



Pavlov's Dogs and American Education

You might ask, what have Pavlov's dogs got to do with educating American children? More than you think.

Ivan Petrovich Pavlov, the Russian experimental psychologist, was born in 1849 in the town of Rayazan. His father was a priest, and he was raised in the Russian Orthodox tradition. He was attracted to the study of science, and in 1870 entered St. Petersburg University. In 1875, he got his degree in Natural Sciences. He then went on to study medicine, after which he entered the Veterinary Institute where he stayed for 10 years doing research on digestion.



After a visit to Germany, where he studied at the laboratories of Rudolf Heidenhain in Breslau and Karl Ludwig in Leipzig, he returned to Russia and decided to focus his attention on the study of glandular secretions — saliva and gastric juices. He selected the dog as his experimental animal and devised surgical techniques which made it possible to establish "permanent fistulas (tubes)" in connection with the principal organs of digestion (salivary glands, stomach, liver, pancreas, parts of the intestine).

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His experiments were difficult to carry out while keeping the dogs not only alive but healthy. It took the sacrifice of 30 dogs before he could get the surgical procedure right. How did Pavlov get his dogs? He relates: "At that time dogs were collected with the help of street thieves, who used to steal those with collars as well as those without. No doubt we shared the onus of the sin with the thieves."

In 1895, Pavlov was appointed to a chair in physiology at the Military Medical Academy in St. Petersburg, and in 1904 was awarded the Nobel Prize. Pavlov had discovered that in every case, glandular secretion was determined by one or more reflex actions.

Actually, Pavlov recognized that there are two types of reflexes: unconditioned and conditioned. An unconditioned reflex is an innate response to stimuli that occurs naturally, without any learning involved. For example, when you are driving a car and enter a dark tunnel in daylight, your eyes automatically adjust to the change in light. However, a conditioned reflex is a learned response, as when you see a red light, you automatically put your foot on the brake. You have acquired an automatic response to stimuli — a conditioned or learned reflex, a habit.

Rejecting his religious upbringing in favor of the materialist worldview, Pavlov came to believe that science had to free itself from religious dogma concerning the soul. The soul had no place in science, he concluded, and the mind was simply the monitor and transmitter of signal-stimuli from the external world on the one hand, and the organism's responses on the other. Pavlov disliked any talk of "freedom of choice." To him such talk was an offense against scientific rigor.

Although the communists took control of Russia in 1917, Pavlov was able to continue his work unhindered in what became the State Institute of Experimental Psychology supported by government



Written by [Steven J. DuBord](#) on September 19, 2008

funding. Since Pavlov was both a Darwinist and a behaviorist, there was no ideological conflict between him and the new Marxist-Leninist government, which denied God and viewed man as nothing more than an animal whose behavior could be shaped by the State.

In 1920, Pavlov and his colleagues embarked on a long-term experimental investigation. The aim of the experiments was to learn how to artificially create human disorganization for the purpose of controlling and reorienting human behavior. In *The Nature of Human Conflicts* (1932), influential Soviet psychologist Dr. A.L. Luria gives us a full account of the experiments and what they revealed. "The chief problems of the author," Luria wrote in his Preface, "were an objective and materialistic description of the mechanisms lying at the basis of the disorganization of human behavior and an experimental approach to the laws of its regulation."

Why would these Soviet psychologists spend so much time and effort trying to find out how to deliberately drive people crazy? The answer is simple. The Soviet Union believed itself to be the leader in a world revolution to convert everyone to communism, which required the conquest of all its capitalist enemies. And this was to be done not by military invasion but by psychological warfare under the guise of objective science. Pavlov wrote in 1935:

The power of our knowledge over the nervous system will, of course, appear to much greater advantage if we learn not only to injure the nervous system but also to restore it at will. It will then have been proved that we have mastered the processes and are controlling them.... In many cases we are not only causing disease, but are eliminating it with great exactitude, one might say, to order.

Pavlov to Power

Luria described quite explicitly the key to creating behavioral disorganization. "Pavlov" he noted, "obtained very definite affective 'breaks,' an acute disorganization of behavior, each time that the conditioned reflexes collided, when the animal was unable to react to two mutually exclusive tendencies, or was incapable of adequately responding to any imperative problem."

In short, the methodology Luria describes is exactly the way our schools teach children to read. The child is taught to look at printed text as a string of little pictures, whole configurations, memorized in sight-vocabulary exercises. As a result he develops a whole-word conditioned reflex. At the same time he is taught something about the letters standing for sounds, a phonetic way of looking at words, which is very difficult to do if you are looking at the words as little pictures. For many children it is simply impossible; they cannot react to two "mutually exclusive tendencies," and thus become reading disabled, or dyslexic. On the other hand, if the child is taught exclusively by the look-say method, he is unlikely to be able to master reading our alphabetic writing system and is very likely to become functionally illiterate.

To understand why this is so, we must have an appreciation for the unique advantages of the alphabetic system of reading and writing. This is how I summarized it for *The New American* in 1997:

Somewhere around 2000 BC someone made a remarkable discovery: All of human language is composed of a small number of irreducible speech sounds. And that person decided that instead of using a writing system composed of many thousands of symbols (which linguists call ideographs), none of which looked like the things they represented and took years to learn and were easily forgotten, it would be better to create a set of symbols to represent only the irreducible speech sounds of language. The result was the world's first alphabetic system, which



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greatly simplified writing and required memorizing a very small number of symbols that stood for sounds....

In learning to read English by intensive, systematic phonics (as opposed to the phony "incidental" phonics which has been added as window dressing to some look-say and whole-language methods), the child first learns to recognize the 26 letters of the alphabet, and then learns the 44 sounds the letters stand for....

This is the way reading in alphabetic languages was taught for thousands of years, and, indeed, this is the only sensible way of teaching it.

Pavlov's laboratory was used by the Soviet State to devise scientific methods of waging psychological warfare in a manner that would enlist behavioral scientists worldwide. Of course, if you were a dedicated Marxist, you considered this scientific activity to be to the ultimate benefit of mankind.

They also experimented on creating another form of behavioral disorganization, which today we recognize as Attention Deficit Disorder. Luria writes:

The experiment is done very easily: we violate the rules of our usual laboratory procedure for the study of the reactive processes; instead of isolating the subject from everything which might distract his attention, we do just the opposite — while performing the experiment we converse with him, give him a book to read, and at intervals interrupt him by the auditory signal requiring the motor response.

Such a functional exclusion of the higher cortical mechanisms from participation of the simple reaction evokes a return to the primitive, diffuse type of reactive processes and a sharp lowering of the "functional barrier."

Dysfunctional by Design

In other words, when a child is prevented from using his intellect where it is needed without distraction, he reverts to a more primitive behavior, which is a symptom of ADD.

Apparently, there were many behavioral psychologists at that time working on the same problems. In his book, Luria draws special attention to the work of Kurt Lewin in Germany. "K. Lewin, in our opinion, has been one of the most prominent psychologists to elucidate this question of the artificial production of affect and of the experimental disorganisation of behavior," Luria writes. "Here the fundamental conception of Lewin is very close to ours."

Such a plaudit from one of Soviet communism's most important theorists of psychological warfare for a top American educator should be worthy of note, if not alarm.

Who is Kurt Lewin? He is the same Kurt Lewin who came to the United States in 1933, founded the Research Center for Group Dynamics at M.I.T., and invented "sensitivity training." He is frequently recognized in the professional literature as the "father of social psychology."

Shortly before his death in 1947, Lewin founded the National Training Laboratory at Bethel, Maine, under the sponsorship of the National Education Association. There teachers were, and still are, instructed in the techniques of sensitivity training and how to become effective agents of change.

Lewin's emphasis on collectivist group behavior to replace individualistic behavior was very much in harmony with what socialist John Dewey, the "father of progressive education," had advocated for his new curriculum. Dewey's work at his Laboratory School at the University of Chicago was known by



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Lenin's wife, who got the communist government to reform Russian schools according to the Dewey model.

Dewey was greeted with enthusiasm by Soviet officialdom when he visited Stalin's Russia in 1928; and he, in turn, was smitten by the Bolshevik experiment and became one of its most prominent promoters. In his 1929 book, *Impressions of Soviet Russia*, he rhapsodically refers to the communist system as "nobly heroic, evincing a faith in human nature which is democratic beyond the ambitions of the democracies of the past."

"The Russian educational situation," Dewey averred, "is enough to convert one to the idea that only in a society based upon the cooperative principle can the ideals of educational reformers be adequately carried into operation." Dewey acknowledged that Soviet propaganda was omnipresent and heavy-handed, but that was okay, since "in Russia the propaganda is in behalf of a burning public faith." He was particularly appreciative of "the role of the schools in building up forces and factors whose natural effect is to undermine the importance and uniqueness of family life" in Soviet Russia.

The communists returned Dewey's fulsome praise, *The Great Soviet Encyclopedia* describing him as "an outstanding American philosopher, psychologist, sociologist, and pedagogue." Much of his pedagogical system was adopted by Stalin's regime.

However, the Dewey-Soviet experiment came to an abrupt halt in August 1932 when the Central Committee of the Communist Party abandoned the laboratory method and ordered a return to a structured curriculum. The communist leaders wanted the *Soviet* schools to produce competent engineers, not semi-literate basket weavers.

Dewey's Dismal System

But in America, where capitalism and individualism still reigned, the Progressive educational leadership had no intention of going back to the structured pro-capitalistic- individualistic curriculum. And anyone who visits an American elementary school today will see the continued implementation of the Dewey-Lewin concept of education. And with that concept have come all of the problems we now associate with the public schools.

Countless articles have appeared in the major media over the last three decades critical of American education. The litany of problems is always spelled out: poor academic performance, high dropout rates, student violence, low teacher morale, etc. And the solutions offered are always the same: more tax money for education, smaller class size, higher teacher pay, new buildings, new curricula, and more computers and high-tech paraphernalia. Nobody has bothered to read Luria's book.

But because most of the reporters are young and have no idea how education was conducted back in the days before the Progressives took over — when children actually learned to read and there were no school massacres — they are incapable of asking the right questions. But those of us who went to school in those halcyon days and are still around to talk about them are generally ignored.

Those of us who were witnesses to the past and have spent our lives monitoring the decline of American education know what happened. It all started at the turn of the last century when the Progressives took control of the education system and gradually imposed their new collectivist philosophy on the curriculum.

The most destructive thing they did was reform the teaching of reading by throwing out the true and tried phonics method and imposing a whole-word method that would teach children to read our



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alphabetic English as if it were a pictographic language like Chinese, which would ultimately lead to the general decline of literacy in our country.

Why were these crucial changes made? They were made so that the Progressives could shape future generations of American children to become collectivists instead of individualists. The Progressives were socialists. They were members of the Protestant academic elite who no longer believed in the religion of their fathers. Their new religion was science, which explained the material world; evolution, which explained the origin of living matter; and psychology, which explained human behavior and offered scientific ways to control it. They believed that evil was caused by ignorance, poverty, and social injustice, and that a collectivist society could eliminate all of that.

The guiding light and chief philosopher behind the Progressive Education movement was John Dewey, whose seminal essay, "The Primary-Education Fetich," published in 1898, provided the blueprint for the new educational agenda. In that article he advocated shifting primary education away from concentrating on individual literacy to placing the emphasis on socialization through group activities. "The plea for the predominance of learning to read in early school life because of the great importance attaching to literature seems to me a perversion," he wrote.

And because his view would be considered so radical by parents and teachers, he wrote:

Change must come gradually. To force it unduly would compromise its final success by favoring a violent reaction. 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.

In other words, deceiving parents would become an important and implicit part of the plan for radical reform. And psychologists, of whom Dewey was one, would play an important role in creating this elaborate deception. "There are already in existence a considerable number of educational 'experiment stations,' which represent the outposts of educational progress," Dewey wrote. "If these schools can be adequately supported for a number of years they will perform a great vicarious service."

Unfortunately for American education, the experimental schools to which Dewey referred were "adequately supported" by generous grants from the Carnegie and Rockefeller Foundations. Indeed, Dewey himself conducted such an experimental school at the University of Chicago, and the book he wrote about that experiment, *The School and Society*, became the bible of Progressive Education and the basis of 20th-century school reform.

And so, the major work of reform would not be done by educators, but by psychologists, who found in education a lucrative source of support for their profession. The new behavioral psychology was born in the laboratories of Professor Wilhelm Wundt at the University of Leipzig. His two American students, G. Stanley Hall (1844-1924) and James McKeen Cattell (1860-1944), came back to America anxious to apply scientific psychology to American education. Hall became a professor of psychology at Johns Hopkins University, where he taught the new psychology to John Dewey. He later founded Clark University. Cattell introduced mental testing in education as part of the new scientific racism called Eugenics.

But it was John B. Watson, the most arrogant behaviorist of them all, who revealed the true contempt that he and his fellow behaviorists had toward their fellow human beings. In his book, *Behaviorism*, published in 1924, he wrote:

Human beings do not want to class themselves with other animals. They are willing to admit that



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they are animals but "something else in addition." It is this "something else" that causes the trouble. In this "something else" is bound up everything that is classed as religion, the life hereafter, morals, love of children, parents, country, and the like. The raw fact that you, as a psychologist, if you are to remain scientific, must describe the behavior of man in no other terms than those you would use describing the behavior of the ox you slaughter, drove and still drives many timid souls away from behaviorism.

In other words, behavioral psychology was not for the timid. "The interest of the behaviorist in man's doings," wrote Watson, "is more than the interest of the spectator — he wants to control man's reactions, as physical scientists want to control and manipulate other natural phenomena. It is the business of behavioristic psychology to be able to predict and control human activity."

And so one can see that what Pavlov and his assistants were doing in Moscow was not too different from what Watson and his ilk were teaching their students.

But even as Dewey had cautioned that change must come slowly, it didn't take long before an increasing number of discerning Americans began to realize what was happening. In fact, by 1955 the reading problem had become so bad that Rudolf Flesch was compelled to write his famous book, *Why Johnny Can't Read*. "The teaching of reading — all over the United States, in all the schools, in all the textbooks — is totally wrong," wrote Flesch, "and flies in the face of all logic and common sense."

As for how the educators were able to perpetuate such "error" without effective reaction from conservative teachers, he explained:

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 if you think the situation has improved significantly since 1955, try getting a good intensive phonics program into your local school. As an author of a very effective intensive phonics reading program used successfully by thousands of home-schooling parents, I have tried to get the program adopted by local schools, only to be told, thanks but no thanks.

ABCs of Psycho-control

There is indeed a Ministry of Education in America, and it is called the National Society for the Study of Education. It was founded in 1901 by John Dewey and colleagues who were interested in psycho-education and the application of science to educational issues. The society publishes an annual two-volume Yearbook filled with discussions of educational interests.

The NSSE describes itself as "an organization of education scholars, professional educators, and policy makers dedicated to the improvement of education research, policy and practice." On its board of directors is a former president of the NEA, Mary Hatwood Futrell. The membership list in the 1969 Yearbook is 94 pages long, and you've probably never heard of the organization. The subject for their 2008 Yearbook is "Why Do We Educate?" It's a question the educators seem to be totally confused about.



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But some of them are not confused at all. One of them is Anthony G. Oettinger of Harvard University, Professor of Information Resources Policy and a member of the Council on Foreign Relations. He said the following at a conference of communications executives in 1982:

The present "traditional" concept of literacy has to do with the ability to read and write. But the real question that confronts us today is: How do we help citizens function well in their society? How can they acquire the skills necessary to solve their problems?

Do we, for example, really want to teach people to do a lot of sums or write in "a fine round hand" when they have a five-dollar hand-held calculator or a word processor to work with? Or, do we really have to have everybody literate — writing and reading in the traditional sense — when we have the means through our technology to achieve a new flowering of oral communication?

What is speech recognition and speech synthesis all about if it does not lead to ways of reducing the burden on the individual of the imposed notions of literacy that were a product of nineteenth-century economics and technology?...

It is the traditional idea that says certain forms of communication, such as comic books, are "bad." But in the modern context of functionalism they may not be all that bad.

For Oettinger and his fellow elitists, the ideal society is one in which the vast majority of people are minimally educated to a sub-literate comic-book level; a collectivized social order of unthinking docile workers who are dependent on an intellectual clerisy (Oettinger and company) for informational sustenance.

I doubt that there are any parents in America who send their children to school to learn to read comic books. If anything, they want their children to be taught to read and write in the traditional manner. They don't consider learning to read as a burden imposed on the individual. Rather, if taught properly, learning to read can be a joyful experience for children eager to explore the wonderful world of the written word.

And what's the solution for parents? If they want to get their children out of Professor Oettinger's clutches, they'll have to home-school them or enroll them in private or parochial schools where literacy is not a burden, but a liberating force for good.

As for the NSSE's question, "Why do we educate?" the answer is quite simple. We educate to pass on to the future generation the knowledge, wisdom, and values of the previous generation. It's a concept we find in Deuteronomy 6. But we can expect that the NSSE will come up with something enormously complicated that will guarantee the perpetuation of the present problems.

Samuel L. Blumenfeld is the author of more than a dozen books, including [Alpha-Phonics](#) and [Is Public Education Necessary?](#)

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