book was the first salvo in the Reading War, which is still going on over a half a century later. The progressive educators, who had introduced the new reading programs, were not about to give up their crusade to use the schools to create a socialist America. Their view, as first stated by their leader John Dewey, was that traditional phonics produced independent, individualistic readers who could think for themselves, while the new whole-word approach produced readers dependent on the collective for meaning and interpretation and were thereby easier to collectivize and control. And anyone who has visited a public school lately will become aware of how socialistic the curriculum has become.

In this socialist crusade, behavioral psychology would play an important role. For example, Dr. Paul Witty, professor of education and director of the psycho-educational clinic at Northwestern University, was interviewed by *Nation's Schools* in July 1955. Flesch had singled out the professor as one of the whole-word gurus. So the magazine prefaced the interview with this paragraph:

“How does one tell a gullible public that it is being exploited by a biased writer — as in the case with Rudolf Flesch and his book *Why Johnny Can't Read*? It will take time and patience for parents to learn that Mr. Flesch has mixed a few half-truths with prejudice to capitalize on two misconceptions. The first is his superficial notion as to what reading really is. The second is his misrepresentation as to how reading is taught.”

By now we know exactly what the progressives mean by “what reading really is.” The word method is now called Whole Language, and in 1991 three Whole Language professors wrote a book, [Whole](#)



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[Language: What's the Difference?](#), in which they defined what they mean by reading. They wrote:

From a whole language perspective, reading (and language use in general) is a process of generating hypotheses in a meaning-making transaction in a sociohistorical context. As a transactional process reading is not a matter of “getting the meaning” from text, as if that meaning were in the text waiting to be decoded by the reader. Rather, reading is a matter of readers using the cues print provide and the knowledge they bring with them to construct a unique interpretation....This view of reading implies that there is no single “correct” meaning for a given text, only plausible meanings.

This is the kind of pedagogical insanity that now reigns in our colleges of education and has filtered down to the classroom teacher. Most parents assume that our educators are sane human beings who use common sense in their classrooms. Unfortunately, few if any parents have access to the writings of these so-called professors of education, and so are totally ignorant of the kind of crackpots who are educating their children.

Of course, back in 1955, the educators had every reason to denounce Rudolf Flesch because he put in jeopardy all of the new programs that were created to deal with the reading problems children were having as a result of the new teaching methods. An article in the May 1953 issue of *High Points* had described the new world of remedial reading which had come into existence:

Nearly every university in the United States now operates a “reading clinic” staffed by psychiatrists, psychologists, and trained reading technicians, and equipped with novel mechanical devices such as the metronoscope, the ophthalmograph, and the reading rate accelerator.... In addition, an entirely new professional group of private practitioners has arisen, whose specialized training in the field justifies their hanging out their shingles as “reading counselors” and rating large fees for consultation and remedial treatment.

So in addition to the education establishment and the new basal textbooks they wrote promoting the new teaching method, a whole new field of psychological therapy had developed to take care of children’s reading problems. Indeed, as early as 1944, *Life* magazine was writing articles about the epidemic of dyslexia among American children. The article stated:

Millions of children in the U.S. suffer from dyslexia which is the medical term for reading difficulties. It is responsible for about 70% of the school failures in the 6- to 12-year-age group, and handicaps about 15% of all grade-school children. Dyslexia may stem from a variety of physical ailments or combination of them— glandular imbalance, heart disease, eye or ear trouble — or from a deep-seated psychological disturbance that “blocks” a child’s ability to learn. It has little or nothing to do with intelligence and is usually curable.

The article then went on to describe the case of a little girl with an I.Q. of 118 who was being examined at the Dyslexia Institute of Northwestern University. After her tests, the doctors concluded that the little girl needed “thyroid treatments, removal of tonsils and adenoids, exercises to strengthen her eye muscles.” No one suggested teaching her to read with phonics.

No wonder Flesch’s book hit a sensitive nerve among the educators, psychiatrists, psychologists and “reading specialists.” They all had an economic stake in the continued use of teaching methods that produced these thousands of affected children.

The result of Flesch’s book is that it awakened many parents who then began to teach their children to read at home. But the public schools continued to use the teaching method that continued to produce



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reading disability. And by now the full story of the deliberate dumbing down of the American people has been fully documented by such books as Charlotte Iserbyt's [the deliberate dumbing down of America](#) and John Taylor Gatto's monumental, [The Underground History of American Education](#).

And yet most American parents continue to put their children in the government schools where the dumbing down curriculum is still in place and does its job of destroying their children's ability to become good readers and successful human beings. And yet, the idea of reforming the public schools still resonates among the public who constantly approve of the government's efforts of reform by throwing billions of dollars at the educators.

But Flesch knew how difficult the job of reform would be. He wrote:

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.

And the situation today is about the same as it was back in Flesch's day. My contacts in the teaching field tell me that not much has changed since 1955, despite the fact that many books have been published since then corroborating Flesch's findings. But it seems that only the homeschoolers have bothered to read them.

Back in the 1970s when I became aware of what was going on in the schools, I decided to write a phonics reading program that could easily be used by any parent to teach their child to read at home. I eliminated the use of any pictures and simply taught the student our English alphabetic system in a rational, systematic way. Its title is Alpha-Phonics. By now it has been used by thousands of homeschooling parents quite successfully, proving beyond any doubt that we can restore high literacy to this country if the will to do so is there. Unfortunately, it isn't among the educational establishment.

Meanwhile, just about everyone who reads a newspaper knows that we still have a severe reading problem, which is not helping our country compete with all of those students learning English in China, South Korea, Japan, and India.. Indeed, the National Endowment for the Arts was so concerned about our declining literacy that they conducted their own survey which was released in November of 2007 entitled "Reading at Risk."

According to the Report, the number of 17-year-olds who never read for pleasure increased from 9 percent in 1984 to 19 percent in 2004. About half of Americans between the ages of 18 and 24 never read books for pleasure.

Endowment Chairman Dana Gioia stated: "This is a massive social problem. We are losing the majority of the new generation. They will not achieve anything close to their potential because of poor reading." The survey found that only a third of high school seniors read at a proficient level. "And proficiency is not a high standard," said Gioia. "We're not asking them to be able to read Proust in the original. We're talking about reading the daily newspaper."

Well, as you can imagine the Report had as much influence on our educators as Flesch's book of 1955. By the way, Flesch wrote a new book in 1983, *Why Johnny Still Can't Read*. That book was totally ignored by the educators, who had so completely solidified their control over reading in the schools,



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that they couldn't have cared less about what Flesch had to say in his new book.

How long will America continue to suffer this literacy blight? As long as there are government schools controlled by the progressives, there will be no true reform. Thus, if parents want their children to become successful, literate human beings they will have to do it themselves or place their children in private and church schools they can trust.

Dr. Samuel L. Blumenfeld is the author of nine books on education including *NEA: Trojan Horse in American Education*, *The Whole Language/OBE Fraud*, and *The Victims of Dick & Jane and Other Essays*. Of *NEA: Trojan Horse in American Education*, former U.S. Senator Steve Symms of Idaho said: "Every so often a book is written that can change the thinking of a nation. This book is one of them." Mr. Blumenfeld's columns have appeared in such diverse publications as *Reason*, *The New American*, *The Chalcedon Report*, *Insight*, *Education Digest*, *Vital Speeches*, and *WorldNetDaily*.



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