

The Never Ending Debate on the  
Proper Mode of Teaching Children to Read

**LETTERS FIRST VERSUS WORDS FIRST**

*Remarks by Thirty-one Boston Schoolmasters  
on the Seventh Annual Report of the Honorable Horace Mann,  
Secretary of the Massachusetts Board of Education*

1844

AND

*Horace Mann's Reply*

1844

AND

*Geraldine Rodgers' Cutting-Edge Analysis  
Of the Deaf-Mute Method from Her Book, The Hidden Story*

1996

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# Modes of Teaching Children to Read

By Thirty-one Boston School Masters

[This essay, written in 1844, is the first critique of the sight-vocabulary or whole-word method ever published. It was written by Samuel Stillman Greene (1810-1883) in behalf of the Association of Boston Masters for their *Remarks on the Seventh Annual Report of the Honorable Horace Mann, Secretary of the Massachusetts Board of Education*. This was the opening salvo of a dispute which was to go on for over a year and finally reveal the fact that Thomas H. Gallaudet was the originator of the new sight-vocabulary method. At the time of the dispute, Greene was principal of the Phillips Grammar School in Boston. In 1851 he became professor of didactics at Brown University. He also became known for his excellent textbooks on English grammar.]

Reading, justly deserves the first rank among the studies of our schools. As an accomplishment alone, it possesses intrinsic excellence; but, considered as fundamental to other departments of learning, its value cannot be too highly estimated. In judging, therefore, of the merits of any system by which this branch may be taught, *remote, as well as immediate effects should be duly regarded*. A child, even at the threshold of his education, should be subjected to any delay, which the formation of correct habits may require. He should never be hurried over difficulties, at first concealed, yet, in his progress, unavoidable, simply to make his entrance into the temple of learning, easy and agreeable. A system of instruction is subjected to an unworthy test, when the chief excellence claimed for it consists in *smoothing* the path of the learner. To ascertain where the *true* path lies, and to exhibit what, to us, seems erroneous are the objects of the following discussion.

Though differing from Mr. Mann, upon this subject, we would, by no means, be supposed to undervalue his efforts in the cause of education, or detract aught from the benefits his labors have conferred. Our dissent from his views arises from an honest conviction that, if adopted, they would retard the progress of sound learning. His opinions on the method of teaching reading, may be learned from the following quotations, taken from his second and seventh annual reports, and from his "Lecture on Spelling-Books, delivered before the American Institute of Instruction, August, 1841."

"I am satisfied that our greatest error, in teaching children to read, lies in beginning with the alphabet;—in giving them what are called the 'Names of the Letters,' *a,b,c,&c.*". . . "Although in former reports and publications I have dwelt at length upon what seems to me the absurdity of teaching to read by *beginning* with the alphabet, yet I feel constrained to recur to the subject again.— being persuaded that no thorough reform will ever be effected in our schools until this practice is abolished."—*Seventh Annual Report*, pp. 91, 92.

"Whole words should be taught before teaching the letters of which they are composed."—*Lecture on Spelling-Books*, p. 13.

“The mode of teaching words first, however, is not mere theory, nor is it new. It has now been practiced for some time in the primary schools in the city of Boston, —in which there are four or five thousand children,—and it is found to succeed better than the old mode.”—*Common School Journal*, Vol. 1. p. 326.”

“During the first year of a child’s life, he perceives, thinks, and acquires something of a store of ideas, without any reference to words or letters. After this, the wonderful faculty of language begins to develop itself. Children then utter words, —the names of object? around them,—as whole sounds, and without any conception of the letters of which those words are composed. In speaking the word ‘apple,’ for instance, young children think no more of the Roman letters which spell it, than, in eating the fruit, they think of the chemical ingredients, —the oxygen, hydrogen, and carbon,—which compose it. Hence, presenting them with the alphabet, is giving them what they never saw, heard, or thought of before. It is as new as algebra, and, to the eye, not very unlike it. But printed names of known things are the signs of sounds which their ears have been accustomed to hear, and their organs of speech to utter, and which may excite agreeable feelings and associations, by reminding them of the objects named. When put to learning the letters of the alphabet first, the child has no acquaintance with them, either by the eye, the ear, the tongue, or the mind; but if put to learning familiar words first, he already knows them by the ear, the tongue, and the mind, while his eye only is unacquainted with them. He is thus introduced to a stranger, through the medium of old acquaintances. It can hardly be doubted, therefore, that a child would learn to name any twenty-six familiar words, much sooner than the twenty-six unknown, unheard, and unthought-of letters of the alphabet.”—*Ibid.*

“The practice of beginning with the ‘Names of the Letters,’ is founded upon the idea that it facilitates the combination of them [?] into words. On the other hand I believe that if two children, of equal quickness and capacity, are taken, one of whom can name every letter of the alphabet, at sight, and the other does not know them from Chinese characters, the latter can be most easily taught to read,—or, in other words, that learning the letters first is an absolute hindrance.”

“The ‘Names of the Letters’ are not elements in the sounds of words; or are so, only in a comparatively small number of cases. To the twenty-six letters of the alphabet, the child is taught to give twenty-six sounds, and no more.”—*Seventh Annual Report*, p. 92.

“But, not only do the same vowels appear in different dresses, like masqueraders, but like harlequins they exchange garbs with each other,”—*Ibid.*, p. 95.

“In one important particular, the consonants are more perplexing than the vowels. The very definition of a consonant, as given in the spelling-books, is, ‘a letter which has no sound or only an imperfect one, without the help of a vowel.’

And yet the definers themselves, and the teachers who follow them, proceed immediately to give a perfect sound to all the consonants. If a consonant has ‘only an imperfect sound,’ why, in teaching children to read, should not this imperfect sound be taught them? And again, in giving the names of the consonants, why should the vowel be sometimes prefixed, and sometimes suffixed?”—*Ibid.*

“For another reason, the rapidity of acquisition will be greater, if words are taught before letters. To learn the words signifying objects, qualities, actions, with which the child is familiar, turns his attention to those objects, if present, or revives the idea of them, if absent, and thus they may be made the source of great interest and pleasure.”—*Common School Journal*, Vol. 1. p. 326.

*For the sake of distinction, and from its recent origin, this mode of teaching reading is called the new method. To whom belongs the honor of its discovery seems not to have been fully ascertained. Miss Edgeworth, in the opinion of Mr. Pierce, was the first to recommend it. “It is practiced,” he says, “by Mr. Wood, late principal of the Sessional school, Edinburgh; by Jacotot, the celebrated teacher of the Borough school, and others. It is founded in reason and philosophy; and it must become general.”*

The plan of teaching, as developed by the publications of the secretary, by Mr. Pierce’s “Lecture on Reading,” and by various other publications, is substantially as follows: whole, but familiar words, without any reference to the letters which compose them, are first to be taught. The alphabet, as such, is kept entirely concealed. Some three or four words are arranged on a single page of a primer prepared for the purpose, or are written on the black-board several times, and in various orders, as follows: cat—dog—chair; dog—cat—chair; chair—cat—dog. These are pointed out to the child, who is required to utter them at the teacher’s dictation, and to learn them by a careful inspection of their forms, as whole objects. After these are supposed to be learned, new words are dictated to the pupil, in the same manner as before. This process is repeated, till the child has acquired a sufficient number of words to read easy sentences in which they are combined. To what extent this mode of learning words should be carried, is, nowhere, definitely stated. Mr. Pierce says: “When they are perfectly familiar with the first words chosen, and the sentence which they compose, select other words, and form other sentences; and so on indefinitely.” He then proceeds to recommend several books, as containing suitable sentences for this purpose. Of these, one prepared by Miss Peabody, now Mrs. Mann, contains, he says, “a full illustration of the whole method, with words and sentences.” Since this book is also recommended, by the secretary, as containing the best exemplification of the whole plan, it may be taken as a standard, by which to form an estimate of the extent to which the friends of the new system would carry this process of teaching words. More than a hundred words, having little or no apparent connection with each other, and arranged in the manner above described, occupy the first twenty or thirty pages. Then follows a reading lesson, in which these words, with many more, are joined together in sentences. Subsequent to this lesson, and arranged as before, is another set of words followed by another reading lesson, and so of the remaining part of the book, save some fifteen pages containing the alphabet, a few lessons in spelling, and a few cuts for

drawing. The whole number of words in this “Primer” does not differ materially from seven hundred. Derivative words, though differing but slightly from their primitives, are, in this reckoning, to be counted, because this minuteness of difference enhances the difficulty of acquisition. “When the scholars,” says Mr. Pierce, “have reached this stage of advancement,” by which, it is supposed, he means, have learned all the words contained in this or other books which he recommends, “you may teach them the *name* and the *power* of the letters, especially the latter; though I can conceive no great disadvantage from deferring it to a still later period; “that is, till they have learned more words. It appears then, that at some period in the child’s progress, after learning either seven hundred, a thousand, or two thousand words, he is to commence the laborious and unwelcome task of learning “the unknown, unheard, and unthought-of letters of the alphabet.” Here, if ever, it is supposed, he begins to learn how to combine letters into words; that is, learns how to spell; and thus, by a new process, acquires the power of uttering words, without having them previously pronounced by the teacher.

*As this system is somewhat new, and has not been well tested by experiment, although its immediate adoption is earnestly recommended by high authority, it cannot be reasonably supposed that a system by which the present generation were taught to read, a system as prevalent as is the mode of alphabetical writing, and one which, from its long and uninterrupted use, has become venerable with age, will be abolished, unless good and substantial reasons can be given for such change. Indeed, change itself, is undesirable. If the new system can be shown only to be equally as good as the old, no change should take place. Positive proof of its superior advantages alone, should be considered, or, at least, the *probabilities* of a successful issue, should so far exceed the chances of a failure, as to amount to a good degree of certainty. As, until quite recently, the secretary has presented, rather than strongly advocated the claims of the system, his opinions, have called for nothing more than a passing consideration. But, as his personal and official influence is now exerted for its adoption, that our silence may not be construed into assent, we feel impelled to express a respectful dissent from his views.*

Aware that this position is to be sustained against prevailing usage, he has given his reasons for believing, “that no thorough reform will ever be effected in our schools until this practice [of beginning with the alphabet] is abolished” These reasons are drawn,

- 1st.—From what he conceives to be the *natural order* of acquisition.
- 2d.—From the anomalies of the alphabet.
- 3d.—From an impression which he has, that “the rapidity of acquisition will be greater, if words are taught before letters.”

With us, as teachers, the main question is, whether or not we approve of the new system, and can recommend its universal adoption. In assuming the negative of the question, it is first to be shown that the arguments urged in favor of the system, fail to make it even *equal* in value to the old) much more *superior*; and, then, that there are reasons of a positive character, which are adverse to it, and serve to show it vastly *inferior* to the old system.

Before entering upon a consideration of the separate arguments which have been urged in its support, some general remarks will be necessary, in order to remove whatever is irrelevant to the question, and to restrict it within its appropriate limits.

*1st.—Whether words should be taught before letters, is a question which should be confined strictly to written language.*

That much irrelevant matter, employed in the secretary's argument, arises from confounding written with spoken language, appears from the following passage in his lecture: "The advantages of teaching children, by beginning with whole words, are many. . . . What is to be learned is affiliated to what is already known." So in the quotation at the beginning of this article, he says: "But if put to learning familiar words first, he [the child] already knows them by the *ear*, the *tongue*, and the *mind*, while his *eye* only is unacquainted with them. He is thus introduced to a *stranger*, through the medium of old acquaintances." The principle here claimed for the new system, is that of passing from the *known* to the *unknown*. The principle is good; it is of its application that we complain. The secretary speaks of "familiar words;": the question arises, *What* is familiar? *What* is known? When we speak of words, we may mean either the *audible*, or the *written* signs of our ideas. The term word is, therefore, ambiguous, unless it be so qualified as to have a specific reference. In speaking of familiar words, nothing can be meant except that the child can utter them; he knows them only as *audible* signs. To say that *printed* words are familiar to a child's tongue, can have no other meaning than that he is accustomed to the taste of ink; to say that such words are familiar to his *ear*, is to attribute to that ink; a tongue; and to say that they are familiar to the mind, is to suppose the child already able to read. *Now, as reading aloud is nothing less than translating written into audible signs, a knowledge of the latter, whatever may be the system of teaching, is presupposed to exist, and is about as necessary to the one learning to read, as would be knowledge of the English language to one who would translate Greek into English.*

To illustrate. Take the printed word *mother*; when pronounced, it is familiar "to the ear, the tongue, and the mind." Does this familiarity aid the child in the least, in comprehending the printed picture? Can he, from his acquaintance with the audible sign, utter that sign by looking upon the six unknown letters which spell it?

The truth is, in all that belongs, appropriately, to the question under consideration, the word is unknown; unknown as a whole, unknown in all its parts, and unknown as to the mode of combining those parts. *The question, when restricted to its appropriate limits, is simply this; 'What is the best method of teaching a child to comprehend printed words?'* All that is said about the familiarity of the child with the audible sign, and the thing signified by it, is claimed in common by the advocates of both systems, and is, therefore, totally irrelevant in the discussion of this question; since what belongs equally to opposite parties can have no influence in a question in which they differ.

What though “printed names of known things are the signs of sounds which their [the children’s] ears have been accustomed to hear, and their organs of speech to utter, and which may excite agreeable feelings and associations, by reminding them of the objects named?” Is the rose any the less agreeable to the mind of the child, or, is the word *rose*, when pronounced, any the less familiar to his organs of speech or to his ear, because its printed sign is learned by combining the letters r-o-s-e? Or does the mere act of telling the child to say *rose*, while pointing to the picture, formed of four unknown letters, in any way enhance its agreeableness?

The question, then, is not whether a child shall be “introduced to a stranger through the medium of old acquaintances,” for, in fact, by the new system, this introduction is made through the medium of the teacher’s voice.

The true question at issue is, whether the child shall be furnished with an attendant to announce the name of the stranger, or whether he shall be furnished with *letters* of introduction by which, unattended, he may make the acquaintance, not of some seven hundred strangers merely, but of the whole seventy thousand unknown members of OUT populous vocabulary.

*2d.—The question must be confined not merely to written language, but to written language of a particular species.*

When the secretary, in speaking of a child after the first year of his life, says that, then, “the wonderful faculty of language begins to develop itself,” he undoubtedly refers to spoken language. And well may that be called a wonderful faculty by which, through the agency of the vocal organs, we can so modify *mere sounds*, as to send them forth freighted with thoughts which may cause the hearts of others to thrill with exstastic delight, or throb with unutterable anguish. And no wonder that there should have existed, early in the history of the world, a desire to enchain and represent to the eye these evanescent messengers of thought. Hence the early and rude attempts at writing, by means of pictures and symbols. But these, unfortunately, were representatives of the *message*, not the *messenger*, of the idea, not the sound which conveys it. *At length arose that wonderful invention, the art of representing to the eye, by means of letters, the component parts of a spoken word, so that now, not merely the errand, but the bearer stands pictured before us. The grand and distinctive feature of this invention is, that it establishes a connection between the written and the audible signs of our ideas.* It throws, as it were, a bridge across the otherwise impassable gulf which must ever have separated the one from the other. The hieroglyphics and symbols of the ancients, performed but one function. To those who, by a purely arbitrary association, were able to pass from the sign to the thing signified, they were representatives of ideas—and ideas *merely*; hence they are called ideographic characters, and that mode of writing has been denominated the *symbolic*, and is exemplified in the Chinese language.



*On the other hand, words written with alphabetic characters perform two functions. Taken as whole pictures, they, like Chinese characters, represent ideas; but taken as composed of alphabetic elements which represent simple sounds, they conduct us directly to the audible sign which, in the case of common words, we have from childhood been accustomed to associate with the thing signified.* Owing to the last office which these words perform, namely, that of representing sounds, this mode of writing is called the *phonetic*. It has been said with truth, that “the art of writing, especially when reduced to simple phonetic alphabets like ours, has, perhaps, done more than any other invention for the improvement of the human race.” If any one wishes still further to be convinced of the difference between the two, *let him compare the figure 5, which is purely a symbol, with the written word five: the one gives no idea whatever of the spoken word, whereas the other conducts us directly to it.* Here the contrast is too striking to be misapprehended, A person might read Chinese, without knowing a single sound of the language, simply because Chinese characters were never intended to represent sounds,

The new system of teaching reading, abandons entirely this distinctive feature of the phonetic mode of writing, and our words are treated as though they were capable of performing but one function, that of representing ideas. The language, although written with alphabetic characters, becomes, to all intents and purposes, a symbolic language. *Now we say, as ours is designedly a phonetic language, no system of teaching ought to meet with public favor, that strips it of its principal power.* And we confess ourselves not a little surprised that the secretary, who cherishes such correct views of the inferiority of the Chinese language, should urge us to convert ours into Chinese. He says, in his second annual report, (*Corn Sch. Journal*, Vol. 1., pp. 323, 324:) “It is well known that science itself, among scientific men, can never advance far beyond a scientific language in which to record its laws and principles. An unscientific language, like the Chinese, will keep a people unscientific forever.” Besides losing the vantage ground which we now possess. of passing with ease from the visible to the audible sign, and the reverse, we meet with another objection to the proposed change. As our language was written with alphabetic characters, our words are too long and cumbrous for becoming mere symbols. A single character would be vastly superior to our *trissyllables* and *polysyllables*. If the new system prevails, we may soon expect a demand for reform in this respect. As it now is, the child must meet with all the difficulties that necessarily accompany the acquisition of the Chinese language, and these greatly increased by the forms of our words.

The defenders of the new system seem to lose sight of the nature and design of the alphabetic mode of writing, as an *invention*. To understand an invention, we must first know the law of nature which gave rise to it, and then the several parts of the invented system, as well as the adaptation of these parts, when combined, to accomplish some useful purpose. Thus, to explain the steam-engine, the chemical law by which water is converted into steam must first be understood, and in connection with it, that of elasticity, common to all aeriform bodies. Then follows—what constitutes the main point in this illustration—the explanation of the several parts of the machine, with the modes of combining them, so as to gain that immense power, which is found so valuable in the arts. Take another illustration, more nearly allied to the subject under consideration. It was discovered a few years since, that a piece of iron exposed, under given

circumstances, to a galvanic current, would become a powerful magnet, and that it would cease to be such, the instant the current was intercepted. Little was it then thought, that this simple discovery would give rise to an invention by which the winged lightning, fit messenger of thought, could be employed to enable the inhabitants of Maine to converse with their otherwise distant neighbors in Louisiana, with almost as much ease, as though the parties were seated in the same parlor.

Now, no one will pretend, that to make use of the steam-engine successfully, all that is necessary is to gain an idea of it, as a *whole*. The several parts, with their various relations and combinations, must be explained. Equally necessary is it, in managing the magnetic telegraph, for the operator to be familiar with the laws of electricity, and the adaptation of the several parts of the machine, to accomplish, by means of that agent, the object proposed. But who would think of interpreting the results of its operation, the dots, the lines, the spaces, by looking upon them as constituting a single picture?

To apply these illustrations. *It was discovered, ages ago, that Nature had endowed the organs of speech with the power of uttering a limited number of simple sounds. From this discovery originated the invention of letters to represent these elementary sounds. Letters constitute the machinery of the invention. They are the tools by which the art of reading is to be acquired;* and a thorough knowledge of letters bears the same relation to reading, as does a thorough acquaintance with the parts of a steam-engine, or of the magnetic telegraph to a skilful use of these instruments. The new system proposes to abandon, for a time at least, all that is peculiar to this invention; all that distinguishes it from the rude and unphilosophical system of symbolic writing, which, centuries ago, gave place to it, throughout every portion of the civilized world. *Now, since such an estimate was placed upon this invention by the ancients, as to secure its adoption to the exclusion of all other methods of writing; and since a trial of many centuries has served only to confirm mankind in the belief of its superiority over every other system; we can but protest against the adoption of a mode of teaching, that subjects the child to such inconvenience and loss.*

*3d.—Mr. Mann has not been more unfortunate in blending spoken with written language, than in confounding the names of letters with their powers.*

All his remarks, therefore, which proceed upon the supposition that the defenders of the old system advocate a plan of teaching, by which the *name-sounds* of letters are to be joined, as “l-e-g” into “elegy,” can have no weight in the discussion of this question.

The word *letter*, as applied to the alphabet, is ambiguous, unless accompanied by some term, or explanatory phrase, to show what is intended. In referring to one of the elementary sounds which enters into the formation of a *spoken* word, we call that *sound* a letter; so, in speaking of the conventional sign, which represents that sound to the eye, as the character *h*, seen in a *printed* word, that sign we call a letter; both the sound and the sign, take the *name aitch*, for example; this name, in turn, is called a letter. Now, to prevent confusion, these three things, the power, the character, and the name, should be kept entirely distinct from each other. In a *spoken* word, elementary *sounds* are

combined; in a *written* word, elementary *characters*: in neither written nor spoken words, are the *names* of letters joined, except in those instances, where the name and power are the same, as in the case of the long sounds of the vowels.

A perfect alphabet would require that the thirty-five elementary sounds of the language, as given by Dr. Rush, should have each one representative, and no more. With such an alphabet, the transition from the written, to the audible sign, would be made without the possibility of a mistake; and, equally certain would be the passage from the sound of a word, to its written sign, in which consists the art of spelling. *But we have not such an alphabet. Ours is imperfect. A single letter has several different sounds; the same sound is represented by different letters and combinations of letters, and many of the letters in some of their uses become silent. These anomalies are the cause of inconveniences as sensibly felt by the defenders of the old system, as by those who, to effect, for the child, a temporary escape from one difficulty, would thrust him into others equally great. The defenders of both systems agree that these difficulties must, at some time, be met and mastered.*

Were a language reduced to writing by means of a perfect alphabet even, it is not difficult to see how, in time, that alphabet would become corrupted. It is probable that, at the time of the invention of letters, it was intended that each character should represent but one sound. But, as the sounds of the language to be written were better analyzed, either new letters, as among the Greeks, were added, or, the same letter was made to represent more than one sound.

*Again, different nations have adopted the same alphabetic characters; but in applying them to the elementary sounds of their respective languages, the rules of uniformity were disregarded; thus, the sound represented by e in English, is represented by i in French, and so of others.* Then, as the words of one country, like its citizens, may emigrate to, and become naturalized in another, retaining, in the latter, their original orthography and pronunciation, new sounds must inevitably be attached to the same letter; hence, the French sound of *i* in *fatigue*. In the same way, many equivocal words have been introduced into our language; thus, *bark*, derived from a Saxon word, means the noise made by dogs; so, again, the same word, derived from the French *barque*, signifies a vessel, while the Danish word *bark*, signifying the covering of a tree, has been introduced, unchanged, into the language; all of which give three widely different meanings to the same word. Add to these circumstances, the mutations to which every language is subject, from age to age, and it is easy to account for such changes as are seen in the words, *could*, *would*, *should*, and others, in which the *l* was sounded by the generation before us; so also, usage requires us to retain the silent letters of such words as *catarrh*, *phthisic*, and many others derived from the ancient languages, that their etymology may not be lost.

These various changes have created the necessity of referring to the same alphabetic *character* and *name* some two, three, or more elementary sounds; thus *ce* is the *name* of the character *c*; to this name and character we are obliged to refer a hissing sound, which is also represented by *s*, another sound represented by *k*, and still a third, represented by

z. Another evil arising from such mutations, is, that many letters, having become silent, must be retained in the formation of the written sign, although worse than useless in determining the audible. Such being the three-fold meaning to be attached to the word letter, and such being the condition to which various circumstances have conspired to reduce our alphabet, let us inquire, if Mr. Mann has not been led astray, by neglecting to make these necessary distinctions.

He says, on page 92:

“The advocate for teaching the letters asks, if the elements of an art or science should not be first taught. To this I would reply, that the ‘Names of the Letters’ are not elements in the sounds of words; or are so, only in a comparatively small number of cases. To the twenty-six letters of the alphabet, the child is taught to give twenty-six sounds, and no more. According to Worcester, however,—who may be considered one of the best authorities on this subject,—the six vowels only, have, collectively, thirty-three different sounds. In addition to these, there are the sounds of twenty consonants, of diphthongs and triphthongs”

Before proceeding to show that the secretary has confounded those things which should be kept distinct from each other, it is necessary to correct an erroneous statement which he has made, respecting the number of *different* sounds in the language. It is not true, nor does Worcester, anywhere, as we can find, assert, that “the six vowels only, have, collectively, thirty-three different sounds.” It is true that he assigns to *a*, seven sounds,—to *e*, five,—to *i*, five,—to *o*, six,—to *u*, six,—and to *y*, four; and that these several numbers when added, amount to thirty-three. But if any one will take the pains to compare the sounds of *y* with those of *i*, those of *a* with those of *e*, and so on, he will find an illustration of what we have already said; that the same sound is represented by different letters; and if he will go still further, and select from Worcester’s table of vowel sounds, the *different* ones only, he will find less than half thirty-three. A little further on, he proceeds to say that “it would be difficult, and would not compensate the trouble, to compute the number of *different* sounds which a good speaker gives to the different letters, and combinations of letters, in our language,—not including the changes of rhetorical emphasis, cadence, and intonation. But, if analyzed, they would be found to amount to hundreds.” Here, it seems, he has fallen into the same error; and his statements are calculated to mislead the reader. The greatest number of elementary sounds in our language does not exceed forty-three. Barber gives the number forty-three; others, forty-one. But Dr. Rush, who probably gave more time and thought to the analysis of the human voice, than any other person, fixes the number at thirty-five. Never, before, have we known it placed as high as hundreds. We have been the more careful to make these corrections, that the reader may see how much weight to attach to Mr. Mann’s remarks on the 97th page of the report, where he makes use of these erroneous statements, to show a want of analogy between teaching reading, on the one hand, and written music, on the other. He says:

“Some defenders of the old system have attempted to find an analogy for their practice, in the mode of teaching to sing by first learning the gamut. They compare the notes of the gamut which are afterwards to be combined into tunes,

to the letters of the alphabet to be afterwards combined into words. But one or two considerations will show the greatest difference between the principal case and the supposed analogy. In written music there is always a scale consisting of at least five lines, and of course with four spaces between, and often one or two lines and spaces, above or below the regular scale; and both the name of a note and the sound to be given it can always be known by observing its place in the scale. To make the cases analogous, there should be a scale of thirty-three places at least, for the six vowels only,—and this scale should be enlarged so as to admit the twenty consonants, and all their combinations with the vowels. Such a scale could hardly be crowded into an octavo page. The largest pages now used would not contain more than a single printed line each; and the matter now contained in an octavo volume would fill the shelves of a good-sized library. If music were taught as unphilosophically as reading;—if its eight notes were first arranged in one straight vertical line, to be learned by name, and then transferred to a straight horizontal line, where they should follow each other promiscuously, and without any clew to the particular sound to be given them in each particular place, it seems not too much to say, that not one man in a hundred thousand would ever become a musician.”

Here the reader will see that Mr. Mann has compared an erroneous conception of the elements of our language, with an erroneous conception of the elements of written music. A scale of *thirty-three* places, at least, for the six vowels only! And this scale so *enlarged* as to admit the twenty consonants, and all their *combinations with the vowels*! It will suffice to say, concerning this scale, that it must be very much reduced; so that he need not be alarmed at the cumbrous size to which our books may attain. But, Mr. Mann seems to be entirely unacquainted with the nature and difficulties of written music, or, at least, he has given, if any at all, a very imperfect and erroneous exhibition of them.

In the science of Music, the Natural or Diatonic scale, consists of eight sounds or tones. The five intermediate tones furnished by the Chromatic scale, added to these, increase the number to thirteen different sounds.

The compass of the human voice, if cultivated, is sufficient to embrace about two and a half octaves, or from thirty to thirty-five different sounds. With instruments, the number of different sounds may be extended almost without limit. We are concerned, however, with the human voice. It will be seen that the number of sounds which are to be represented by visible symbols, in music, is about the same as the number of elementary sounds in our language. It will be seen, moreover, that it is not one “scale,” [staff?] with its added lines, that can represent these thirty or thirty-five different sounds. There is a staff for the Base, one for the Tenor, and one for the Alto and Soprano. Besides, it should be understood, that a note on a given line or space, affected by a flat or sharp, is sounded in the former case, half a tone higher, and in the latter, half a tone lower, than it otherwise would be; or, in other words, it can have, without changing its position in the staff, three different sounds. But, it is not in this particular, that the principal difficulty consists. A note placed on the letter C, for example, will, in all cases, receive the same absolute sound. It now stands as 1, or the keynote, and the syllable *do*, is applied to it. Let F be

sharped, and then, although this note still has the same sound as before, its relation to the other notes is entirely changed. It now becomes 4 of the scale, and the syllable *fa* is applied to it. Let C now be sharped, and the note still remains unchanged on the staff, but the original sound is lost from the scale; the note which then represented it, becomes 7 of the scale, and is called *si*. Next, let D be sharped, and a similar change takes place, and so on, till all the notes are sharped. Again, taking the scale as at first, let B be affected by a flat, and the original key-note becomes 5 of the scale, and is called *sol*; then let E be flatted, and so on, till all the notes have been flatted, and changes of relation will take place for every successive flat. Now, a change of this kind, affects the relation, not of one merely, but of every note of the scale, and the number of changes far exceeds the highest number of sounds attached to any letter of the alphabet. If any one will take the trouble to estimate the whole number of such changes, for all the notes, he will discover some of the difficulties to be overcome by the pupil in this branch of science. Each transposition of the scale is equivalent to giving a new sound to each note; it does give a new name, and a new relation. The only point, therefore, in which the analogy fails, is this: the number of changes which a note may undergo, is much greater than the number of sounds represented by any letter; and the labor of acquiring the notes of music, is very *much* greater than that of learning the letters of the alphabet. Such, certainly, is the opinion of the ablest professors of music in our country.

In respect to emphasis, pauses, and expression, reading and music are analogous; and so, in regard to the elements, in all essential points, they resemble each other. So much has been said, to correct an erroneous statement, and the conclusion drawn from it. Let us now inquire, if the secretary has not fallen into an error, equally inexcusable, from a misconception of the several functions of a letter. We understand him tacitly to concede the principle, that “the elements of an art or science should be first taught.” But, in his subsequent remarks, if we comprehend their design, he denies, that the defenders of the old system are entitled to this conceded principle, because the *names* of the letters are not elements in the sounds of words. We never supposed, nor do we know of a single advocate of the old system, who ever supposed, that the *names* of letters, entered into the formation of words; as, h-a-t, into *aitchaitee*, “l-e-g,” into “elegy.”

*Names were not given to letters for such a purpose. They were assigned to them, for the same reason that names are given to other objects, to aid us in referring to the objects themselves. One would scarcely expect to convince even a child, that there was neither pastry, fruit, cinnamon, nor sugar, in the pie he was eating, by telling him that pies are never made of such names as pastry, cinnamon, &c.*

We agree with Mr. Mann, when he says that, with the exception of the long sounds of the vowels, “the ‘Names of the Letters’ are not elements in the sounds of words;” but we differ from him, if he denies that the *characters*, called letters, are elements in printed words, or that the *sounds* which they represent, are elements in spoken words. One, or both of these two things are implied, when it is asserted, that letters are elements in the formation of words.

The question then returns. Should not letters be taught before words; since, in two important respects, they are elements?

The argument, found upon the next four or five pages of the report, proceeds upon the supposition that the *name-sounds* of letters, are combined into words; and if it will avail the secretary anything, we are ready to grant that he has fully shown, what would have been most cheerfully admitted at the outset, that “the *names* of the letters, are not elements in the sounds of words.” But when he, in apparent triumph, says, “this, surely, is a most disastrous application of the principle, that the elements of a science must be first taught,” we cannot resist the conviction, that his is a most disastrous application of logic, to the true question at issue. *That the fallacy in his argument, consists in confounding the names and powers of letters, is obvious from the following:* “To the twenty-six letters of the alphabet, the child is taught to give twenty-six sounds, and no more.” Now, if he means that he has discovered the fact, that instructors, everywhere, have fallen into the palpable error of teaching children, that to the twenty-six alphabetic characters, only twenty-six *elementary sounds* are attached, the wonder is, since he believes there are hundreds of such sounds, that he has not, by his journal, or otherwise, sought to correct such defective instruction. But, if he means, by the “twenty-six sounds, and no more,” merely the sounds given to the names of the letters, he has either accused the teachers of this country of totally neglecting one essential function of the letters, or else, *he himself has failed to make the proper distinction between the name of a letter, and its power.* If the former is the meaning, and if he intended the above remark as a rebuke to teachers for neglecting to give the elements of sound, as well as the *names* of letters, we reply that, though it may, to some extent, be deserved, it is too unqualified. There are not a few instructors, who teach the children to associate together, the names, the forms, and the powers of the letters. But, what surprises us most, if this be the meaning, is, that Mr. Mann should discover from such defective instruction, reasons for a *total* neglect of the alphabet, till after the child has learned to read. Some teachers may neglect to require the meaning of words. Is this a reason why words should be entirely set aside, till the child can first read whole paragraphs?

The most probable interpretation of the passage, is, that Mr. Mann did not have in his mind a clear perception of the difference between the name-sound of a letter, and its power. This explanation is rendered still more probable from the following allusion to the Greek letters: “Will the names of the letters, *kappa, omicron, sigma, mu, omicron, sigma*, make the word kosmos?” Has any defender of the old system ever asserted that they would? Yet, would the secretary have us suppose that if those names should fall upon the ear of one familiar with the Greek alphabet, he would not, at once, utter kosmos as the combination of the elementary sounds which those letters *name*.

If these quotations fail to convince the reader; let him take the following passage on the 33d page of Mr. Mann’s lecture:

“The faculty of judgment, the power by which we trace relations between causes and effects, and by which we expect the same results from the same antecedents, will be perpetually baffled if we attempt to spell words according to the vocal

power, or *name sound*, as it is sometimes called, of the letters as presented in the alphabet; or, if we infer, that one word should be spelled so or so, because another is spelled so or so.”

Here it will be seen that he makes the *vocal power* of a letter, and its name-sound identical; that is, he has defined the meaning of vocal power, as he understands it. The *name-sound* of a letter is the sound given to its name, as the sound of the syllable *be, ce, em, &c.*; whereas, the *vocal power* of a letter is the sound that letter receives in combination, as the sound of *b*, in *but, bate*. The reader can determine the sound, by directing the attention to what precedes the sound of *ut*, in the former, and *ate*, in the latter example. In this instance, the blending of the *name* and *power* is not left as a matter of inference. Let any one carefully examine the pages of the secretary’s report, from the 92d to the 99th, and he will find many other examples of the same error.

But, we apprehend that Mr. Mann has been induced to bring forward, once more, his theory of teaching words before letters, from what he saw in the Prussian schools. He says:

“When I first began to visit the Prussian schools, I uniformly inquired of the teachers, whether in teaching children to read, they began with the ‘Names of the Letters,’ as given in the alphabet. Being delighted with the prompt negative which I invariably received, I persevered in making the inquiry, until I began to perceive a look and tone on their part not very flattering to my intelligence, in considering a point so clear and so well settled as this, to be any longer a subject for discussion or doubt. The uniform statement was, that the alphabet, as such, had ceased to be taught, as an exercise, preliminary to reading, for the last fifteen or twenty years, by every teacher in the kingdom. Whoever will compare the German language with the English, will see that the reasons for a change are much stronger in regard to our own, than in regard to the foreign tongue.”

Now, we have supposed the word *alphabet* to be a generic term, including all the letters of the alphabet; and that each letter has the three-fold meaning already attached to it. But, if in Prussia, it signifies simply the *names* of the letters, we will endeavor to bear that in mind. If we compare the Prussian mode of teaching children to read, as described by Mr. Mann, with the following portion of the above statement, it will be seen that alphabet, as there used, can mean nothing more than the names of the letters. “The uniform statement was,” he says, “that the *alphabet*, as such, had ceased to be taught as an exercise preliminary to reading, for the last fifteen or twenty years, by every teacher in the kingdom.” According to his description of their method of teaching children to read, it appears that the *forms* of the letters were first taught, then their *powers*, and finally the art of combining the forms into *written* words, and the *powers* into spoken words; so that nothing can be left for the meaning of *alphabet*, as here used, but the *names* of letters. But, we ask, if teaching the forms and powers of the letters, is not teaching the alphabet, or all in it, that is absolutely essential to *reading*? To teach the whole alphabet, as we understand it, is to teach all that belongs to it, not omitting the *names* of the letters, as do the Prussian teachers, at first.



It appears from the last sentence of the above quotation, that Mr. Mann thinks, if such a change as the omission of the *names* of letters was needed in Prussia, a comparison of German and English languages will show a greater demand for a change in the latter. What change, we ask? Such an one as theirs?

Let the following passage answer:

‘There are two reasons why this *lautir*, or *phonic* method, [that is, the method of the Prussian and Saxon teachers, just described,] is less adapted to the English language than to the German;—first, because our vowels have more sounds than theirs, and secondly, because we have more silent letters than they. This is an argument, not against their method of teaching, but in favor of our commencing to teach by giving words before letters. And I despair of any effective improvement in teaching young children to read, until the teachers of our primary schools shall qualify themselves to teach in this manner; — I say until they shall *qualify* themselves, for they may attempt it in such a rude and awkward way as will infallibly incur a failure. As an accompaniment to this, they should also be able to give instruction according to the *lautir* or *phonic* method.’”

Now, how the secretary could discover, from the purely alphabetic and elementary method of teaching which he witnessed in Prussia, reasons for such a change, one which converts our language into Chinese, we cannot easily conceive. It is true, that he adds, “as an accompaniment to this, they [teachers] should also be able to give instruction according to the *lautir* or *phonic* method.” But this seems to be only a secondary consideration; they should be *able* to do it. Besides, from the description of the new system which he has given, and sanctioned as given by others, it would seem that this kind of instruction could not well be given till the child can read easy sentences. Were it not for two reasons, which affect the question in degree, only, not in kind, Mr. Mann, it appears, would recommend that we adopt the Prussian method. But these reasons shall be considered in their appropriate place.

Mr. Mann has been led, as we believe, to recommend anew, this system of teaching words before letters—a system as wide asunder from the Prussian, as are the poles from each other—imply from confounding the names of letters with their powers. They, at first, omit the names of the letters, or, as he affirms that they say, “the alphabet.” But they teach every thing else that belongs to a letter, and, probably, soon after, the names themselves.

And, now why should the *name* be omitted? *To neglect the names of letters is to destroy, at once, one of the most important exercises of the primary school; that is, oral spelling. The letters must have names to aid us in referring to them, no one will deny.* Otherwise, how could Mr. Mann have read such a passage as the following from his lecture? “*Ph* is *f*; and *c* is uniformly concealed in *s*, or sacrificed as a victim to *k* or *z*.” Did he give simply the powers of the letters *f*, *c*, *s*, *k*, and *z*? or, did he hold up a card and point them out? or,

did he speak their names? *If, then, letters must have names, why should the child be kept in ignorance of them? One of the first inquiries of a child, on seeing, a new object is, "What is it?" "What do you call it?" or, in other words, "What is its name?" Shall such inquiries be silenced, when made respecting the alphabet?*

*Besides, the names of the letters, in most cases, must, when spoken, differ from their powers; that is, the name of a letter and its power cannot be identical. Yet, it is evident, from the following quotation from the 96th page of the report, that there exists in the mind of the secretary an impression that the usefulness of the alphabet, in teaching reading, is very much diminished, from the want of a perfect coincidence between the powers of the letters and their name-sounds: "I believe it is within bounds to say, that we do not sound the letters in reading once in a hundred times, as we were taught to sound them when learning the alphabet. Indeed, were we to do so in one-tenth part of the instances, we should be understood by nobody. What analogy can be pointed out between the rough breathing of the letter *h*, in the words *when, where, how, &c.*, and the 'name-sound,' (aytch, aitch, or aych, as it is given by different spelling-book compilers,) of that letter, as it is taught from the alphabet?" Will the secretary give a name to *h*, or *p*, or *b*; or indeed to any of the consonants, which shall sound exactly like the power of the letter? We mean one that can become sufficiently audible to subserve all the purposes of a name; one that can be represented to the eye, like the name of any other object? *Why should not a letter have a name, as well as a peach? And if so, why should the name of the letter resemble that letter, any more than the name of the peach should resemble that fruit?* We can see no necessity for such resemblance. True, the name of a letter, when uttered, is a sound; and the power is a sound; and for the most part, a different one; so is thunder itself very different from the sound of its name; yet we never complain of that name as inadequate to call to mind the idea of thunder. The Greeks have nowhere, as we have seen, complained of any difficulty in associating their dissyllables, *alpha, beta, gamma, delta*, and trissyllables, *omicrom* and *omega*, with the elements of sound to which they refer. Yet how untoward are these names, compared with ours. *The resemblance between the names of most of our letters and their powers is so marked, as to afford no little assistance in combining letters into words. The dissimilarity, of which so much complaint has been made, might never have been mentioned, had it not been for such resemblances as now exist.* The names of the vowels, and their long sounds, with the exception of *y*, are the same. The names of most of the consonants contain the elementary sound joined to a vowel, which either precedes or follows it. And here, we see again, the same want of distinction as before. "And again," says Mr. Mann, "in giving the names of the consonants, why should the vowel be sometimes prefixed, and sometimes suffixed?" So on the 98th page, he says:*

"There is one fact, probably within every teacher's own observation, which should be decisive on this subject. In learning the alphabet, children pronounce the consonants as though they were either preceded or followed by one of the vowels;—that is, they sound *b*, as though it were written *be*, and *f* as though written *ef*. But when they have advanced ever so little way in reading, do they not enunciate words where the letter *h* is followed by one of the other vowels, or where it is preceded by a vowel, as well as words into which their own familiar

sound of *be*, enters? For example, though they have called *b* a thousand times as if it were written *be*, do they not enunciate the words *ball*, *bind*, *box*, *bug*, &c. as well as they do the words *besom*, *beatific*, &c.? They do not say *be-all*, *be-ind*, *be-ox*, *be-ug*, &c.”

Since it is not the *name*, but the *power*, which enters into the combination, of what consequence is it, whether the vowel is prefixed or suffixed? We might as well have *eb* as *be*; *me* as *em*; *le* as *el*. Whatever be the name, whether *eb* or *he*, it does not enter into the formation of words, as *eb-ug*, or “*be-ug*,” so *h*, when represented to the eye as *aitch*, is the *printed* sign, or to the ear, as when pronounced, is the *audible* sign, of a rough breathing.

We cannot believe that even Mr. Mann himself would so disgrace the alphabet, as to reduce it to a file of *anonymous* letters, merely because their *real* names do not, at once, display all their virtues.

Such are some of the errors, at least as it seems to us, into which Mr. Mann has fallen, from a misconception of the offices performed by the letters of the alphabet.

*4th—Whatever the secretary has said by way of ridicule, calculated to disparage the alphabet, ought to receive no consideration in the discussion of this question.*

It is somewhat amusing that Mr. Mann should indulge in occasional merriment, even in the midst of so much confusion. We do not complain of it, but simply ask that it may receive no weight, when indulged in at the expense of the poor alphabet. In speaking of the devices which some humane teachers used to practice, he says in his lecture, page 17th: “He [the teacher] used to tell us that *a* stands for apple, to call *o*, round *o*, *s*, crooked *s*, *t*, the gentleman with a hat on;” and adds, “What manner of ejaculation would that be, which, instead of the unvarying sound of the word ‘sot,’ for instance, should combine the three sounds which the child had been taught to consider as the powers [?] of the letters composing it; viz. ‘crooked *s*, round *o*, gentleman with a hat on?’” “Yet, this is the way,” he adds, “in which many of us were taught to read.” A more grave assertion.

So, in his last report, he says: “If *b*, is *be*, then *be* is *bee*, the name of an insect; and if *l* is *el*, then *el* is *eel*, the name of a fish;” that is to say, if the object named, is the same as the name itself, then that name becomes the name of an insect, or of a fish. Surprising!

All printed names of objects are formed from printer’s ink. *Bee* is the printed name of an object; and since the object itself is the same as its name, it follows that this insect is only printer’s ink. It is, therefore, harmless, unless it is that remarkable bee that has three stings; for we are told that—

‘*No bee* has two stings,’ and that, ‘one *bee* has one more sting than no *bee*;’ therefore, it would seem that one *bee* (and perhaps, this one) has three stings.

As for the *eel*, fit emblem of the logic that caught it, we will leave it to hands best able to retain it.

In his lecture before the American Institute, he says, page 16th, after giving an analysis of the sources of pleasure to a child, among which he includes form, “In regard to all the other sources of pleasure,—beauty, motion, music, memory,—the alphabetic column presents an utter blank. There stands in silence and death, the stiff perpendicular row of characters, lank, stark, immovable, without form or comeliness, and, as to signification, wholly void. They are skeleton-shaped, bloodless, ghostly apparitions, and hence it is no wonder that the children look and feel so death-like, when compelled to face them.”

This, truly, is a dismal picture. How much less do the characters employed to designate numbers, deserve? And shall we neglect to teach *them* to children, because they are thus “bloodless” and “skeleton-shaped?”

So again, if such a reform is called for on account of the “bloodless” forms of our letters, we should suppose that it ought to be extended to music, requiring a similar change in teaching that science; such, for example, as teaching whole measures, or whole tunes, before notes. For, after applying nearly all the chilling epithets, which Mr. Mann employs in reference to the letters of the alphabet, one might go on further, and say of those used in music, that while some have from one to four *fangs*, others are *tadpole-shaped*, and therefore disgust by calling to mind loathsome reptiles; some are bound together in little groups, showing a degree of social affinity; others refuse all alliance whatever, and stand aloof from each other in willful solitude; and even if they had any kindred feeling, they are kept asunder by immovable *bars*. The faces of some are *white*, while those of others are *black*, and these two classes are mingled together without distinction of color. Besides, some, in their pride, rear their heads above the lines assigned to the common classes, while others are depressed as far below the ordinary ranks of the social scale; and it is not surprising that the children, on beholding such distinctions, express themselves in *high tones* of indignation at the arrogance of the former, and in *deep-toned* sympathy at the sufferings of the latter.

Now, how can a child, whose ear is charmed with sweet sounds, and in whose soul melody is seeking for utterance, turn with other than “death-like” feelings, to such loathsome and revolting pictures, as salute his eyes in written music? Would it not be the dictate of *kindness*, to endeavor to make the path of the learner more *easy* and *pleasant*, by allowing him to read whole measures, or whole tunes, before learning the notes of which they are composed? But whether the child, after all, in reading whole words or whole tunes, will entirely escape from these “ghostly apparitions,” we will leave for others to decide.

*5th.—As a final consideration, by way of restriction, let it be suggested, that the mere promotion of a child’s pleasure should never form the basis of any system of education.*

If such considerations, as making the path of the learner *pleasant* and *easy*, have not formed the basis of the new system, they have, at least, had great weight in the minds of its defenders.

Let the reader refer to the whole paragraph on the 16th page of Mr. Mann's lecture, containing the last quotation, and he will see reasons for believing that a desire to promote the pleasure of the child, lies at the foundation of the system. The letters of the alphabet, "bloodless, ghostly apparitions," should at first be omitted; because, "having dimensions in a plane," merely, they are capable of affording only a small amount of that pleasure which arises simply from the love of form; a source of pleasure which, at best, he says, "is the feeblest of all" Such, certainly, seems to us a natural inference from this paragraph; and if such a principle induces him to urge the adoption of this system, it is hoped that every practical teacher, and every friend of thorough instruction, will enter against it his solemn protest. The child's pleasure to be consulted at the expense of order! at a sacrifice of first principles, the only *basis* of a thorough education! Nothing has been more productive of mischief, or more subversive of real happiness, than mistaking what may afford the child present gratification, for that which will secure for him lasting good.

It would seem that the child, in his ignorance and devotion to pleasure, is allowed to judge what is best, what is proper; what, on the whole, will result in the greatest amount of good. "How," inquires Mr. Mann, 'can one who, as yet, is utterly incapable of appreciating the remote benefits, which, in after-life, reward the acquisition of knowledge, derive any pleasure from an exercise, which presents neither beauty to his eye, nor music to his ear, nor sense to his understanding? And since the child cannot "appreciate the remote benefits" of learning the alphabet, must his caprice govern those who can, and determine them to abandon, even for a time, what they know is all-important in teaching him to read? A child is sick, and cannot appreciate the remote, or immediate benefits of taking disagreeable medicine. Will a judicious parent, who is fully sensible of the child's danger, regard, for one moment, his wishes, to save him from a little temporary disquietude? A child has no fondness for the dry and uninteresting tables of arithmetic. Shall he, therefore, be gratified in his desire to hasten on to the solution of questions, before acquiring such indispensable prerequisites? We have been accustomed to suppose that the responsibilities of the teacher's profession, consist, mainly, in his being required to fashion the manners and tastes of his pupils, to promote habits of thinking and patient toil, and to give direction to their desires and aspirations, rather than to minister to the gratification of their passion for pleasure.

If we mistake not, it was this same pleasure-promoting principle, that led Mr. Mann to interpret, as he did, the relation subsisting between the pupil and the teacher in the Prussian schools; on the part of the pupil it was, says Mr. M., "that of affection first and then duty." Here, it seems, Mr. M. would have the teacher first amuse the child, so as to gain his good-will, at any expense, and would, then, have him attend to duty as a secondary matter. This is reversing the true order of the two. Duty should come first, and pleasure should grow out of the discharge of it. We wish to be distinctly understood on this point. The teacher ought, when compatible with duty, to awaken in the child, agreeable, rather than painful feelings. He, who delights in seeing a child in a state of

grief, is unfit for the teacher's office. On the other hand, he, who would substitute *pleasure* for *duty*, or would seek to make that sweet, which is of itself bitter, and to make that smooth, which is naturally and necessarily rough, is actuated by a misguided philanthropy. Hence, we dislike all attempts to make easy, and to simplify, that which is already as easy and simple as the nature of the case will allow.

The grand mistake lies in the *rank* assigned to pleasure. To *gratify* the child, should not be the teacher's aim, but rather to lay a permanent foundation, on which to rear a noble and well-proportioned superstructure. If, while doing *this*, the teacher is successful in rendering mental *exertion* agreeable, and in leading the child from one conquest to another, till *achievement itself* affords delight, it is well; such pleasure stimulates to greater exertion. But if, to cultivate pleasure-seeking is his aim, he had better, at once, abandon his profession, and obtain an employment in which he will not endanger the welfare, both of individuals and society, by sending forth a sickly race, palsied in every limb, through idleness, and a vain attempt to gratify a morbid thirst for pleasure.

But even if the promotion of pleasure were the aim of the teacher, the new system of teaching reading, is a most unfortunate mode of securing it. Pleasure springs from an active, rather than a passive state of the faculties.

The new system proposes to afford the child pleasure in the exercise of *reading words*: yet, instead of requiring him to exert, in the least, his mental faculties, in combining the elementary parts of these words, the teacher gives merely the result of his own mental processes, and exacts nothing from the child) but a passive reception of the sound, which is to be associated arbitrarily, with the *visible picture*, pointed out to him.

To this, the reply will, probably, be made, that the *idea*, not the mere act of passing from the visible to the audible sign, affords the pleasure. Such a reply is cut off by our first and second restrictions. The pleasure arising from the *idea*, can be urged, with equal force, by both parties. Therefore, in determining to which of the two systems belongs the greater pleasure, no account whatever can be made of that which arises from the *meaning* of words. We submit the question to any candid mind, which system, is adapted to afford the greater amount of pleasure? We will now grant to the defenders of the new system, for the sake of argument, all the advantage which they claim, from the association of interesting ideas, with the words which convey them. All that they can then mean, is, that the idea throws such a charm around those "bloodless and ghostly apparitions" which constitute words, that the "death-like" feeling, with which the child would otherwise "face" them, is now converted into pleasure. According to the plan of teaching, already described, however, the familiar word is first pronounced to the child; the *idea* is then in the mind, as soon as he hears the word uttered. Having received the idea, and all the pleasure it can afford, does it seem reasonable to suppose he will interest himself much, with the "ill-favored" forms that represent it to the eye? There is a little nut enclosed in a prickly encasement. The nut itself is very agreeable to children; so agreeable as to induce them, at the expense of some pain, to try their skill in removing this unfriendly exterior. Repeated trials, with the stimulus afforded by a desire to gratify the taste, gives them skill; till at length, they can obtain the nut without much suffering. Now, suppose some

“humane” person, desirous of aiding the child in *acquiring* this kind of skill, and of making his task, at the same time, more *pleasant*, should begin by removing the troublesome covering without any effort on his part. Would he, in the first place, secure the object of giving the child *skill*? and in the second place, will the child, having obtained the nuts, derive much pleasure from handling the vacant burrs? and, finally, does not pleasure itself become vitiated and morbid, when unattended with effort? This illustration, will, at least, apprise the reader, of our reasons for the opinion, that the new system is the result of a misguided effort to make that pleasant, which, to some extent at least, must be disagreeable; to make that easy, which, from the nature of the case, is beset with unavoidable difficulties.

Having fixed what seem to us, the necessary limitations of the question, we will now consider whatever of argument remains in favor of the system.

The first consideration seems to arise from the fact that the child learns to utter whole sounds, the names of objects, without attending, in the least, to the elements which compose them. The following quotation from the 14th page of Mr. Mann’s lecture, will explain what he means; “When we wish to give to a child the idea of a new animal, we do not present successively the different parts of it, —an eye, an ear, the nose, the mouth, the body, or a leg; but we present the whole animal, as one object. And this would be still more necessary, if the individual parts of the animal with which the child had labored long and hard to become acquainted, were liable to change their natures as soon as they were brought into juxtaposition, as almost all the letters do when combined into words.” So, we are to understand that *printed* words, in like manner, should be learned as whole objects, though composed of elementary parts.

So far as this argument receives any force from its reference to the fact, that the child *utters* words, as whole sounds, we have no more to say, but would refer the reader to the first restriction of the question.

All that remains to be considered under this head, is that part of the argument contained in the last quotation, the general principle of which, seems to amount to this; the whole compound objects should first be taught, and made use of, as if understood; at some future period, the unknown elements which compose them, should be given, with the modes of combining them.

According to this, in teaching Numeration, all numbers, like 349, 8764, 97635, &c., should be given to the child as single objects. It is true, Mr. Mann denies the pertinency of this comparison, on the 98th page of his report; yet, it is impossible for us to see how he can escape it. The comparison fails only in one respect. Some of the letters of the alphabet do not, with unerring certainty, guide to the proper sound, while the *forms* and *places* of the figures, taken together, are an unfailing index of their value. Now, if our alphabet were what we have denominated a perfect one, the *forms* of the letters could never fail to lead to the correct sound. With such an alphabet, the comparison would fail in no material point.

But, if there is any meaning in the above quotation, Mr. Mann would recommend this mode of teaching words, even if they were written with a perfect alphabet. "Still more," he says, "would this be necessary if the individual parts of the animal, with which the child has labored long and hard to become acquainted, were liable to change their natures as soon as they were brought into juxtaposition, as almost all the letters of the alphabet do, when combined into words;" that is, whole words should be taught first, if each letter had but one sound; "still more," *a fortiori*, is it necessary so to teach them, since such is not the fact. And hence, we say, if words should be taught in this way, numbers, music, and every other art and science should be taught in the same way. If Mr. Mann still denies the aptness of the comparison, he makes the argument, drawn from the "natural order," as it is called, rest entirely on the imperfections of the alphabet, which forms one of the distinct arguments to be considered hereafter. The only difference which he has pointed out, certainly comes from that source; as any one will see by referring to the 98th page of the report. A denial, therefore, of the pertinency of this comparison is equivalent to giving up that part of the argument now under consideration. If, on the other hand, he acknowledges the aptness of the comparison, and recommends that the decimal system of numeration be treated in this manner, every one will see, that it loses all that gives it a superiority over the Greek or Roman numerals. The evil which would result, from the extension of this principle, to other branches of knowledge, could not be estimated.

Moreover, the illustration drawn from the animal, or a tree which is more commonly given, fails, we think, to meet all that is required in teaching a child to read. Grant, that he does not, in learning to distinguish a tree from a rock, or any other dissimilar object, form his idea of it, by inspecting the parts separately, and then by combining trunk, bark, branches, twigs, leaves, and blossoms. In learning to read, however, he is to distinguish between objects which resemble each other; and in many instances, very closely, as in the case of the words, *hand, band; now, mow; form, from;* and scores of others. To make the illustration good, it would be necessary to place the child in a forest, containing some seventy thousand trees, made up of various genera, species, and varieties, among which were found many to be distinguished only by the slightest differences. Or, if it will suit the case any better, let him be placed in a grove, containing seven hundred trees, having, as before, strong resemblances; if, then, this general survey of each of them, as a whole object, will enable him to distinguish them rapidly from each other, whatever may be their size, or the order in which he may cast his eyes upon them, we will acknowledge the aptness of the illustration. Primary school teachers, who have tried the system, testify, that when children have learned a word in one connection, they are unable to recognise it in another, especially if there be a change of type.

As Mr. Mann has, virtually, denied the right of extending the principle of teaching compound first, and the elements subsequently, to music and numeration, and, as his reasons for that denial are drawn from the present imperfect state of the alphabet, we may infer that he relies, mainly, if not solely, on the latter branch of the argument.



We will, therefore, next consider the *second* reason urged in favor of the new system. It may be thus stated. ‘Such is the imperfect condition of the alphabet, that the letters, when combined into words, do not, with certainty, lead the learner to the correct pronunciation; whereas, by teaching words before letters, all this uncertainty is avoided.

That the alphabet is imperfect, we have already conceded. The nature of these imperfections, we will repeat, 1st.—A single character may represent several different sounds, 2d.—A single sound, may be represented by several different characters, either separate or combined. 3d.—A letter may be silent. These anomalies are, to children, a source of much perplexity and doubt. We fully appreciate the difficulties arising from them, and as heartily deplore their existence, as can the authors of the proposed remedy. And here, two questions arise. The first is this; ‘Is the condition of the alphabet a sufficient cause for any material change in the modes of teaching children to read?’ And the second, ‘Does it afford sufficient reasons for *such* a change as the one proposed?’

In answering the first question, we are prepared to say unhesitatingly, that the mode of teaching letters before words, is the only true and philosophical one. Letters, as we have already shown, are elements in the formation of words. That the elements of an art or science should first be taught, no one in the least acquainted with teaching, will pretend to deny. To proceed from known elements to their unknown combinations, is natural and easy; it is the only course that will ensure a thorough acquaintance with any subject. Hence, we say, no material change should take place. But in making the child acquainted with the letters and the modes of combining them, we are not sure that the best methods have always been adopted. A letter is not understood until its *visible symbol*, its *name* and its *power*, are associated together. It is the custom, in many primary schools, to teach at first only the *name* and *symbol*, and to leave the power to be learned by imitation or inference, when the child begins to combine letters into syllables or words. For example; the learner readily pronounces the names of the letters h-i-v-e, but being ignorant of their powers, he hesitates; the teacher says, pronounce; the child still hesitates; the teacher utters *hive*, as the combination of these four letters, and the child is then left to receive only a twilight conception of the powers of those letters. The Prussian method, it appears, consists in presenting the *symbol* and the *power*, leaving the name to be learned afterwards. This method has the advantage of bringing the *powers* of the letters, at an early period, to the notice of the child, in a manner so distinct and vivid, as to impress them indelibly upon his memory; and must give him great facility in the process of mental combination. The omission of the name, however, lies at the root of oral spelling, and endangers the acquisition of that important branch,

A third method, and one which will, we think, commend itself to the favorable regard of all who examine it, is that in which the three attributes of a letter are at once associated together. The advantages of this method, and the modes of interesting children in it, are topics which will be more fully discussed in another place. While we deny, therefore, that any material change should take place, we cheerfully admit, that some such improvements as named above may be made in the manner of teaching the letters.

The second question is, ‘Do the imperfections of the alphabet afford sufficient reasons for *such* a change as the one proposed?’ We have already said, that no material change, in our opinion, should take place. But others think differently, and have proceeded both to devise, and strongly recommend, the plan under consideration. To this method of teaching we are opposed, for the following reasons:

1st.—Teaching whole words according to the new plan, to any extent whatever, gives the child no facility for learning new ones. Every word must be taken upon authority, until the alphabet is learned.

2d.—Since the alphabet must, at some period, be acquired, with all its imperfections, it is but a poor relief, to compel the child, at first, to associate seven hundred different, arbitrary forms with the ideas which they represent, and then to learn the alphabet itself.

Mr. Mann was sensible of this objection to his new theory, when he said, in his second annual report, (*Common School Journal*, Vol. 1. page 327),

“There is a fact, however, which may, perhaps, in part, cancel the differences, here pointed out. The alphabet must be learned, at some time, because there are various occasions, besides those of consulting dictionaries or cyclopaedias, where the regular sequence of the letters must be known; and possibly it may be thought, that it will be as difficult to learn the letters, after learning the words, as before. But the fact, which deprives this consideration of some part at least of its validity, is, that it always greatly facilitates an acquisition of the names of objects, or persons, to have been conversant with their forms and appearances beforehand. The learning of words is an introduction to an acquaintance with the letters composing them.”

To learn to associate readily the form of a word with its meaning, is as difficult a task, for aught we can see, as it would be to associate the form and name of a letter with its power. It will be said that the former exercise affords the learner pleasure, and therefore attracts his attention and interests him. We have already expressed our sentiments on the policy of consulting the pleasure of a child, at the expense of his real good. If it can be shown, however, that, of two methods equally good in other respects, one has the additional recommendation of pleasing the child, and the other has *not*, we should by all means, choose the former. But all these remarks about the pleasure resulting from the new mode of teaching, grow out of the supposition, that learning the alphabet is totally destitute of interest.

This impression is not correct. And it is somewhat surprising, that the defenders of the new system do not see, when speaking of the alphabet, as destitute of interest, that a striking symbol, on the one hand, and the meaning of a word and its symbol, on the other.

That children are constantly uttering the elementary sounds of the language, before learning the letters, is obvious to every one. They must have some knowledge of them. So says Mr. Mann, on Page 93 of the report: “Generally speaking, too, before a child begins

to learn his letters, he is already acquainted with the majority of elementary sounds in the language, and is in the daily habit of using them in conversation.” It may be said of a letter, then, with as much propriety as of a word, that it is “familiar to the ear, the tongue, and the mind.” The eye is not acquainted with the visible symbol. If, then, such old acquaintances can introduce the child to the stranger (the visible representative) in one case, why not in the other? If the one exercise affords pleasure, why not the other? The latter may not to the same extent, as the former. We have made these comparisons for the benefit of those who insist so much on pleasing children.

But in interesting children, much depends upon the modes of teaching. It is not necessary to teach the alphabet invariably from the vertical column. Letters may be made upon the black-board; and the children may be allowed to make them on the slate, or on the board. Again, the teacher may be supplied with small pieces of card, each containing a letter; or, with metallic letters, which may be handled. Let these be kept in a small box or basket and when a class is called upon to recite, let the teacher hold up one of these letters. One of the class utters its name; let him then be required to utter its *power* also. The same should afterwards be exacted of the whole class, in concert. The teacher should then give the letter to the successful pupil. Let this exercise be repeated till all the letters are distributed. The pupils now, one by one, return the letters to the teacher, who counts the number belonging to each, and awards praise where it belongs. Children may be deeply interested in exercises of this kind, and at the same time be laying the foundation for a thorough course of instruction in reading. Then, let the teacher present some two or three letters, so arranged, as to spell a familiar word; as *ox, cat, dog*. The pupils should be required first, to utter the names of the letters thus arranged; next their powers, then, to join those powers into the audible sign which will call to mind the object named.

3d.—Another objection to converting our language into Chinese, arises from the *change* which must inevitably take place in the modes of associating the printed word with the idea which it represents, when the child is taught to regard words as composed of elements. *Children, at first, learn to recognise the word, by the new method, as a single picture, not as composed of parts; and for aught we know, they begin in the middle of it and examine each way. It is not probable that they proceed invariably from left to right, as in the old mode. However that may be, an entire change must take place when they begin to learn words, as composed of letters.* The attention, then is directed to the parts of which words are composed. While the eye is employed in combining the visible characters, the mind unites the powers which they represent, and the organs of speech are prompt to execute, what the eye and the mind have simultaneously prepared for them. *The mode of association in a symbolic language, if we mistake not, is this: The single picture is associated arbitrarily, yet directly, with the idea; the idea is then associated with its audible sign; this sign being familiar to the child, is readily uttered. In a phonetic language, it is different. The attention being directed to the letters and their powers, the child is conducted immediately to the audible sign; this when uttered, or thought of, suggests the idea.* Whether or not these are the correct views, is immaterial to the argument. All that is claimed is, *that a change takes place in the modes of association, as soon as the child begins to combine letters into words, it is of this change we complain. All will acknowledge the importance of forming in the child, correct habits of*

*association, such as will not need revolutionizing at a subsequent period in life.* On this point, we cannot forbear quoting the excellent remarks of the secretary, relating to the subject of spelling. After recommending a certain natural and simple mode of classifying words, he proceeds to say: "On such lessons as these, scholars will very rarely spell wrong. They can go through the book twenty times while they would go through a common spelling-book once; and each time will *rivet the association*, that is, it will make an ally of the almost *unconquerable force of habit*. A connection will be established between the general idea of the word and its component letters, which it will be nearly impossible to dissolve. In pursuing any study or art, it is of the *greatest importance to have the first movements*, whether of the eye, the hand, or the tongue, *right*. The end will be soonest obtained to submit to *any delay that exactness* may require. We all know with what tenacity first impressions retain their hold upon the mind. When in a strange place, if we mistake the points of compass, it is almost impossible to rectify the error; and it becomes a contest which of the two parties will hold out longest, the natural points of the compass, in their position, or we in our false impressions. So if, in geography, we get an idea that a city is on the west bank of a river, when it is on the east, it is almost as practicable to transfer the city itself, bodily, to the side of the river where it seems to belong, as it is to unclench our own impressions, and make them conform to its true location. These illustrations might be multiplied indefinitely." It seems to us that, as one of these illustrations, the subject under consideration must be legitimately ranked.

4th.—The new system fails to accomplish the object which it proposes. The main design of this mode of teaching seems to be, to escape the ambiguity arising from the variety of sounds which attach to some of the letters, as well as from the variety of forms by which the same sounds may be represented.

The defenders of this system seem to forget, since these anomalies are elementary, that they must be carried into the formation of words. Thus, we can represent a single elementary sound, first by *a*, then by *ai*, and again, by *ei*; hence, we can form three different words; as *vane, vain, vein*. In a similar manner we *have, rain, reign, rein; wright, write, right, rite*; and hundreds of others. It will be seen at once, that it must be as difficult for a child to attach the same sound to four different pictures called words, as to four different pictures called letters. Hence, it is plain, that we have "harlequins" among words; as well as among letters. The only difference is, that the former are more numerous, yet the legitimate offspring of the latter. We have "masqueraders," too, among words. Let the sound represented by the four letters, *r-i-t-e*, fall upon the child's ear, and he may think, either, of a ceremony, of making letters with a pen, of justice, or of a workman. Again, let either the printed or spoken word *pound*, for example, be given; and he may think of an enclosure for stray cattle, of striking a blow, of certain weights, as *avoirdupois, apothecaries', or Troy weight*, and also, of a denomination of money. To illustrate the difficulty arising from this equivocal word, or from any other one of the hundreds in the language, we will pursue a course similar to that in which Mr. Mann shows the child's perplexity with the letter *a*, on page 93 of the report. Found has more than seven different meanings, if we take into the account all the various weights, and moneys. But we will suppose it to have only seven. Now, if the sentences in which this word occurs be equally divided among these seven meanings, we have only to use the

words *sentence*, *word*, and *idea*, instead of *word*, *letter*, and *sound*; and the secretary's own language will bring us to a result as deplorable as that to which he arrives; namely, "that he [the child] goes wrong six times in going right once."

But what shall be done, since words, as well as letters, may become "masqueraders," and "harlequins?" Shall some enthusiastic reformer, some Miss Edgeworth, come forward and tell us that no thorough reform can be effected, till the practice of teaching words, before *whole sentences*, is abolished; intimating, that at no distant period children will begin with whole *paragraphs*, and, if very small, with whole *pages*?

Thus, it would seem that the advocates of this system, in attempting to shun Scylla are falling upon Charybdis. But it will, probably, be said in reply, that the connection will aid the child in determining the meaning of such words. This we willingly grant, and at the same time, claim, what is somewhat similar to it, in teaching the use of the letters; namely, that simple analogies may be pointed out to the child, which will aid him, not a little, in determining the correct sound to be given to the letters. In monosyllables ending with *e* mute, the vowel, almost without exception, is long, or like the name-sound. So when a syllable ends with a vowel, especially if accented, that vowel is long. The vowel *a*, in monosyllables, ending with *ll*, has generally, the broad sound. A monosyllable, ending with a single consonant, contains, usually, a short vowel. These are only a few of the various analogies which may be pointed out, and which will enable the learner, in most cases, to give the correct sound.

5th.—It introduces confusion into the different grades of schools.

The elements must be taught somewhere. If neglected in the primary schools, they must be taught in the grammar schools. And thus the order of things is reversed, and disarrangement introduced into the whole school system. The teacher who is employed, and paid, for instructing in the higher branches, is compelled to devote time and attention to the studies appropriately belonging to the schools of a lower grade. This is found to be the case, to too great an extent, in the schools of our city. We do not say this to the disparagement of the primary school teachers, or from the belief, that there is a want of fidelity on their part. We believe it to be, in part, at least, owing to the system of teaching, or rather want of system, in the primary schools. The books used in these schools, according to the author's own account of them, are adapted to either system. This is equivalent to saying that they are adapted to neither; for it is impossible to see how two methods, so entirely different from each other, as those under consideration, can be embraced in one series of books. After repeated inquiries made in many of the primary schools of the city, we are persuaded, that the teachers have taken the full amount of license allowed them, by the author of the books which they use. Some begin with the alphabet; others require the children to learn eight or ten words, from which they teach the several letters, though not in the order in which they are arranged in the alphabet. Some carry the process of teaching words to a greater extent, yet require the child to learn to spell, before teaching him to read. Others, as will appear, teach the children to read, without making them at all acquainted with the letters. One evil, resulting from this want of system, is a great neglect of spelling. It is the opinion of those masters who have been

longest in the service, and can therefore compare the results of the two systems, that in respect to spelling, among the candidates for admission from the primary schools, there has been a great deterioration during the trial of the new system; a period of about six years. The following instance, which occurred a few weeks since, though perhaps, an extreme case, well illustrates a large class of cases, in which there is a deplorable neglect of spelling. A girl in her tenth year, presented herself for admission into one of the grammar schools, with a certificate of qualification from the district committee. The master gave her to read, the sentence beginning with the words, "Now if Christ be preached," &c. The third word, she called "Jesus," and persisted in saying it was so pronounced. She was requested to spell it; the master, at the same time, pointing out the first letter. This letter, she called "Jesus." The first letter of the alphabet was pointed out; the pupil uttered "and"; the second letter was shown her; "but," was her response. The letter *m*, she called "man." She was sent to the assistant teachers of the school, who found her totally ignorant of the alphabet. The master sent her back to the primary school, with her certificate endorsed, "not qualified; can be admitted only by the authority of the sub-committee of the grammar school."

And, here we may remark, that the testimony of able primary school teachers themselves, who have tried both systems, is adverse to this mode of teaching reading. They declare that in the end, nothing is gained, but much is lost; that the task of teaching the alphabet, and the art of combining letters into words, are more difficult, and less satisfactory, than if the child had begun with the letters.

6th.—It cherishes and perpetuates a defective enunciation.

Children so universally come to the school-room, especially from uneducated families, with habits of incorrect articulation, that the efforts of the teacher, at an early period, should be directed towards the correction of these habits. The only sure way to accomplish this, is to drill the pupils on the elements of sound. The errors in enunciation consist, chiefly, in giving either an incorrect sound to, in suppressing, or in mingling, the vocal elements. A forcible enunciation of these elements, separately, will direct the attention of the child to, and correct, those which are uttered improperly; will bring out those which have been omitted, or too feebly expressed, and will tend to keep separate those, which, from early habit, have been blended together. Nor is this all. Reading may be divided into two departments, which may be called the *mechanical* and the *intellectual*. The latter embraces all the higher excellences of reading; such as *emphasis*, *inflection*, *pauses*, and what is comprehended in the term *expression*. To prepare the pupil for this department of reading, it is of paramount importance, that all which is embraced in the former, should first be carefully taught. In this discussion, we are concerned especially with the mechanical part of reading. It includes two particulars; first a skilful use of the *tools* employed in the art, that is, the ability of uttering with fluency the *sounds* of the words, while the eye passes rapidly over the letters which represent them; and, secondly, such a thorough training of the organs of speech, as will enable the pupil to give those sounds with clearness and force. By the new system, neither of these particulars can, to any great extent, be attended to; for they both involve a knowledge of the elements. To be able to utter the elements forcibly, when taken either separately, or

combined, is not unlike the acquirement of skill on an instrument of music. That a performer can pass over rapid and difficult passages with ease and gracefulness, is the surest proof that he has been thoroughly drilled, on every *note* of those passages. He did not acquire them all in a mass, as a *whole*, and that by some fortunate movement of the fingers which cost him no effort. Such skill must have been the result of patient toil, which was but gradually rewarded with success. What if one desiring to become a skilful player upon the piano-forte, yet impatient to play a tune) because more *agreeable*, should, at first, omit the lessons for practice, and place the fingers upon the keys, regardless of order, or the rules contained in the “Book of Instructions?” The bad habits, thus acquired, might last him through life, and ever prove an obstacle to his success. But what would be thought of a professor of music, who should allow of such a disorderly beginning? *Still more*, of one who should recommend it, and affirm that no thorough reform could be effected without it? A defect in the enunciation of the elements, is a radical one, and the new system is directly calculated to perpetuate it. If there was no other argument against the system, this, of itself, would be sufficient to show its utter futility.

The *third* and last argument for the system, in the words of the secretary, is, that “the rapidity of acquisition will be greater, if words are taught before letters.” This is a question of fact. It either is so, or it is not so, and facts alone, can sustain the position which Mr. Mann here assumes. If he could have adduced facts to sustain the assertion, and then have said, *I know*, instead of saying, as he does on the 92d page of the report, “I believe that if two children, of equal quickness and capacity, are taken, one of whom can name every letter of the alphabet, at sight, and the other does not know them from Chinese characters, the latter can be most easily taught to read,” such facts would have done much towards effecting the desired change in the State. But where are the facts? We have seen none. It is true, the secretary does allude, in his second annual report, to the introduction of the system into the Boston primary schools, and says, “it is found to succeed better than the old mode.” Here, let the reader first inquire, What is the system in the Boston schools? Is it precisely the one which Mr. Mann recommends? And in the second place, What is the opinion of practical teachers concerning the results of the nearest approaches to this system, as seen in the Boston schools for the last five or six years? And thirdly, let the reader be informed that “*The Mother’s Primer*,” which begins with words, was introduced, as appears from the vote of the Boston Primary School Committee, Nov. 7, 1837, and that the second annual report of the Secretary of the Board of Education, bears date Dec. 26, 1838, leaving an interval of about one year only, for the trial of the new system. Whether a trial during so short a period, amidst the novelty always attending a change, is sufficient to warrant the assertion that “it is found to succeed better than the old mode.” we will submit to the judgment of any candid mind.

It is supposed, that the secretary, when he affirms that “the rapidity of acquisition will be greater, if words are taught before letters,” intends to include the acquisition of the alphabet, with the modes of combining letters into words; otherwise the whole matter is unworthy of the attention of the friends of education. Such being the case, the question stands thus. Two children, in like circumstances, in every respect, commence learning to read; the first learns some seven hundred different words, as he would so many different

letters; having acquired no more ability to learn the seven hundred and first, than he had at the beginning; afterwards he learns the twenty-six letters of the alphabet, including all the “harlequins” and “masqueraders,” and finally the art of combining the letters into words. The other learns first, the letters; then, the art of combining them; and finally makes use of his knowledge, to acquire his seven hundred words. Now by what rule of arithmetic, or of common sense, it is ascertained that the former will advance more rapidly than the latter, is to us entirely unknown.

Such are the reasons that have compelled us to dissent from the opinions of the secretary, on this branch of education. The main question at issue, we are constrained to answer in the negative; because such a change, as that proposed by Mr. Mann and others, is neither called for, nor sustained by sound reasoning. The arguments adduced in its support are, as we believe, inconclusive. The plausibility of some, arises from considerations wholly irrelevant; others are fallacious; and others still, are based upon false premises.

On the contrary, the reasons brought against the change, and in favor of the prevailing system, are of paramount importance. Therefore, as conscientious and faithful servants in the cause of education, we feel bound to adhere to the path of duty, rather than yield to the opinions even of those who are high in authority.



## **Note from Internet Publisher: Donald L. Potter**

January 29, 2013

The Boston Schoolmaster's reply to Horace Mann's defense of the sight-word method in the Boston schools is taken from Mr. Samuel L. Blumenfeld's 1973 *The New Illiterates: And How to Keep your Child from Becoming One*. Mr. Blumenfeld, in his research, discovered that the first sight-word reading system in English was created by Thomas H. Gallaudet, and published in 1836 as *The Mother's Primer*. Mr. Horace Mann was able to get it installed in the Boston classrooms.

I am publishing the Boston Schoolmasters' critique because of its continuing relevance in the debate on the best mode of teaching beginning reading for the best long-term benefit to the students.

During my 21 years in public, and my experiences since as a private tutor, I became aware that the exact same method recommended by Mr. Mann is still being used in most of the public schools in America. I was fortunate in 1953 to begin first-grade under an accomplished phonics teacher of the old school, Mrs. Pearl Monroe. Many of my contemporaries were not so fortunate, getting the then popular Dick and Jane method that led to many millions of students developing artificially induced whole-word dyslexia, a form of dyslexia caused by the look-and-say method. Dr. Samuel Orton warned of the potential hazards of teaching sight-words (whole-words by the look-and-say method) in a famous but largely ignored essay.

In January 2013, I published Gallaudet's *The Mother Primer* from a copy I was able to purchase off the Internet from an antique bookseller in Maine. That book is available from my website, [www.donpotter.net](http://www.donpotter.net), in pdf format. The book seemed to have disappeared for a long time. Mr. Blumenfeld had not actually seen a copy when he wrote his book. Miss Geraldine Rodgers obtained a copy from the Gallaudet College for the deaf. She sent me her highly annotated copy. I plan to publish her annotations sometime in the future.

I am also publishing as an appendix to this document an analysis of the arguments the Boston Schoolmasters used to prove Mann's method was inferior to the spelling book method that was used in America at that time, and which produced generations of highly skilled readers, as a perusal of the private letters, newspapers, and literature of that will amply testify.

Please revisit this document from time to time to see the additional information that I will be adding.

Please visit my website [www.donpotter.net](http://www.donpotter.net) for the very best in free phonics instructional material. I would also like to recommend Mr. Samuel L. Blumenfeld's *Blumenfeld Alpha-Phonics* method for both beginning and remedial readers.

REPLY  
TO THE  
“REMARKS”  
OF  
THIRTY-ONE BOSTON SCHOOLMASTERS  
ON THE  
SEVENTH ANNUAL REPORT  
OF THE  
BY HORACE MANN,  
Secretary of the Board

BOSTON:  
WM. B. FOWLE AND NAHUM CAPEN.

1844.

The third section in the “Remarks” on Modes or TEACHING CHILDREN TO READ,” opens debatable ground. It is a proper subject for discussion, and I have welcomed discussion upon it. For this purpose, I have given publicity to views diametrically opposed to my own. In a number of the Common School Journal, for February last, I inserted a long article, whose object was to controvert opinions on this subject, which, after seven years of reflection, observation, and inquiry, I had deliberately formed. The existence of that article in my Journal, is not recognised in the “Remarks,” although, as it seems to me, almost every argument, having any plausibility, which the “Remarks” contain, was borrowed from the Journal. Thus I am assailed by weapons taken from my own armory, without any acknowledgment of the source whence they were obtained.

I have discussed this subject, at length, in my Journal, in a Lecture, and in my Reports; but never with a word of ridicule towards any individual. I have used no expression that could cause a twinge in any man’s breast. Why, then, on a subject so remote from passion or ill-will, should the ‘thirty-one indulge in ridicule of me?

The difficulties inherent in the orthography of our language are so great, that many philosophic and benevolent minds have sought for some method of reform. In England, since Bishop Wilkins’s “Essay towards a Real Character, and a Philosophical Language,” published in 1668, propositions for a change have been too numerous for detail. In our own country, as far back as 1790, Dr. Thornton, who presided for so many years over the Patent-office, at Washington, published a pamphlet, entitled “Cadmus, or a Treatise on Written Language,” in which he proposed that every letter should be named according to its power; and he invented new characters to supply the deficiencies of our alphabet.

For this production, the American Philosophical Society awarded, to its author, a gold medal and the title of CADMUS! In 1768, Dr. Franklin amused his leisure hours in preparing a “Reformed Alphabet.” I have seen a work of some size in which the orthography was conformed to the orthoepy. Phonography, which is at present attracting some attention among educated men, is designed to supersede, in part, the obvious imperfections of our language. It is not unworthy of notice that, at the last session of congress, an elaborate plan for the reformation of our alphabet and language in this particular, was ordered to be printed. All these things show that real difficulties exist. All philosophical teachers have felt these difficulties, so far as their own profession was concerned, and have been ready to give, at least, a candid consideration to plans for their removal. The section in the “Remarks,” devoted to this subject, evinces no such spirit.

There are several reasons why I shall not attempt a lengthened reply to this part of the “Remarks.” The first is, that, from beginning to end, it is an arrant misrepresentation of the system it professes to impugn. I have never advocated, or known, or heard of, nor have I met any person who has ever advocated, or known, or heard of, any such mode of teaching the English language to children, as the “Remarks” assail. They accuse me in several places, of attempting to convert our language into Chinese; although in other places, they are obliged to acknowledge that I condemned the Chinese. Witness such passages as the following: “We confess ourselves not a little surprised that the Secretary who cherishes such correct views of the Chinese language, should urge us to convert ours into Chinese.” (p. 65.) “How the Secretary could discover reasons for *such* a change, one which converts our language into Chinese,” &c. (p. 78.) “Another objection to converting our language into Chinese,” &c. (p. 94.) On this point I observe only, that, after reading what I have said on this subject, the imputation of a purpose, on my part, to convert our

language into Chinese, or into any thing belonging to that family of languages, could never have come from the intellectual portion of any man's brain.

An equally *ineffectual* attempt is made to fasten a lower degree of absurdity upon myself and those who agree with me as to the manner of teaching young children to read; as the following quotations will serve to show:

“The plan of teaching, as developed by the publications of the Secretary, by Mr. Pierce's ‘Lecture on Reading,’ and by various other publications, is substantially as follows: whole, but familiar words, without any reference to the letters which compose them, are first to be taught. The alphabet, as such, is kept entirely concealed. Some three or four words are arranged on a single page of a primer prepared for the purpose, or are written on the black-board several times, and in various orders, as follows: cat – dog – chair; dog – cat – chair; chair – cat – dog. These are pointed out to the child, who is required to utter them at the teacher's dictation, and to learn them by a careful inspection of their forms, as whole objects. After these are supposed to be learned, new words are dictated to the pupil, in the same manner as before. This process is repeated, till the child has acquired a sufficient number of words to read easy sentences in which they are combined. To what extent this mode of learning words should be carried, is, no where, definitely stated. Mr. Pierce says, ‘When they are perfectly familiar with the first words chosen, and the sentence which they compose, select other words, and form other sentences; and so on indefinitely.’ He then proceeds to recommend several books, as containing suitable sentences for this purpose. Of these, one prepared by Miss Peabody, now Mr. Mann, contains, he says, ‘a full illustration of the whole method, with words and sentences.’ Since this book is also recommended, by the Secretary, as containing the best exemplification of the whole plan, it may be taken as a standard, by which to form an estimate of the extent to which the friends of the new system would carry this process of teaching words.” – *Remarks*, p. 59.

Again;

“It appears then, that at some period in the child's progress, after learning seven hundred, a thousand, or two thousand words, he is to commence the laborious and unwelcome task of learning ‘the unknown, unheard and unthought-of letters of the alphabet.’ Here, if ever, it is supposed he begins to learn how to combine letters into words; that is, learns how to spell.” – *Remark*, p. 60.

The idea that the “new system,” as advocated by Mr. Pierce, myself and others, postpones the learning of the alphabet, and of course spelling, until after seven hundred words are learned, is kept before the reader's mind, throughout the section. (See pp. 60, 63, 92, 102.) Now the facts that invalidate this representation, stand conspicuously out, in the very productions from which it professes to be derived. In the “Primer” referred to, there are only about one hundred words, before the first story or reading lesson; and the instructions to teachers contained in the author's preface, are, “ Before all the words are learned that belong to the first story, the child may be taught several letters, such s, t, v, b, d,” &c. “Some children will soon inquire out all the letters, and as soon as they are known, it is well to let them spell the words,” &c. “There is no doubt that the sooner spelling is begun, intelligently, the better,” &c. Yet with these directions before them, the Thirty-one allege that according to our plan, “the alphabet, as such, is kept entirely

concealed; “and also, that the child, “after learning either seven hundred, a thousand, or two thousand words,” is then, “if ever,” to learn how to spell.

Mr. Pierce, in the lecture from which the quotation in the “Remarks “ is made, says, “After the scholars are able to manage with ease, simple sentences, such as are found in Gallaudet’s and Worcester’s Primers, Bumstead’s First Book, or Swan’s Primary Reader, let them be taught the names and sounds, or powers of letters.” Now the first sentence in Gallaudet’s Primer is, “*Frank had a dog; his name was Spot.*” In Worcester’s, it is, “*A nice fan.*” In Bumsted’s “First Book,” the first sentence has twenty different, but very simple words; the second has only six. In Swan’s, it is, “*I can make a new cage.*” Mr. Pierce’s direction therefore, is, “After the scholars are able to manage with ease, such simple sentences” as the above, “let them be taught the names and sounds of letters.” What an outrage then, was it to say, that Mr. Pierce would postpone the teaching of letters, until after “two thousand,” or “one thousand,” or “seven hundred,” whole words had been learned, and then, “IF EVER,” begin “to combine letters into words.” Must a child learn *seven hundred words* before he can read, “A nice fan,” or other similar sentences? Take the common type, in which this Reply is printed, and I doubt whether seven hundred different words can be found on any *three full pages* in it.

Still more enormous is the statement in relation to the “Primer,” which is said to be my “standard;” for, according to the directions contained in that, about a fifth part of the letters were to be learned, by or before the time that one hundred words were to be; and in regard to spelling, which, of course, must be subsequent to learning the letters, it says, “There is no doubt, that the sooner it is begun, intelligently, the better.” Yet the “Remarks” say, “What surprises us most, if this be the meaning, is that Mr. Mann should discover from such defective instruction, reasons for a *total* neglect of the alphabet.” The italicising of the word *total*, is not mine; the “Remarks” themselves give it this emphasis of falsehood. What an exorbitant misrepresentation, on the threshold of the section, of my views and of the views of those with whom I agree!

At the late meeting of the American Institute of Instruction, held at Portland, Mr. S. S. Greene, late of the New North School, Boston, delivered, as a lecture, the substance of this part of the “Remarks.” Mr. Amos Brown, the distinguished Principal of the Gorham Academy, who had become acquainted with my system, through my Journal and Reports, said, in a public discussion which ensued upon the lecture, that he should not have recognised it as a description of my system of teaching to read. Mr. Brown gave an able and philosophical exposition of the plan, as I advocate it, and said that he had taught one of his own children according to it, with extraordinary success.

It would be useless, therefore, to consider, in detail, those arguments which are brought to overthrow a system which nobody upholds. Besides, the plain, common-sense views which belong to this subject, are turned into metaphysics, by the “Remarks” and treated with division and subdivision, that bewilder instead of elucidating. The subject is ground down, and pulverized into impalpability, beyond microscopic vision. Had it been the unaided production of a single mind, the subtlety and evanescence of its refinements might have been less; – now, I know not how otherwise to describe it than as the doctrine of metaphysics applied to the almost endless anomalies of the alphabet. An attempt to individualize the atomical parts of this section, and to give an answer to each, would be like attempting to beat back a league-square of sea-fog, by hitting each particle with the

sharpened end of a rod. I shall content myself, therefore, with endeavoring to find some *nuclei* rarified into less metaphysical tenuity than the general mass, and striking at them.

The phrases, or their equivalents, “new system,” “old system,” “the two systems,” and “both systems,” (which, of course, can include but two,) occur more than thirty times in this article. From this prolonged iteration I infer, that the Thirty-one meant to designate two plans of teaching, namely, *letters before words*, and *words before letters*. They pronounce decidedly, – on what evidence, and after what “patient investigation and keen discrimination,” we shall soon see, in favor of the former method. Much observation and reflection, together with the experience of many persons, incline me strongly in favor of the latter.

By the “old method,” the names of the letters, – the A, B, C, as they have been immemorially called, – were first taught. After these letters, came tables of ab and eb, of bla and ble, of ska, ske, of bam, flam, &c. &c., an almost endless catalogue, and doleful as endless. All the old spelling books, so far as I know, were constructed on this plan. In Webster’s, Pike’s, Emerson’s, Sanders’s &c, the number of these senseless particles amounted to hundred. By the “old system,” when the child could master the alphabet at sight, and could read these names of nothing, by spelling them, he was put to the reading of short sentences. Then, and not till then, was any order or beauty evolved to his vision, out of night chaos. From inquiries made, know not of how many teachers, I learn that it has taken children, on an average, at least six months to master the alphabet, on this plan, even when they went to school constantly. In country districts, where there are short schools and long vacations, it has generally required a year, and often eighteen months, to teach a child the twenty-six letters of the alphabet; when the same child would have learned the names of twenty-six playmates, or of twenty-six interesting objects of any kind, in one or two days. And the reason is obvious. In learning the meaningless letters of the alphabet, there was nothing to attract his attention, to excite his curiosity, to delight his mind, or to reward his efforts. The life, the zest, the eagerness with which all children, except natural-born idiots, seek for real objects, ask their names, or catch them without asking, never enlivened this process. The times of the lessons were seasons of suspended animation. The child was taught *not to think*. His eyes and mind were directed to objects as little interesting as so many grains of sand. For the time being, he was banished from this world into the realms of vacuity. By the letters and abs, no glimmer of an idea was excited in the child’s mind, and when he was put into words and short’ sentences, he found, as the general rule, that the letters had all changed their names, without any act of the Legislature. Were the common objects of nature or of art, – animals, trees, flowers, fruits, articles of furniture and of dress, implements of trade, &c. &c., learned as slowly as this, an individual would hardly be able to name the objects immediately around them, during the first century of his existence; and antediluvian longevity would find him inquiring the names of things now familiar to a child. But all who have arrived at middle life, and been educated in this community, know bitterly what the “old method “ means.

By the “new method,” a book is used which contains short, familiar words, which are the names of pleasant objects or qualities, or suggest the idea of agreeable actions. A simple story is told, or some inquiry is made, in which a particular word is used, and when the child’s – attention is gained and his interest excited, the word is shown to him, as a whole. He is made to speak it, and is told that the written or printed object means that we mean when we speak the word; and that if he will learn words, he can read such

stories in books as he has heard, miles distant from him, or that he can do some other of the hundred wonderful things which belong to reading, and which even a child can be made to understand. Words are shown, which excite pleasant images when spoken, and after a little while, if the instruction is judiciously managed, the child comes to look upon a book as a magic casket, full of varied and beautiful treasures, which he longs to see. Pleasant associations with the book, the school, and the teacher, are created. The idea that every word has a signification is kept perpetually before his mind, until he looks habitually for a meaning in printed words, as much as he does in those spoken ones, which are addressed to him. His mind is kept in an active, thinking state. The time never is, when he looks at the words in a book without going out, in imagination, to things, actions, or relations, beyond the book. He is not stultified as he is when compelled to look at letters and particles, for a year, which are almost nothing in themselves, and suggest nothing beyond themselves. After a number of words have been taught in this way, – more or less, according to the capacities of the child, but ordinarily, I should say, less than a hundred, – some of the letters are pointed out. In subsequent lessons the attention is turned more and more to the letters, until all are learned. My view is, and I said so, both in my Lecture and in my last Report, that the powers of the letters should also be learned. The spelling of some words may begin even before the whole alphabet is mastered.

Such is a very brief, and perhaps therefore, imperfect, sketch of the "new method," as I know it to have been most successfully practised, in many schools. It was advocated, – with the exception of learning the powers of letters, – by Mr. Gallaudet, in the *Annals of Education*, as far back as 1830. Soon afterwards he prepared a "Primer" on the plan. Mr. Worcester soon followed him, though not wholly on the same plan. Since that time several works have been prepared, more or less in accordance with these views; but all abandoning the "old system." Let me give a specimen of the old gibberish. *Ba be bi bo bu by ca ce ci co cu cy da de di do du dy fa fe fi fo fu fy ka ke ki ko ku ky ga ge gi go gu gy ha he hi ho hu hy ma me mi mo mu my na ne ni no nu ny ra re ri ro ru ry ta te ti to tu ty wa we wi wo wu wy la le li lo lu ly pa pe pi po pu py sa se si so su sy za ze zi zo zu zy ab eb ib ob ub ac ec ic oc uc ad ed id od ud af ef if of uf al el il ol ul ag eg ig og ug am em im om um an en in on un ap ep ip op up as es is os us av ev iv ov uv ax ex ix ox ux ak ek ik ok uk at et it ot ut ar er ir or ur az ez iz oz bla ble bli blo blu cla cle eli clo clu pla ple pli plo plu fla fle fli flo flu va ve vi vo vu bra bre bri bro bru cra cre cri cro cru pra pre pri pro pru gra gre gri gro gru pha phe phi pho phu cha che chi cho chu chy dra dre dri dro dru dry fra fre fri fro fru fry gla gle gli glo glu gly sla sle sli slo slu sly qua que qui quo sha she shi sho shu shy spa spe spi spo spu spy sta ste sti sto stu sty sca sce sci sco scu scy tha the thi tho thu thy tra tre tri tro tru try spla sple spli splo splu sply spra spre spri spro spru spry stra stre stri stro stru stry swa swe swi swo swu swy.*

Now this *heap of nothing* is taken literally from Noah Webster's *Spelling-Book*, of which, probably, greater numbers have been sold than of all others put together, and which is, therefore, the best exponent of the "old system."

On the score of authority, antiquity is doubtless on the side of the Thirty-one. On pp. 60, 67, &c., they expressly lay claim to it. They may have it. They may have it, from the time of the Dark Ages;" whence, indeed, it has descended to their hands in an unbroken line.

Among the advocates of the “new system,” are Mr. Gallaudet; Mr. Emerson, the President of the Institute; Mr. Pierce; Dr. Howe, who says he could not teach the Blind in any way, but that of giving them whole words at first, because, having fewer senses, they cannot be abused to such an extent as other children can; the Hon. J. A. Shaw, for many years Preceptor of the Bridgewater Academy, a member also for several years, of each branch of our Legislature, and now Superintendent of Schools in the Second Municipality of New Orleans; Mr. Palmer, the author of the Prize Essay on common Schools; Mr. Russell, the elocutionist, in part, &c., &c. In 1837, the Boston Primary school committee, now more than one hundred in number, and some of them “practical educators,” introduced Mr. Bumstead’s books into the Primary Schools of the city; and from that time I suppose the “new system” has been in general use, in these schools. Such is, in part, the weight of American authority, on our side. Which is the greater?

The Thirty-one express strong apprehension, lest the child, in learning according to the “new method,” should enjoy too much pleasure. “The grand mistake,” say they, in discussing this point, “lies in the rank assigned to pleasure.” To show what relative importance is attached, by the Thirty-one, to making school and learning pleasant to a child, the “Remarks” contain an illustration so apposite that I must quote it.

“There is a little nut enclosed in a prickly encasement. The nut itself is very agreeable to children; so agreeable as to induce them, at the expense of some pain, to try their skill in removing this unfriendly exterior. Repeated trials, with the stimulus afforded by a desire to gratify the taste, gives them skill; till at length, they can obtain the nut without much suffering. Now, suppose some ‘humane’ person, desirous of aiding the child in *acquiring* this kind of skill; and of making his task, at the same time, more pleasant, should begin by removing the troublesome covering with his own hands, and suffer the child to surfeit himself, without any effort on his part. Would he, in the first place, secure the object of giving the child *skill*! and in the second place, will the child, having obtained the nuts, derive much pleasure from handling the vacant burrs? and, finally, does not pleasure itself become vitiated and morbid, when unattended with effort? This illustration, will, at least, apprise the reader of our reasons for the opinion, that the new system is the result of a misguided effort to make that pleasant, which, to some extent at least, must be disagreeable; to make that easy, which, from the nature of the case, is beset with unavoidable difficulties.”

– *Remarks*, p. 87.

In this parable, the chestnut is knowledge. Its pleasant taste is the delight of acquisition. The alphabet is the prickly burr enclosing it. To make the comparison tally, the child’s character; happiness, fortune, in after-life, are to depend, to a very great extent, upon the facility which he can acquire in opening the burrs, and in extracting the precious meat. But as yet the child knows nothing of its taste, its utility, and its prerogative of conferring health, wealth and eminence. A question arises as to the best method of instructing and inducing a child to strip off the “prickly encasement,” and obtain the salubrious fruit within. The “movement” party, or defenders of the “new system,” say, – strip off this porcupine burr, pare off the shell, and offer a piece of the rich meat to the child for ten days, or more if need be, in succession, to see how he likes it, and to cultivate a taste for it. Say nothing of your ultimate object, nor of the ultimate benefit it may be to him. All this, he cannot yet understand; but do it pleasantly, and see if his good will be not excited; see, if, even before the accustomed hour, he will not



present himself for the accustomed favor. After a few days, give him a nut with the shell on; he will soon find how he can extract the desired kernel within. Continue this also a few days, and when his appetite is “sharp set,” then give him a burr, – the “prickly encasement” itself, – the nut, with its “unfriendly exterior,” its “troublesome covering,” all on. Can any one, who knows any thing of country chestnut-parties, – of being in the woods, two miles from home, by daylight in the morning;-can any one who has had “practical experience “of this, doubt for a moment, that the child will find a way, or make a way, as Lord Bacon said, to extract from the burrs, as many of the nuts as it is best that he should eat ?

The plan of the “conservatives “ is’ this. Take a basket containing two or three hundred chestnut burrs, and catch a child. Give the child neither taste nor foretaste of a chestnut, and say nothing to him of the savory interior of the burr. Lest a “ grand mistake “should be committed, and an improper “rank assigned to pleasure,” say nothing to the child of those qualities or properties of chestnuts, which can give pleasure to his palate, and put pennies in his pocket; but give him a burr, whose closely-knit seams neither sun nor frost has begun to open. Command him to open it with his fingers. He refuses. Scold him. He takes it into his hands, but cries. Whip him. His fingers bleed, and still the burr is not loosened. Whip him again. Repeat it, if necessary, four times a day; and continue this regimen until he shall be willing to save his back at the expense of his digits. This, according to the above happy illustration, is the “old method” of teaching children to love chestnuts, and to go abroad voluntarily to gather them by satchels-full.

A parallel to the wisdom of the above may be found on page 97 of the “Remarks.” According to the “old system,” – that system which, “from its long and uninterrupted use has become venerable with age,” (p. 60,) a child, in learning the alphabet, was taught to give a the long sound. But probably, in the first twenty words where he would find it, it would not have the long sound, but some other; as in *pa, ma, father, apple, hat, cat, rat, ball, fall, call, warm., swarm, man, can, pan, ran, brass, glass, water, star, &c.* ; and so of other letters. Now what remedy is to be applied to remove an evil which the child encounters on the very threshold of reading? The “Remarks” contain the following prescription for the case

“Simple analogies may be pointed out to the child, which will aid him, not a little, in determining the correct sound to be given to the letters. In monosyllables ending with *e* mute, the vowel, almost without exception, is long, or like the name-sound. So when a syllable ends with a vowel, especially if accented, that vowel is long. The vowel *a*, in monosyllables, ending with *ll*, has, generally, the broad sound. A monosyllable, ending with a single consonant, contains, usually, a short vowel. These are only a few of the various analogies which may be pointed out, and which will enable the learner, in most cases, to give the correct sound.” – *Remarks*, p. 97.

Let us now suppose a simple case,-such a one as might occur in the first reading lesson ever given to a child. In the alphabet the name of the letter *o* has the long sound. The child’s first lesson contains the *dove* and *love*, which, after spelling, he pronounces *dōve* and *lōve*, according to the sound of *o* in the alphabet as it had been taught to him. But in this he is corrected, and made to follow public usage, and not the instructions of his teacher. Coming soon to the words *lone* and *bone*, which may be in the next lesson, he gives to *o* the short sound, and calls them *lone* and *bone*. No; says the teacher. “In

monosyllables ending with *e* mute, the vowel, almost without exception, is long, or like the name-sound." Now here we must suppose the child to understand the meaning of "monosyllable," and of "e mute," and "vowel," and "long," as applied to sounds, and "name-sound," as applied to the alphabet, – a very enterprising supposition, surely, to begin with.

In the next lesson, the words gone and done occur, and the child, having understood and remembered the last direction, pronounces them gone and done. No; again says the teacher. I told you that "in monosyllables ending with *e* mute, the vowel is long, or like the name-sound, almost without exception." "Now these are some of the exceptions." And might he not also add, as equally comprehensible by the child, *exceptio prohat regulam*?

So among the sentences given to a child, there may be such a one as the following: "Our good dog and our strong pony." Here the letter *o* occurs seven times; and, in the last recurrence, only, has it the long sound. The child reads the sentence, and having found the letter *o* six times without the long sound, he follows analogy, and mispronounces the word "pony." Hark, says the teacher; "When a syllable ends with a vowel, especially if accented, that vowel is long." But how, one might reasonably ask, does the child know that the first syllable in *pony* ends with a vowel? or, in other words, how does he know that the word is not divided thus, *pon-y*? To push this inquiry one step further: the illustrative word which occurs most readily to my own mind, after such teaching as this, is *solemnity*. Here the first syllable ends with a vowel, which, according to Worcester, has the obscure sound, but the child gives the long sound. Not so, says the teacher; I said, "especially if accented."

To illustrate another of the above rules, take this sentence: "The cap and cloak and cane are in the hall." Misled by analogy, the word hall is mispronounced *hāle*. Remember, says the teacher, that "the vowel *a* in monosyllables ending with *ll*, has, generally, the broad sound."

Once more; suppose the child's name is Job, – which, with such teaching, would be most appropriate, – and, in reading his own name, according to the *fourth* rule, he calls it Jōb. "A monosyllable," says the teacher, "ending with a single consonant, contains, USUALLY, a short vowel."

Now this is not ridicule, but a plain statement of the directions, laid down by thirty-one "practical educators, to be given to learners, to enable them to meet the difficulties which they experience, when, emerging from the alphabet, they find that the vowels, in a vast majority of cases, are no longer to be known by their old names. The "Remarks" add further, that "these are only a few of the various analogies which may be pointed out, and which will enable the learner, in most cases, to give the correct sound." In regard to these being "only a few of the various analogies which may be pointed out to the learner," I must say I am sorry for it. I would they were all, and that there had been *four* less.

I have been told by one of the best teachers in Massachusetts, as a fact within his own personal knowledge, that the student of a certain college, entering a district school for the first time in his life, and entering, too, in order to keep it, and finding there a child who did not know a letter of the alphabet, took its book, marked off the first six letters, and, without telling the name of one of them, set the child to learn them for its first lesson.

Which of the above modes would prove most helpful and intelligible to a child, it is not easy to determine.

A point much insisted upon in the “Remarks” is, that the “old system” proceeds upon the philosophical principle of beginning every study with the acquisition of its elements, – a principle which, as it is averred, the “new system” violates. But the “Remarks” do not anywhere define the term “element.” It seems to be treated as a fixed, invariable quantity. The meaning of the word *element*, however, must have reference to the class of compounds respecting which it is used; and its significations must differ as it is differently applied. To the teacher of penmanship, the different parts of a letter are elements. He divides them into hair-stroke, ground-stroke, curve, &c. To the speller, letters are elements. To the reader, grammarian, and rhetorician, in different aspects of their respective arts, whole words, whole clauses, and whole sentences are elements. Mr. Swan, one of the signers of the “Remarks,” says, “the pronunciation of syllables and words, [not letters] forms the elementary part of reading.” (Swan’s Primary School Reader, P. 2, p. 22.) In the logical arrangement of an extended treatise or history, sections, chapters, books, become elements. To the librarian, whole volumes, and even alcoves, are elements. And to him who would take an inventory of a nation’s literary treasures, libraries themselves are elements. To the mechanic or machinist, are not those substances elements, which to the chemist are highly compounded? What, then, do the Thirty-one mean by elements? They surely cannot mean those ultimate corpuscles or monads of things, which are incapable of being divided, – so small that they have no longer an upper or an under side, a north or a south end.

They doubtless mean that letters are the elements of reading. But, for my part, I prefer Mr. Swan’s definition in his “Reader,” – which makes “the pronunciation of syllables and words the elements of reading, – to that contrary one which he has subscribed to in the “Remarks.” This is in conformity with all teaching; for every science has its postulates as well as its definitions. Such, too, is the course of nature, and the order of Providence. A child, at its birth, is not introduced either to the splendidly magnificent or to the curiously minute; but he is introduced to simple, comprehensible objects, which are capable of being indefinitely divided in one direction, as in chemistry, and indefinitely compounded in the other, as in astronomy. According to the doctrine of the Thirty-one, it was a most unphilosophical way, to bring all the beasts and birds before Adam, as whole objects, or individuals, to be named. He should have been initiated by a course of elementary instruction on the parts of which they were composed, – on heads, trunks, and legs; eyes, ears, and noses; hair, fur, and feathers; teeth, claws, and beaks; – or, perhaps, there should have there should have been a course even preparatory to this, on carbon, oxygen, and hydrogen; and after Adam had spent three or four centuries on these elements, he might them into animals, and give names to “every beast of the field, and every fowl of the air.”

On pp. 101-2, I am again accused of drawing hasty conclusions, because in my second Report, dated Dec. 26, 1838, I spoke of the experiment of teaching words before letters, as having been tried in the Boston Primary Schools, and as having been” found to succeed better than the old mode.” The language of the “Remarks” is this:

“Let the reader be informed that ‘*The Mother’s Primer*,’ which begins with words, was introduced, as appears from the vote of the Boston Primary School Committee, Nov. 7, 1837, and that the second annual report of the Secretary of the Board of Education, bears date Dec. 26, 1838, leaving an interval of about one year only, for the

trial of the new system. Whether a trial during so short a period, amidst the novelty always attending a change, is sufficient to warrant, the assertion that 'it is found to succeed better than the old mode,' we will submit to the judgment of any candid mind."  
– *Remarks*, pp. 101-2.

Of any candid mind! Hear facts! On the 2d day of August, 1836, – almost two years and four months before Dec. 26, 1838, – the Primary School Committee passed the following vote:

“VOTED, – That such teachers as may be disposed to use Gallaudet’s *Mother’s Primer*, for teaching the alphabet, may do so in the way of experiment, and report to the district committee their opinion of its value.”

On Nov. 7, 1837, a year and a quarter after the passage of this vote, the standing committee made a report from which the following extracts are taken:

“They have carefully examined the’ *Mother’s Primer*, (that is, the Primer, by which words were to be taught before letters;] and caused the experiment to be made in several of the schools, and from the favorable reports which have been received from the teachers of the success they have met with in advancing the children from the fourth to the third class, your committee are induced to recommend its adoption in our Primary Schools; believing as they do that it is easier as well as more expeditious and interesting to the pupil, than the old, unintelligible, and irksome mode of teaching them to call certain arbitrary marks or letters, by certain arbitrary sounds.” – “Your committee have been informed by one of the teachers, who has for the last year adopted this proposed mode of teaching, that pupils taught in this way, are enabled, in four months, to read very well in plain reading, and spell words of one syllable, even with silent letters; whereas it generally – takes a longer period of time, by the old method, to teach them the alphabet of large and small letters.”

Now this account of the experiment, its success, and the length of time during which it had been tried, is in the very report of the committee, from which the above date of Nov. 7, 1837, is taken. The experiment, therefore, had been on trial for more than a year, previous to Nov. 7, 1837, and nearly two years and a half before the date of my Report. Yet the Thirty-one say, that, on the 26th of Dec. 1838, – the date of my Report, – there had been “an interval of about one year only for the trial of the ‘new system.’” And they add; “ Whether a trial during so short a period, amidst the novelty always attending a change, is sufficient to warrant the assertion, that ‘it is found to succeed better than the old mode,’ we will submit to the judgment of any candid mind.”

My “hasty conclusion,” therefore, was not founded on a trial “of about one year only,” but on a trial of more than two years, which afforded full time for an experiment upon half a dozen successive classes. Such, to say nothing of moral qualities, are the “patient investigation and keen discrimination” of the Thirty-one, in ascertaining and averring facts, on which to arraign a fellow-citizen for precipitancy in forming his judgments, and incapacity in the discharge of public duties. Any comments or epithets, applied to this, however severe, would only lighten the crushing weight of the facts.

If I was hasty, in forming my conclusion, after an experiment of more than two years, how highly must the Boston Primary school committee think themselves complimented, who not only formed an opinion, *but acted upon it*, after a trial of about half that time ?

In relation to the charge on page 76, that I do not know the difference between the name and the power of a letter, – as it could have been intended for nothing but insult, I pass it by with the single remark, that if the Thirty-one treat their respective pupils, in the daily routine of the schoolroom, with a tittle of the superciliousness and injustice, with which the first three sections of the “Remarks “ uniformly treat me, it is no wonder that, in order to preserve their ascendancy in school, they are obliged to put in practice the inexorable doctrines respecting “School Discipline,” contained in the fourth.

But it is useless and painful to devote further time to this section. If the whole vapory mass which shrouds its almost fifty pages, were condensed into a dozen drops, they would be found to consist of the same impure material as those I have already analyzed. I ‘shall close my observations upon it, therefore, by the exposure of one more of its misrepresentations, – a misrepresentation, which, I venture to say, was never surpassed in fatuity and blindness, by any criminations ever sent forth against public or private individuals.

The “new system,” – that is, teaching words before letters; – has been in operation in the Boston Primary Schools, about seven years. During this time, thousands of children, who had been taught in this way, must have passed from the Primary into the Grammar Schools. Hence, if the plan of beginning with words, instead of letters, is as unphilosophical and visionary, as it is represented to be, great practical mischiefs must have resulted any intelligent tribunal, on the arraignment of that system, would demand a statement of those mischiefs, with specification and circumstance. Such a case, the “Remarks” bring forward; and although it is but one, yet it is a ease apparently so flagrant in its character, that the Thirty-one seem to have relied upon it, as a substitute for numbers, and as sufficient, by its own force, to silence all opposition, and to close the controversy, at once and forever. I give the case in their own words:

“The following instance, which occurred a few weeks since, though perhaps, an extreme case, well illustrates a large class of cases, in which there is a deplorable neglect of spelling. A girl in her tenth year, presented herself for admission into one of the Grammar Schools, with a certificate of qualification from the district committee. The master gave her to read, the sentence beginning with the words, ‘Now if Christ be preached,’ &c. The third word she called ‘Jesus,’ and persisted in saying it was so pronounced. She was requested to spell it; the master, at the same time, pointing out the first letter. This letter she called ‘Jesus.’ The first letter of the alphabet was pointed out; the pupil uttered ‘and;’ the second letter was shown her; ‘but,’ was her response. The letter *m*, she called ‘man.’ She was sent to the assistant teachers of the school, who found her totally ignorant of the alphabet. The master sent her back to the Primary School, with her certificate endorsed, ‘not qualified; can be admitted only by the authority of the sub-committee of the Grammar School.’” –*Remarks*, p. 99.

The name of the girl referred to, is Eliza Ingram, a daughter of Mr. G. Ingram, Boston. On the 29th day of March last, she belonged to the Primary School taught by Miss H. E. Moore. On that day she was examined by Dr. John Odin, Jr., of the Primary School Board, and a certificate of qualification to enter the Grammar School, was given her. She was rejected by Mr. Barnum Field, of the Franklin School. The account in the “Remarks”

states, that "The master sent her back to the Primary School, with her certificate endorsed, 'not qualified; can be admitted only by the authority of the sub-committee of the Grammar School.'" "A slight confusion of genders occurs here. According to the statement of Dr. Odin, Mr. Field sent back the certificate of a *boy*, declaring that she was "not qualified," &c.

Now the following certificates from the father of Eliza, and from her past teachers prove, that she was taught on the "old system," of letters before words; and not on the new system" of words before letters. The statement of Dr. Odin proves that she was well qualified when she was rejected.

BOSTON, Oct. 11, 1844.

This certifies, that the first school which my daughter Eliza attended, was the Infant School kept by Miss Ball, in Theatre alley. She went there from one to two years.

G. INGRAN.

I have a distinct recollection of Eliza Ingram, and of her attendance at my Infant School, when it was located in Theatre alley, several years ago. She did not know her letters when she entered, but while in the school, (a period of more than a year, I think,) she learned the alphabet, and commenced with words of two or three letters. My mode of teaching was then on the old plan, requiring the names of all the letters to be thoroughly learned before commencing with words.

L. M. BALL,  
Teacher of Franklin Infant School.

*Boston, Oct. 10, 1844.*

Dear Sir: With regard to the inquiries which you yesterday made respecting a little girl named Eliza Ingram, I can only say that she was admitted into my school during the year 1840; and remained with me two or three months. At the time of her admission, she was perfectly familiar with the alphabet, and qualified to enter the first division of the fourth class; which class was then reading in the first reading lessons of "Lee's Spelling-Book."

Yours, respectfully,  
*Friday morn, Oct. 11th, 1844.*

CATHRINE G. PRATT.

BOSTON, October 11, 1844.

Sir: I have no recollection of the particular time in which Eliza Ingram entered school, but should think it might have been in the year 1840. At the time of her admission, she was perfectly familiar with the alphabet, and was found qualified to enter the second division of the third class. She was one who made slow progress, as her attendance at school was most irregular. Her usual manner, when reading, was to spell each word, (silently,) before pronouncing it.

Yours, respectfully,

T. M. B. WOODWORTH.

The following extracts are from a letter of Miss Moore:

"It is with pleasure that I comply with the request contained in your letter, which I received this morning, to make a statement on paper, of what I know with regard to Eliza Ingram. She entered my school, May 1, 1843, in the second division of the third class. She could then spell

simple words, and read the first lessons in the First School Book. In reading, I perceived, she spelled her words, all of them. I endeavored to correct that habit, for she appeared to think she could not pronounce the smallest word without spelling it. She seemed to be familiar with the letters, and I have never observed, at any time, that she was ignorant of the names of any of the letters.” “She says she was told to spell the words to herself before she pronounced them. When she first came to me, I said to her, (with out knowing any thing of her previous instruction,) that I should think she had been taught to read by spelling, instead of reading the words first.”

*To the Sub-Committee of the Primary School Board:*

Gentlemen, – In accordance with your request, I will endeavor to give you the language used by me in the statement of facts to the Board, touching the case of the girl noticed in the “Remarks” of the Masters, as sent to the Grammar School.

I stated, that the history of the girl could be traced back to her first entrance into any school; and that her first teacher, several years ago, taught her the alphabet and words of two or three letters; and that her successive teachers declare that she knew her letters, and was capable of reading easy words; that my first knowledge of her, was when I gave her a permit to enter the School for Special Instruction, on the first of May, 1843. I then gave the following account of her course, which I have from her teacher. When she entered the school, she was placed in the second division of the third class, could spell easy words, and read the first lessons in “My First School Book.” In reading, she had the habit of spelling all the words before pronouncing them; and at no ignorant of the, letters of the alphabet. In August, 1843, she was advanced to the first division of the third class; and in November following, to the second class. While in this class, the habit of spelling before pronouncing was eradicated. The only difficulty remaining was, her being so confused, when spelling a word wrongly, as to be unable to correct the error; but before she left the class, she overcame this infirmity sufficiently to spell well. January 1, 1844, she became a member of the first class, and would learn a lesson, and read as correctly, and with as much expression, as any child in the class, particularly in verse, as she seemed to acquire the sentiment more readily than the other children. If a new lesson was to be read, she would hesitate, be confused, and make mistakes, till she had learned the sense, and then she was as ready as any one. She had, from a peculiar organization of mind, the habit of using synonymes in her reading, (frequently words better than the text.) She was the best arithmetician in the school, readily answering any question in Emerson’s First Part. She had likewise a readiness in printing letters and words on her slate, which was quite creditable, and induced her teacher to urge her forward, that she might sooner enjoy the advantages of a Grammar School.

This girl, thus qualified, was presented for my examination, on the 29th of March, 1844, in company with nine other children comprising the first class; – her teacher, at the time, expressed a fear that she might not appear sufficiently well to receive a certificate, because she was so readily confused, and when in this state of mind, apt to commit errors. I spent upwards of an hour in the examination. She appeared so well prepared in all the branches requisite, and in some, if not all, so superior to her classmates, that I did not hesitate to give my certificate, and directed her to go to the Franklin School. A few days after, a certificate which I had given to a boy of the same class, was handed to me, on which was endorsed, “not qualified; can be admitted only by consent of the sub-committee of the school,” or words to the same effect. Whether signed

by the Grammar Master, or not, I cannot say; but was told it was for this girl. So long had I been accustomed to make examinations in the Grammar and Primary Schools, that I felt a confidence in having done right; and such a summary return of my certificate only confirmed me in my impression. I then requested the teacher to receive her back, if she should apply, and continue to instruct her, intending to make application at some other school. She did not, however, return to the school immediately; in fact, I was not aware of her being there, until the chairman of the Board, some three weeks since, called my attention to the case as reported in the "Remarks," when I requested him to visit the school immediately, with me, and make inquiry of the teacher. We found her as unprepared as myself for so bold and unwarrantable an attack. The teacher told us the child was then in her seat. We questioned the child as to her examination at the Grammar School; she said she was confused; and when asked what the words "and," "but," &c., were, pronounced them correctly, for the inquiry of the master was, "What's that?" pointing to the word. We examined her in reading, spelling, and the letters of the alphabet. The chairman said she was fully qualified for the Grammar School; and when we learned she had had but about six weeks' instruction since her rejection in April, he declared, that she must have been qualified then. She was detained at home, by the sickness of her father, until the 1st of July.

Subsequently, I requested three of the masters who signed the "Remarks," to visit the school with me, and satisfy themselves as to the case; and I am happy to say, that, after a thorough examination of the qualifications of the girl, they expressed themselves as perfectly satisfied that she now knows the letters of the alphabet, and is qualified for the Grammar School. One of the gentlemen thought she might have learned all in six weeks! the other two, that she must have known her letters in April, but, owing to some peculiar circumstances, was prevented doing herself justice. I said the same to the Board. I also said to the Board, that though the high character and standing of this school, (inferior to none of its class,) the untiring and devoted efforts of a thorough teacher, and my own personal interest in the school, had thus publicly been libeled, I was willing to look at the case in a charitable light, and considering the position of a timid girl in a new and large place, filled with two hundred or more boys, before whom she was to be examined, I was willing to allow that her natural sensitiveness may have overpowered her, and caused the result spoken of in the pamphlet. I invited any and all of the committee to examine the case for themselves; and if, after the most rigid examination, they could not sustain me, then indeed should I be amenable to their reproof, and unworthy of a seat at their Board. To all the facts I had stated, I held myself ready to make affidavit.

Very respectfully, yours,  
*Boston, Oct. 24, 1844.\**

JOHN ODIN, Jr.

Thus it appears, that the *one* special case which the Thirty-one Boston schoolmasters, have adduced to prove the manifold mischiefs of teaching *words* before *letters*, and the only one which they have ventured to set forth with specification and circumstance, turns out to be a case where the *letters* were taught before *words*! Happy peroration, after such an exordium and such ratiocination! Human ingenuity could never have conceived a more felicitous conclusion to such an argument; nor could poetic license itself have invested the whole with a more appropriate charm. The pertinency of the evidence tallies



with the soundness of the reasoning; and the fact is kindred to the logic. If, for once, I may be classical with these gentlemen, so many of whom “have enjoyed all the literary advantages of the college or the university,” (*Remarks*, p. 24,) I would quote to them the lines of Horace, – the letter and the spirit of which, they have so admirably exemplified:

----- “*servetur ad imum*  
*Qualis ab incepto processerit, et sibi contet.*”

\*The above certificates are open to the inspection of any one who wishes to see them.

A sub-committee, appointed for the purpose, specified seven topics for inquiry. In regard to the first six of these topics, the committee propounded corresponding questions to the teachers of all the Primary Schools. Each Primary School teacher “gave an immediate written reply without having an opportunity to consult or advise with any other.”

Premising that I refer to this controversy between the Thirty-one and the Primary School Committee, only for the purpose of giving publicity to important facts connected with the subject of teaching young children to read, I proceed to state the topics, in their order, which were proposed for inquiry, together with the facts elicited, as both appear in the Committee’s report.

“First. It is stated, [in the “Remarks” of the Thirty-one,] to be the case to too great an extent, in the schools of our city, that the elements are not taught.

“Second. That this neglect, (of teaching ‘the elements,’) is ‘owing, in part at least, to the system of teaching, or rather want of system, in the Primary Schools.’

“Third. That the course of instruction pursued in these schools, leads to ‘a great neglect of spelling.’

“Fourth. That the books used in the Primary Schools are not adapted to the wants of these schools.

“Fifth. That children are taught, in some of our Primary Schools, ‘to read, without making them at all acquainted with the letters.’

“Sixth. That the information of these Masters as to the mode of instruction is derived from ‘repeated inquiries made in many of the Primary Schools of the city.’

“Seventh. An instance of a case is given to illustrate ‘a large class of cases,’ and as tending to show that ‘there is a deplorable neglect of spelling’ in our Primary Schools.”

From the replies obtained from the Primary School teachers, it appears,

“First. That in all the Primary Schools in this city, the elements, or alphabet, are taught in the fourth or lowest class.

“Second. That in no single instance are the children taught ‘to read without making them at all acquainted with the letters.’

“Third. That in the opinion of the teachers, the system of the books used in the schools does not lead to a neglect of spelling; and all the teachers, without an exception, teach the children to spell.

“Fourth. The teachers approve of the books now used by them in the schools, and consider them adapted to the capacities of the children; and in this connection your committee would state, that of the hundred and seventeen teachers there are only three who give an unqualified objection

to the books and system; nine others qualify their answers by suggesting what they think would be an improvement in the books and system; – their principal objection being, that the words are not divided into syllables in the first book.

“Fifth. That, during the last six years, not over twenty visits have been made by the Masters of the Grammar Schools to the Primary Schools. Six of these visits were made by the supposed author of these statements, in the latter part of last June, and he then made inquiries as to the mode of instruction. The other visits, with one or two exceptions, had no reference to the method of teaching.

“Sixth. Not any of the teachers have known or heard of children being sent from the Primary to the Grammar Schools ignorant of the alphabet, excepting the ease mentioned in the pamphlet.

“Seventh. Only forty-six of the children sent from our Primary Schools to the Grammar Schools, within six years, have been rejected; of these, ten were rejected at one time *because they did not read loud enough*; the rejection of nearly all the others was said to be owing to some defect in *reading*. Your committee have found, that thirty-four of the number rejected for want of qualifications were sent from the *Intermediate* Schools, which are not ranked as *Primary* Schools, but designed to take up and prepare for the Grammar Schools, a class of children older than those belonging to the Primary Schools; these, therefore, being an exception to the Primary Schools, should not be regarded in the Report. Deducting, therefore, thirty-four, from the whole number, forty-six, will leave twelve rejected from the Primary Schools for want of qualifications, during the six years. This certainly cannot justify the idea which is entertained by some that ‘it is not uncommon for children to be rejected for want of qualifications.’ Your Committee would add, that deficiency in spelling has never been the reason for such rejection, *in a single instance*. During these six years, there have been sent from our schools to the Grammar Schools about eight thousand children.”

In regard to the seventh topic of inquiry, the Committee presented the letter of Dr. Odin. (See ante, pp. 116-118.) The Committee then proceed as follows :

“Your Committee deem it unnecessary to make many comments in relation to these replies; the answers of the teachers are plain and to the point, and that of Dr. Odin sufficiently conclusive.

“We would however remark, that the small number of rejections within six years does not indicate a deterioration in the schools, but tends to confirm the observation of his Honor, the Mayor, that the improvement of the higher schools is attributable, in part, to the improved condition, and better preparation of the children on admission from the Primary Schools. There is an apparent inconsistency between the statements of the masters and the opinion of the Mayor, which opinion these masters have quoted in the former part of their ‘Remarks,’ and by that quotation signified that they believed his observation to be correct. The Board will perceive, from the facts presented, the direct opposition of all the statements of the teachers to all the statements in the pamphlet.”

I leave these averments of the Committee, without comment of my own.

P. S. On p. 104 of this Reply, I stated a little too strongly that Dr. Howe says he could not teach the Blind in any way, but that of giving them whole words at first, – because having fewer senses, they cannot be abused to such an extent as other children can.” I meant, not that it would be *physically* impossible so to teach them, but that it would be *morally* impossible for any intelligent person, acquainted with both modes, and with the differences of success attending them, to teach the Blind letters before *words*.

There is also, p. 103, a slight discrepancy between one sentence in the Reply, and the paragraph in my Lecture on Spelling-books, to which it refers, – the latter being stated in the alternative, the former not. A regard for exactness induces me to notice these slight departures from strict accuracy. H. M.

## Note from Internet Publisher: Donald L. Potter

February 1, 2013, Odessa, TX

I will keep my comments brief and to the point. The fundamental issue between Horace Mann and the Thirty-one Boston Schoolmasters is the never-ending one between teaching reading as an alphabetical system where letters and combinations of letters represent sounds and an ideographic system (hieroglyphics) where shapes of words represent meaning directly without reference to the powers of the letters.

Modern scientific research into reading acquisition is entirely on the side of the Boston Schoolmasters. I highly recommend Stanislas Dehaene's 2009 book, *Reading in the Brain* for the most up-to-date research. He completely demolishes the *word before letter approach*, as exemplified by all whole-word theorists from Thomas Gallaudet and Horace Mann (*The Mother's Primer*) in the 1830's to William Gray (Dick & Jane: look-and-say) and Arthur Gates in the 1930's to Frank Smith and Ken Goodman (Whole Language) in the 1970's to Gay Sue Pinnell and Irene Fountas (Guided Reading) and Barbara Mustafa (Whole to Part Phonics) today.

Teaching whole-words **before** letters creates a reflex on the right side of the brain that conflicts with the perceptual skills necessary to learning to read the words fluently (accurately and rapidly). It is the leading cause of normal children reading like children with dyslexia - and many being misidentified as dyslexic. The symptoms of a sight-word guesser and dyslexic reader are so similar that they are virtually indistinguishable. The only way I know to determine if a child has dyslexia is to teach him or her phonics and see if they learn to read. Many children diagnosed as dyslexics respond so well to phonics instruction that they often end up having to be reclassified as normal readers.

During Horace Mann's day, the spelling books were still used **after** the student were taught beginning reading with the word-first method so many students were able to somewhat repair the damage done to them by the word-first method. The key terms are word-first and letter-first (phonics-first). Analytical phonics (whole-to-part phonics, also called inductive phonics) is backwards because it sets up a conflict between a holistic (all at once) reflex on the right side of the brain, with a phonics reflex on the left side of the brain. For optimum results phonics should be taught before words, and the prevention of guessing should be a primary goal, if the highest reading achievement levels are the ultimate goal.

For a thorough study of *The Mother's Primer* and the issues involved in teaching word first versus letters first pace Geraldine Rodgers's Chapter 32 in her 1996 *The Hidden Story*. For your convenience, I have reproduced the whole chapter in the next part of this paper.

# The Hidden Story

## Chapter 32

### Regarding The Deaf-mute Method for Teaching Beginning Reading

By Geraldine Rodgers

It was Samuel Blumenfeld who discovered that the 1930 Scott, Foresman “Dick and Jane” readers were based on Gallaudet’s 1835 *The Mother’s Primer*, and that Gallaudet’s 1835 text had used a deaf-mute method to teach beginning reading to hearing children. Blumenfeld told that story that story in his excellent book, *The New Illiterates* (1973).

Gallaudet’s *The Mother’s Primer* was simply an adaptation for hearing children of the same teaching methods that Gallaudet had used in his school for deaf-mutes. Yet Gallaudet, most peculiarly, made no reference at all to his 1835 book to that extraordinary fact. The inference must be that by 1834 Gallaudet wanted to obscure the book’s nature. That is also most peculiar, and it certainly raises unanswered question.

However, as Blumenfeld pointed out, Gallaudet had openly stated the following in a book he had purchased five years earlier, in 1830, *The Child’s Picture Defining and Reading Book*, which was not a book for beginners:

“ This little volume, although originally prepared for the Deaf and Dumb, will be found to be equally adapted to the instruction of children in families, infant schools, common schools, and Sunday schools.”

The definitions in that 1830 book were not nor primarily of objects and activities whose spoken names unknown to hearing children. Instead, the book largely “defined” everyday things. Unlike deaf-mute children, hearing children did not need any such “pictures” or “context” definitions to learn the “meaning” of such words, since the words were already in their vocabularies as spoken words. Therefore, what Gallaudet must have been implying was that hearing children, who already had gone through some kind of alphabetic primer, could be taught to READ those simple printed words, that they already knew as spoken words, by the deaf-mute method, by sight-words “meaning,” instead of by letter “sound.”

It is certainly very interesting that E. L. Thorndike’s associate and middle-age graduate in 1919, Stuart A. Curtis, later wrote that the very first so-called *Picture Dictionary*, meant for primary grades, and that it was very like Gallaudet’s 1830 work. “Picture dictionaries” teach primary children with normal hearing to read printed words, that they already know as spoken words, buy the “meaning” of pictures, instead of by the “sounds” of letters. That is exactly what Gallaudet recommended for hearing children with his 1830 *The Child’s Picture Defining and Reading Book*. Since picture dictionaries for hearing were new in the 1920’s, it is only reasonable to assume that Curtis (through Thorndike’s influence?) must have known about Gallaudet’s 1830 work and was imitating it.

Blumenfeld pointed out in this 1973 book, *The New Illiterates*, that Gallaudet's 1835 *The Mother's Primer* was difficult to find in libraries. Since Blumenfeld had not been able to find a copy of the actual text, his very accurate conclusion that *The Mother's Primer* used a deaf-mute method had to be based only on reports in the literature of the period concerning the text.

However, I eventually did obtain a copy of the book itself from Gallaudet College in Washington, D. C., and made a painstaking statistical analysis of its contents. As Blumenfeld had accurately surmised, it was, indeed an application of the pure deaf-mute method for hearing children.

The pure deaf-mute method teaches a strictly controlled vocabulary of basic sight-words by pictures, and then employs context-guessing on new words. While context-guessing, the child makes a mental comparison of the new word to previously memorized whole words so as to see like parts, in order to fix the new word in the visual memory. The best label for that exercise is "visual phonics." Yet no auditory memory (true phonics) needs to be involved at all in that exercise, whether it is used by hearing children or by the deaf-mute students taught by the inferior Gallaudet/de l'Epee method.

My statistical analysis of the words in *The Mother's Primer* showed that Gallaudet used a "frustration level" for the introduction of new words, although Gallaudet made no reference to that fact. So far as we know, such "frustration levels" were not used in the earlier, less virulent sight-word "meaning" method primers. Sight – words "meaning method"-method primers had first appeared in 1826 and had flooded the market by 1835, when Gallaudet's pure-deaf-mute-method sight-word primer was finally published. (As my 1995 history demonstrates, Gallaudet was most emphatically part of the change-agent group which had been promoting both sight-word "meaning"-method primers and government control of education since 1826, and very probably was in a leadership role in that group.) The "frustration level" that Gallaudet used in *The Mother's Primer* is manifestly a deaf-mute-method device to promote correct context guesses in the meaning of "new" sight words.

In Gallaudet's *The Mother's Primer*, "new" words almost never compose more than ten percent of any selection. "New" words were embedded in the context that were almost always composed of ninety per cent or more of "old" words. It is obvious that the ex-teacher of the deaf-mutes, Gallaudet knew that a context bed of ninety per cent or so of old words was necessary to assure correct context guesses on the "meaning" of "new" words. In other words, Gallaudet set a "frustration level" for understanding the general meaning of a selection at the point at which the context bed of "old" words dropped below ninety percent of the total.

The idea of the ninety per cent "frustration" level for understanding the general context of a selection is present in so-called "individual reading inventories" which are used in individual oral testing. If children cannot correctly pronounce ninety per cent of the words in a selection, they are said to be reading below their "frustration level." That

means they are not absorbing enough of the meaning of the selection as a whole. The idea of using such a “frustration level” for twentieth-century hearing children was apparently introduced by one of the pre-eminent “reading experts,” Emmet Betts, possibly by the early 1940’s. Undoubtedly, Betts used it with no reference at all to the fact that it was a deaf-mute-method device.

The use of a ninety-per-cent frustration level also appeared, most interestingly, in William Scott Gray’s oral reading paragraphs in his Ph. D. thesis at the University of Chicago in 1917. Gray had originally prepared most of those paragraphs under the personal supervision of E. L. Thorndike at Columbia Teacher’s College in 1913-1914. Gray marked as “failing” those children who could not read aloud correctly ninety percent of any of his selections. Yet I had to take a word-count of Gray’s oral reading paragraphs to find that he was using the ninety-per-cent level as the cut-off point between passing and failing oral reading. Nowhere in Gray’s 1914 Columbia Teacher’s College master’s degree thesis, which explained how Gray had devised his paragraphs under Thorndike’s direction, was any reference made to the fact that Gray was using that ninety-per-cent accuracy cut-off point.

The phony phonics device that Gallaudet used in 1835, the mental comparison of a seen, new word to previously memorized whole words, in order to see the parts, along with guessing the meaning of a new word from the context. Of a selection, is the same whole-word guessing, phony phonics that has been used in America schools since the arrival of the two deaf-mute-method reading series written by William Scott Gray and Arthur I. Gates in 1930. It is also the same as the “intrinsic”, whole-word phonics proposed in 1925 by Arthur I. Gates who had been Thorndike’s 1916-1917 graduate students at Columbia Teacher’s College in New York from 1917 to about 1944. Gates discussed his so-called “intrinsic”, whole-word, guessing phonics in a 1925 article in the *Elementary School Journal*. The *Elementary School Journal* (previously called the *Elementary School Teacher*) was published at the University of Chicago where Thorndike’s ex-graduate student, William Scott Gray, and Thorndike’s one-time fellow student, and fellow psychologist, C. H. Judd, were then located.

“Intrinsic”, whole-word, guessing phony phonics is omnipresent in America schools today. However, the famous reading “expert” of Columbia Teacher’s College, Arthur I. Gates, certainly would not have bothered to write an article in 1925 in which he falsely claimed, in effect, to have invented such “intrinsic”, whole-word guessing phonics, if “intrinsic”, whole-word guessing phonics had already been in use in 1925 for hearing children.

There was a critical difference between Gallaudet’s 1835 *The Mother’s Primer*, which would be used for hearing children only in the first grade, and the deaf-mute series of reading books introduced for hearing children by Arthur I. Gates and William Scott Gray starting in 1930, even though the 1930 texts were modeled on Gallaudet’s book. Gallaudet’s 1835 book for hearing children could only take children through the first grade, unlike materials for deaf-mute children, which were intended to take hearing children, not just through the first grade like Gallaudet’s 1825 *The Mother’s Primer*, but

completely through the first three grades. During those three years, hearing children were to be so thoroughly conditioned to use the deaf-mute method that they would continue to read for the rest of their lives just like deaf-mutes, by “meaning,” and not by “sounds.”

After the circa-1826 switch from “sound” to “meaning” in beginning reading in America and Great Britain, the vocabulary in books for hearing children above the first grade had been too large for the deaf-mute method to work. The deaf-mute method only gives the illusion of success for hearing children if the printed vocabulary is small. Therefore, for many years after 1826, the failure of the deaf-mute method to work with normal-sized vocabularies above the first-grade level was hidden by a great emphasis on so-called “elocution.” Teachers demonstrated to their classes how to pronounce all the word sin the new, always very short, selections aloud to the children first. After that, the classes changed the short selections in unison, over and over. Then, finally, individual children read the short selections aloud, by which time they obviously had memorized most of the material. As discussed in my 1995 history, a British school inspector said that Welsh children about 1880 could go on “reading” a selection in English even if their books fell on the floor, and even if they spoke little English. Colonel Parker claimed that children in America in 1875 had so over-practiced their reading books that they could chant the selections in their sleep!

When people today see selections in nineteenth century reading books with elaborate syntax and difficult vocabulary, they wrongly assume that nineteenth-century children must have read very well to have been given such material. They are completely ignorant of the teacher-imitating and “chanting” methods used to “teach” such selections.

The “elocution” nonsense succeeded in masking the failure in 1826 to 1870 “meaning” method readers through the first three grades. At the fourth level and higher, a phonic analysis of words appeared, not for decoding words but further to promote “elocution.” By exposure to the “elocution” phonics in the fourth- and higher-level books, some of the children who stayed in school long enough finally did learn to read independently by “sounds,” instead of by memorized sight-word “meaning.” Yet even at the higher levels the class chanting continued. Ferdinand Buisson of France, who visited American schools in the summer of 1876, while attending the 1876 Philadelphia exposition, said he had witnessed it “many times,” and he did not mean just in the lowest grades.

To a large extent, the inability of the 1826 deaf-mute method to stand on its own continued to be the case even when phonics markings finally appeared at fourth grade and above. Even Nila Blanton smith quoted a remark from the nineteenth century stating that upper-grade students could not use phonic markings on new printed words without help from their teachers.

However, after silent reading was promoted for beginners in 1870, the memorization chanting that had appeared after 1826 and that was done in the name of “elocution” began to fade. In its place, “supplemental phonics” instead of “elocution” began to spread as the aid in memorizing “new” printed words, but such “supplemental phonics” was originally used above the beginning first-grade level. Its original nature was outlined in the 1883 Boston reading curriculum, and it consisted of the comparison of whole-words to each other in order to see like parts, or, in other words, phony phonics.

While a whole-word, phony phonics, approach had appeared casually in reading books before 1883, such a carefully worked-out teacher's guide for its use as the 1883 Boston material had never appeared in print before, so far as I have been able to determine. That careful 1883 Boston presentation of the deaf-mute-method, "phonics" suggests input from William James, since some portions of that same 1883 document which have been quoted sound as if they were written by William James. The fact that E. L. Thorndike later wrote a similar article listing at length the "phonograms" that would be useful in such whole-word phony phonics suggested a tie from Thorndike to the 1883 Boston reading curriculum with its similar material, a tie to Thorndike's former teacher and close friend, William James, and a tie to the deaf-mute method, which relies on comparison of whole words to each other, to see like parts, in order to promote memorization of those words.

Yet such whole-word, phony phonics drill, which had been largely above first grade after 1870, metamorphosed into true, but supplemental, phonics drill at the first grade by 1900. In addition, after massive spelling failures from the Colonel Parker/Quincy influence from about 1875, massive spelling drill with an emphasis on true phonics re-entered American schools at second grade and above, starting about 1885. That "sound" emphasis in spelling only lasted until about 1900, when it was hounded out of schools by "experts" such as Columbia Teachers College Professor Suzzallo. Nevertheless, in beginning reading instruction, from about 1900, massive "supplementary" true phonics drill did come into use in first grade.

However, after the appearance of the deaf-mute-method text in 1930, no such "sound"-loaded exercises of any kind were allowed to remain in first-grade (or in any of the grades). Only Gates' phony "intrinsic", or whole-word, guessing phonics was permitted, and it used no true "sound" whatsoever since it was only the word-attack exercise of a poorly-taught deaf-mute, who was drawing on a sight-word bank of memorized "meaningful" whole words to use in that exercise.

It was in contrast to the failure of the 1826 and 1870 deaf-mute methods to work above the first grade level, without the help of such devices as "changing" or supplementary phonics, that the 1930 deaf-mute-method series were finally able to control the printed vocabulary in all their books for hearing children as rigidly as the printed vocabulary is artificially controlled for deaf-mutes. That only became possible in 1921, after Thorndike had identified the 10,000 commonest words in spoken language (even though Thorndike's count was on printed materials). Spoken language is the language that hearing children already know and use, and it is the language that composes more than 98 per cent of any written text, even for adults.

The 1930 deaf-mute-method series were constructed so that they could take children straight through the entire first three years of school, by the use only of an extremely unnatural, rigidly-controlled, high-frequency, and very tiny printed vocabulary of some 2,000 words, and by the use of massive context-guessing, whole-word, so-called "phonics." By the end of third grade, the series would "teach" as printed whole words some 2,000 words from Thorndike's list of the 10,000 commonest words (out of the half-



million words in English). Once acquired, that 2,000-sight-word bank, which compose about 95 per cent of most texts, would make future use of context-guessing and phony phonics on unknown printed words very reliable, if any “new” printed words were already in the “reader’s” spoken vocabulary.

Students were also supposed to work out the meaning of any truly new words which were not already in their spoken vocabularies from the context of the selection, and then added the truly unfamiliar word to their reading (and spoken) vocabularies by the use of whole-word phony phonics. The fact that most students failed to increase their vocabularies with the deaf-mute method is obvious from the extremely low “reading comprehension” scores that began to turn up by the 1940’s at the high school level and above, and which low scores we are getting today.

Controlled-vocabulary books through the first eight grades were very shortly added to the 1930 series, which originally had only covered the first three grades. Rigid vocabulary control then took over all grammar-school textbooks and eventually even high-school textbooks. Children left high school with knowledge of only high-frequency words and with varying degrees of the ability to use context-guessing and whole-word (actually silent) phony phonics.

During the first three years of school, while only “meaning” conditions reflexes were being set up, and while all true “sound” in reading was being totally avoided, children were to be sufficiently drilled in context-guessing and phony phonics skills so that they would automatically and permanently avoid the use of “sound” apart from “meaning” in reading. That is what was so lethal about the 1930 deaf-mute series, in contrast to earlier materials, which had used sight-words. The 1930 materials were written so as to avoid the use of the “sound” of print, apart from its “meaning.” All through school and for the rest of the students lives. “Skill” texts in reading instruction above the primary grades are still scrupulously constructed so as to employ only whole-word phony phonics.

Since shortly after 1930, rigid vocabulary and syntax control in all elementary school textbooks has served to protect the deaf-mute method from much-deserved attack, because that rigid control has hidden much of the deaf-mute method’s terrible failure. The academic disease of vocabulary and syntax control has become so pervasive today that some text written for the high-school level appears instead to have been written for the simple-minded. The defects in resultant adult vocabularies (and syntax) are now showing up in such places as *The New York Times*, where, for instance, a recent vocabulary error of a reporter (and his editor!) was the use of the adjective “ramshackle,” for the very, “ransack.”

As a result of the 1930 deaf-mute-method reading books and their successors, and of rigid vocabulary and syntax control in other textbooks, and for the first time in history anywhere in the world, hearing children have been taught just like poorly taught deaf-mutes. Enormous numbers of hearing children in English-speaking countries have gone through their entire schooling with no use of true “sound” whatsoever.

It was when E. L. Thorndike of Columbia Teacher's College finally identified the 10,000 commonest words, listed in his 1921 *The Teacher's Word Book*, that it immediately became possible to write reading books which used only the very highest frequency words, and to avoid the need to use "supplementary" phonics. The first 1,000 of those most common words had already been identified when Ayres published his 1915 *A Measuring Scale for Ability in Spelling*. Yet Ayres' 1,000 words occupied only about 90% of a page of print. The "experts" at that time obviously considered it desirable to know additional high-frequency words to bring the total to about 95% of a page of print. Hearing children could be "instructed" more easily with the deaf-mute method with a large sight-word bank.

The 95% level is what individual reading inventories today identify as the "instructional level," just as they identify 90% as the "frustration level," and 98% as the "independent level."

That 98% "independent" level is also very interesting because most people taught by "sound" will read, almost unflinching and just like computer software, at 100% accuracy, not 98% accuracy. Yet the vast majority of those whose reading vocabularies have been artificially controlled by the deaf-mute "meaning" method will read less than 100% accuracy. An accuracy score of 98% does not demonstrate that such readers are reading "independently," or that the readers have successfully memorized for their "meaning" (out of the half-million or so words in English) some 9,000 printed words which covers about 98 of any page of print.

It is very easy to test such oral reading accuracy by blocking out 100-word sections on material which is going to be read aloud at some kind of gathering, when copies of that same material are available in the audience. Two errors on a 100-word section represent 98% accuracy; five errors 95% accuracy, and so on. It is surprising to find how often errors are made on the very simplest words, either because they were simply learned wrong in primary school, or because that part of the print was jumped over and ignored as a result of "psycholinguistic guessing." I have often scored percentage of word accuracy when something is read out loud in public while I am holding a copy. For the most part readers older than I am, who would have been in first grade in 1930 or earlier, read at 100% accuracy. Readers younger than I am, and who would have learned by the deaf-mute method which took over American schools by the early 1930's, almost always read at only about 95% accuracy to 98% accuracy, and occasionally even sink below 95%

After Thorndike had identified the words which compose 95% of a page of print, beside those which compose 98% of a page, total vocabulary control for hearing children through the first three grades became possible for the first time. Every one of those printed words which accounts for about 95% of almost any page of print could be taught to hearing children solely by their "meaning," in the exact same way that a deaf-mute learns his sight-words, never by "sound." The meaning of the unknown words on a page beyond 95% or so of memorized sight-word could then be guessed from the context, and memorized by the use of whole-word phony phonics. Hearing children could then be taught to read in exact the same way as badly-taught deaf-mute children are taught to read, purely by "meaning," and with absolutely no use of true "sound" whatsoever.

Thorndike's 1921 work did identify those crucial words that occupied from about 90% of a page (Ayers' 1,000 commonest words) to about 95% of a page (about another thousand words). Thorndike also identified those words, which occupied up to about 98% (which are at a maximum, only about 9,000 out of the 10,000 commonest words that Thorndike listed). In later books Thorndike purported to list the 20,000 most common and the 30,000 most common words. Yet the additional words Thorndike listed had to be only a sampling from the actual sets of words at the lowest frequency. If Thorndike had sampled other texts than the ones he did, he should logically have turned up different words in the very lowest frequencies. At even lower frequencies than Thorndike's 30,000, of course, are most of the half million or so words in English. Thorndike included no words beyond his purported 30,000 level.

Yet it is the last 2% of words on a page which are most important, those beyond 9,000 frequency, and it is those words which carry the most meaning in almost any selection. Unless such words are already in the vocabulary of a person who has been taught to read by the deaf-mute method, it is very likely he will be unable to "decode" and therefore to learn those words by the use of his clumsy "intrinsic phonics."

In his 1925 article in the *Elementary School Journal of Judd's and Gray's* University of Chicago, Gates had recommended the use of his so-called and presumably newly-minted "intrinsic" phonics instead of the supplementary but true, sound-bearing phonics which was the norm in the 1920's. Gates' "intrinsic phonics" finally officially appeared in Gray's 1930 readers (and Gates' own 1930-1931 Macmillan series). With the advent of the 1930 Gates' so-called "intrinsic" phonics, true phonics ("sound") in beginning reading was once again replaced by "meaning," and the result was once again replaced by "meaning," and the result was massive reading disability.

With Gates' "intrinsic phonics," an unknown new meaning-bearing words was to be carefully and deliberately embedded in the context of a selection of previously memorized sight-words which had been learned by pictures or objects, or from previous context-guessing. "Intrinsic phonics" meant that the whole, new, meaning-bearing word was to be compared in memory to the parts of similar meaning-bearing sight-word already filed in memory, so to as help in memorizing the appearance of the new word and so as to tell the words apart. Yet the meaning of the new word was to be derived "intrinsically" from the context of the selection in which it has been so carefully embedded. (That is also how Gallaudet's deaf-mutes were taught new, soundless words, after they had learned a basic sight-vocabulary from pictures) Obviously, "intrinsic phonics" was not only an exhausting exercise for a child, but it also demanded a nit-picking vocabulary control by the "authors" of all reading instruction materials. No previously untaught words could be allowed to show up by accident in that context-bed of old words. In addition, each "new" word had to be repeated in the "story" a "scientifically" correct number of times, so that it could be memorized. Such rigid vocabulary control lowered the content of those materials to imbecilic levels.

In his 1930 book, *Interest and Ability in Reading*, The Macmillan Company New York, Gates described all the research work that had been done in the 1920's to decide on was the optimal number of times to repeat new sight words in stories so that the "new" sight words could be memorized. Gates' group had studied the results of work on that "problem" with children with intelligences ranging from subnormal to well above normal, and, most meaningfully, they also studied the optimum number for deaf-mute children. Could there be any clearer admission that the Gates and Gray introduced for hearing children in 1930 was identical to the method Gates' researchers were using for deaf-mute children? The only reason for the differences in the "optimum" number of repetitions. For hearing children in comparison to deaf-mute children was that the hearing children already knew the words as spoken words, but the deaf-mute children had no vocabulary when they were beginning.

In her so-called "history" first published in 1934, Nila Banton Smith referred to William Scott Gray and Arthur Irving Gates as "giants," which is nauseating, because the "giants" Gray's Scott, Foresman 1930 deaf-mute-method series (and the "giant" Gates' parallel Macmillan series) plunged America into functional literacy after 1930.

America had enjoyed respite from about 1890 to 1930 from the functional literacy that had been the result of the "meaning" method in beginning reading which had initially been promoted by the first and far earlier group of highly-publicized "experts," starting in 1826. (That first movement to "meaning" and war against "sound" is discussed at length in my 1995 history.) There had been a partial return to phonics "sound" in the late 1860's, but it was squashed by the second group of "meaning"-endorsing "experts" starting in 1870 (As this book demonstrates, the second pro-"meaning" group succeeded by using James' "sentence" ideas).

The 1870-and-later group of pro-"meaning" experts, who promoted the sentence method, had also endorsed phony whole-word phonics, meant to be used only outside the "meaningful" reading lessons, "supplementally." That endorsement had left the door open to the "supplemental" use of real, not phony phonics by about 1890. In my 1995 history, I quote at length from a New York State source in 1905, which makes that evolution from phony ("meaning") to real ("sound") supplemental phonics very clear. [Florence Akin's 1913 *Word Mastery* and Lyda Williams 1916 *How to Teach Phonic* are good examples. Don Potter, 2/3/13, both available for free at [www.donpotter.net](http://www.donpotter.net)]

Yet even though supplemental true phonics had come back at the first grade about 1900, "meaning" reading books were still in dominant use and were still the only books recommended by Ph. D. "experts" such as those at Columbia Teacher's College and the University of Chicago. Nevertheless, despite such "meaning" primers, American children had learned really to read from about 1890 to 1930: by phonic spellers at second grade and above from about 1885 to 1930, and by some phonic reading series such as Wards' of the 1890's and the Beacon series of 1912. (Yet even those reading series made the mandatory bow to "meaning" by using sight words at the very beginning and by continuing to emphasize the importance of "meaning" all through their teaching-to-read programs.)

The fact of American literacy before 1930 from the use of “sound” in reading (or spelling) instruction after about 1885 or so is conclusively demonstrated by the massive popularity of silent movies, which had to rely on dialogue printed on the screen to carry the story line. Illiterates could never have followed – or enjoyed, and therefore paid to attend – those silent movies. Yet, almost immediately after 1930, the Gray and Gates intrinsic-phonics deaf-mute-method “meaning” readers drove supplementary phonics (“sound”) and any phonic reading series from America’s primary classrooms. Since the arrival of the “talkies” coincided with the arrival of the deaf-mute-method primers, no one ever realized that audience-reading abilities were dropping enormously.

If oral reading tests like the ones Gray composed under Thorndike’s direction in 1914 had been massively given and clearly scored (Gray obscured his scores in 1917), the failure of the 1930 deaf-mute-method readers would have been immediately evident. Nevertheless, the use of 1914-style oral reading tests effectively disappeared by 1930, and what were massively used instead were Thorndike 1914-style reading comprehension tests. The reason the oral tests were dropped is obvious. Ever since Gray’s and Thorndike’s 1914 work, the “experts” had to know very well that the results of the oral accuracy tests would completely discredit the deaf-mute-method readers. The “experts” had to know that if the public found out how inaccurate the oral reading was that was produced by the “meaning” method, the public, figuratively speaking, would very likely ride the “experts” out of town on a rail.

Despite the fact that supplemental phonics was successful about 1900, phonics in direct, and not “supplemental”, teaching of beginning reading had disappeared after the baneful arrival of the sentence method and defeat of Leigh phonics in the 1870’s. After the 1870’s, the only phonics that was “acceptable” was supplemental phonics which was always (at least technically, though not in fact) supposed to be subservient to “meaning” and to use only outside the actual reading of the “meaningful” story text. Although supplemental phonics evolved into true “sound” instruction, its users erroneously thought they were still primarily emphasizing “meaning” in beginning reading. Therefore the period from 1870 to 1930 remained at least officially, opposed to the use of “sound” in the direct teaching of beginning reading. The use of phonic “sound” was always supposed to be indirect, outside the “meaningful” story-reading lesson itself.

A clear split had been present in the 1880’s and 1890’s between the followers of the psychologists and “experts” who favored teaching reading for “meaning” in the first grade, and the followers of people like Rebecca Pollard, an elocutionist, who favored phonics, or “sound,” in the first grade. The conflict can be followed in the activists’ publication, *The Public School Journal*, from 1889 to 1893. The non-“expert,” Rebecca Pollard, had said the two reading methods of sight-words and phonics were contradictory, and could never be successfully combined. She was, of course, resoundingly correct.

Pollard’s belief was implicitly confirmed by Oskar Messmer’s 1903 German experiments, discussed in E. B. Huey’s *The Psychology and Pedagogy of Reading* (1908). Messmer turned up two kinds of readers: those who read by syllables, automatically, and those who read by whole words and guessing. He named the two

kinds, very appropriately, objective and subjective readers, obviously representing “sound” and “meaning,” although Messmer apparently felt they only stood for different stages of development. Yet at the time I did my sabbatical research in 1977-1978, I had never heard of Messmer’s conclusions, since they were not to be found in any of the “reading instruction” literature published after 1912, as will be discussed.

In my sabbatical research in September, 1977, to January, 1978, I observed and rated the teaching of reading in first grade on a scale from Code 1 for straight “meaning” to Code 10 for straight “sound,” most schools falling somewhere in between. I then tested the oral reading of about 900 second-grade children in these same schools in their own languages in this country and Holland, Sweden, Germany, Luxembourg, Austria and France. I sued for the oral reading test a 144-word portion of a copyrighted speed silent-reading test for 10 and 14 year olds, which I obtained the permission to use from the IEA (International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement) in Sweden in 1977, providing I mention them in any material I wrote concerning that use. I had the 144-word English portion translated into German, Dutch, Swedish, French and Icelandic by a commercial translating firm at my own expense, which permitted me to test in languages with the same Germanic and Latin roots from which English was derived. (It was not possible for me to observe and test in Iceland as I had originally arranged to do as a general strike in Iceland was called just as I arrived at the New York airport to go to Iceland. The flight instead went straight to Luxembourg, where I instead received permission to observe and test.

The great “discovery” of my 1977-1978 oral reading research was the fact that there are two distinct and opposite types of readers of alphabetic print (or mixtures of those types), as discussed in my previous unpublished books, some of which are *Why Jacques, Johann and Jan Can Read* (1979), *The Case for the Prosecution* (1981), and *A Counter Report* (1985), and my papers, one of which was *The Wary Reader’s Guide to Psycholinguistics: Subjective vs. Objective Readers* (1982). Yet, unknown to me until December, 1980, was the fact that my “discovery” was no discovery at all since Messmer had already published it in 1903, although Messmer did not express it in the terms I use (nor suggest the existence of mixtures of the two types). [*Why Jacques.....* and *...The Case for the Prosecution* are available on Amazon.]

My research showed that one type of reader reads by true phonics, “sound,” automatically (Code 10), and the other reads by sight-words and conscious guessing, “meaning,” (Code 1). In addition there are those types who have a conflicting mixture of the two reflexes “sound” and “meaning,” and who fall somewhere on the scale between Code 1 (“meaning”) at one end, and Code 10 (“sound”) at the other end. It is not just a question of type’s reading more easily than the other, but of one type’s being distinctly different from the other. On my test data, higher Code numbers consistently showed a different pattern of score when compared to lower Code numbers. The distinctive patterns even appeared when the low score of Code 3 was compared to the ever lower of Code 2.

I postulate that a further analysis in a graphic form may be possible to describe reading programs. The method I described then was on a horizontal scale of 1 to 10, representing the move from “meaning” to “sound.” However, a different analysis is possible, the one commonly used, from “analytic” to the “synthetic” approach. If the “analytic” to the “synthetic” approach formed a vertical scale, numbered like the horizontal “making” go “sound scale from 1 to 10, and it intersected at a mid-point with the mid-point of the horizontal scale, it would produce a graphic grid on which it would be possible to simultaneously and visually to place programs, not only for their “sound” or “meaning” emphasis, but for their “analytic” or “synthetic” emphasis.

Before writing my 1981 book, *The Case for the Prosecution in the Trial of Silent Reading Comprehension Test, Charged with the Destruction of America’s Schools*, I was astonished to find from an article by Myrtle Sholty in the University of Chicago’s *Elementary School Teacher* of February, 1912, that my 1978 “discovery” of two opposite types of readers was no discovery at all. It had been reported by Messmer in 1903 and had been confirmed by Sholty’s experiments published in 1912. Yet Sholty’s work, as well as Messmer’s, had virtually dropped from the literature. [Don Potter published Sholty’s paper on the [www.donpotter.net](http://www.donpotter.net) website. *The Case for the Prosecution...* is available on Amazon.]

I had originally learned of Sholty’s article, but with that description which masked its true nature, in the bibliography to W. S. Gray’s 1917 Ph. D. thesis at the University of Chicago. Gray’s material had been published as part of Charles H. Judd’s 1918 collection of papers on the teaching of reading, *Reading Its Nature and Development, Supplementary Educational Monographs Vol.2, No 4*. In December, 1980, I was doing research at the Library of Congress on most of the materials listed in Gray’s 1917 bibliography, and Sholty’s articles was simply one of many. From Gray’s description it was in no way remarkable.

Gray’s 1917 description so completely obscured the real nature of Sholty’s research that I was astonished, when I finally read Sholty’s actual 1912 article, to find that it contained my own 1978 “discovery.”

In Gray’s later and very long research summary in 1925, his misrepresentation of Sholty’s research became even worse than his 1917 material. Yet Gray – and his superior at the University of Chicago, the psychologist, Judd, and his former superior at Columbia Teacher’s College, Thorndike – must have known the real nature of Sholty’s research five years before Gray wrote his 1917 thesis. That is because, in 1912, Sholty’s research had been outlined with crystalline clarity in her article published by the University of Chicago in its education periodical.

Therefore, because of the blatant misrepresentation of the nature of Sholty’s 1912 article in the bibliography to Gray’s 1917 University of Chicago doctoral thesis (and in his later very long research summary in 1925), and because of Gray’s omission of any reference to Messmer’s 1903 finding, it is only reasonable to assume that Gray at the University of Chicago before 1917 (and his “superiors,” Judd at the University of Chicago, and

Thorndike at Columbia Teacher's College) were trying to hide what both Sholty and Messmer had reported: There are two opposite and mutually exclusive, kinds of reading (or mixtures of those kinds).

In her 1912 report on her own research Sholty had referenced to E. B. Huey's 1908 book, *The Psychology and Pedagogy of Reading*, which had briefly discussed Messmer's 1903 work that had turned up the two kinds of readers, "objective" readers (who obviously have "sound" reflexes), and "subjective" readers (who obviously have "meaning" reflexes). Yet Messmer's remarkable 1903 work has almost totally dropped from the literature in English except in Sholty's 1912 paper, and in the very brief discussion of Messmer's work in Huey's very long 1908 book. Any account of the real nature of Sholty's own research which referred to and enlarged on Messmer's work, has also dropped from the literature.

However, Messmer's research was mentioned in passing in Franz Biglmaier's article on reading instruction in Germany, *Comparative Reading*, 1973, John Downing, Editor, The Macmillan Company, New York. The chapters in Downing's book were contributions from people from various countries.

As discussed elsewhere, I found before writing my 1981 book that Henry Suzzallo of Columbia Teacher's College had discussed types of reading with his "triangle" in his 1913 article on teaching reading in the *Cyclopedia of Education*. Suzzallo implied that they might be only stages and made no reference to Messmer or Sholty.

Guy T. Buswell, as associate of the psychologist, Charles. H. Judd, at the University of Chicago, also referred to different types of reading in a 1922 text published at the University of Chicago, *Fundamental Reading Habits: A Study of Their Development, Supplementary Educational Monographs, No. 21*. Buswell concluded that different "types" of reading were merely different "stages" of development, and that they all culminated in one uniform goal: adult reading ability. Thus Buswell succeeded in 1922 in completely burying the fact that there is no one single kind of adult reading ability, but that there are two mutually exclusive kinds (or mixture of those kinds).

As discussed elsewhere, the "kinds" appear to consist of conditioned reflexes in the brain to either the right angular gyrus area (for "meaning) or the left angular gyrus area (for "sound), or to conflicting (and undesirable) mixture of such reflexes. A review of the literature sources strongly suggest that, by 1922, the psychologist "experts" knew all about the existence of brain-based, "conditioned reflex" explanation for the two different reading types that Messmer had uncovered in 1903, as I discussed at length I my 1985 unpublished book, *A Counter Report*.

I was in the *Elementary School Teacher* of the University of Chicago in February 1912, that Myrtle Sholty reported on her tests with three little girls half-way through second grade. The tests must have been done before 1912, probably after February, 1911. Of the three second-grade girls, two demonstrated that they could read words in parts. (Messmer's "objective" type, referred to in this history as "meaning."). However, all



three little girls at the University of Chicago experimental school were “helped” by context guessing, which was obviously necessary because of the small amount of phonics training used at the experimental school. Sholty specifically referred to Messmer’s research and noted that her research results were in line with his conclusions, that there were two kinds of readers: the objective who reads words in parts (Messmer implied by syllables – or “sound”) and who do not guess; and the subjective, who reads words only as wholes, and who are dependent on context – guessing (objective or ”meaning” method.)

It was in the academic year of 1911-1912 that Cattell’s and James’ close friend and ex-student, Thorndike, taught for the first time his course at Columbia Teacher’s College in New York, “Psychology of the Elementary School Subjects.” (Gates reported that fact in his article contributed to the February 1926, Thorndike honorary issue of the *Teacher’s College Record*.) Thorndike’s giving such a course certainly indicated his sharply increased interest in the subject of the psychology of elementary reading. It must have been about February of 1911 that Sholty did her research with three mid-second-grade girls at the practice school of Judd’s University of Chicago, which Sholty later reported in her February 1912 article.

It hardly seems coincidental that Gates reported that 1911 was the very year that Thorndike began his ten-year-long search for the 10,000 commonest words. It hardly seems coincidental that, with Thorndike’s list of commonest words. It would immediately become possible to write texts with a sufficient controlled vocabulary so that all children could be trained to read only whole words for “meaning,” just like Sholty’s third little student, instead of reading words in parts for “sound” like Sholty’s first two students.

Thorndike’s list of the 10,000 commonest words could (and DID) make it possible to turn almost all American hearing students into whole-word context-guessers, or Messmer’s “subjective” readers, like Sholty’s third little girl. The benighted Government report, *Becoming a Nation of Readers*, on page 11, unwittingly confirms that most Americans today are “subjective” readers just like Sholty’s third little girl, guessing unknown whole meaning-bearing words by mental comparisons to remembered whole meaning-bearing words, aided by the use of context meaning.

By the mid-1930’s, even children’s library books not only had controlled vocabularies but also had rigidly controlled “readability levels.” The “readability levels” removed the complex syntax once found in children’s books, such as those by Horatio Alger or by Robert Louis Stevenson. Materials published shortly after 1930 were a far cry in linguistic complexity from nineteenth-century children’s books, which after 1930 were usually served up in “adapted” forms. Materials published after 1930 were also a far cry from the cheap clapbooks sold in the eighteenth-century, which were read by children as well as adults, or from Psalms with their linguistic complexity. Yet the Psalms had been almost universally reading matter not only for adults but also for children for thousands of years, since before the time of Christ. It was not too long after the 1930’s that even high school texts were published with rigidly controlled so-called “readability levels,” and the “readability levels” in such high-school materials have been dropping lower and lower ever since.

The post-1930 carefully constructed linguistic monstrosities for children and for adolescents resulted in impoverished vocabulary and an inability to handle complex syntax. The ultimate result was the lowering of the nation's verbal intelligence. If anyone doubts that, collect at random newspaper articles from 1916 and do a comparative readability study with newspaper articles today. Also note the frequent misuse today of lower-frequency words whose meanings are not recall understand anymore by reporters (such as a 1955 *New York Times* article using "ramshackle" for "ramsack").

William James' contempt for language has certainly borne some very bitter fruit in the damage done to the English language by James "intellectual descendents". That damage is the direct result of the rigid vocabulary control in the deaf-mute-method which were first introduced by William Scott Gray and Arthur Irving Gates in 1930, and both men were clearly William James' "intellectual descendents."

It was through an interlocking group of such change-agents that William James' confusions on the nature of language finally succeeded in undermining American education. Gates had been a graduate and extremely close associate of James' devoted followers, Edward L. Thorndike and James McKeen Cattell. Gray had been a graduate student, not only of James' devoted follower, Thorndike, with whom Gray had worked on a close personal basis, but of Charles H. Judd. Judd had been a close associate for many years of Thorndike, with whom Judd said he had studied James' text before when both were undergraduates at Wesleyan. As shown elsewhere, Judd had an association with the psychologist, Cattell, over a period of a great many years.

If the charge that they were change-agents seems too extreme, consider the comments of one of the devoted followers of the Thorndike clique at Columbia, William V. Saunders, in his August 4, 1931 letter to *The New York Times* in response to criticism of "educators" by a famous author of dictionaries, Frank Vizetelly:

"...I have had the privilege to five years under the direct guidance of such men as Kilpatrick, Thorndike, Bagley, and Snedden, and of coming to primary acquaintance with the principles and philosophies of Butler, Dewey, Strayer and Cubberly.

I am not going to present an attack on several different institutions of our lives, as Mr. Vizetelly has done I am only going to attack his advertising of his interpretation of the propaganda which our leading (sometimes misleading, too, I must admit) educators must get published continually to force change which is essential to growth, which in turn is often used as a definition of life itself...."

So, according to a devoted follower of the Thorndike clique in August, 1931, the clique was definitely attempting in August 1931, and had been attempting for at least five years previously to "force change" by "propaganda" which was "sometimes misleading." Saunders' letter to *The New York Times* provided reliable testimony from an inside, sympathetic and contemporary sources, that members of the Thorndike clique were,

indeed, intentionally action as change-agents from at least 1926 to 1931, and it implies further that those members were acting more or less in unison. It is not without cause that a larger group of which these men were a part has been labeled “The Education Mafia.”

Note: I reread *The Hidden Story* in June of 2007. By January 5<sup>th</sup> of that year, I uploaded a YouTube video explaining the basic arguments presented in the book. Please feel free to view that video for more information. 2/4/13.

## Note from Internet Publisher: Donald L. Potter

February 2, 2013

I first read Miss Geraldine Rodgers' *The Hidden Story: How America's Present-Day Reading Disabilities Grew Out of the Underhanded Meddling of America's First Experimental Psychologist, Young William James, in the 1870's Under Cover of the Powerful Agassiz Clique* in early February 2002. It was a revelation that has conditioned all my research and classroom instruction in reading ever since.

I read Samuel Blumenfeld's 1973 *The New Illiterates* sometime before I started teaching public school teaching in 1985. At the time, I only got the idea that reading should be taught with reference to the sounds represented by the letters. In 1993 I started teaching Mr. Blumenfeld's *Alpha-Phonics* to bilingual students from first through sixth grade at the Burnet Elementary School in Odessa, TX. My success with that simple, yet complete method, convinced me early on of the benefits of teaching phonics-first over the whole-language methodology that was in vogue at the time.

It was Mr. Charlie Richardson of Long Island who was the connecting link between my practical classroom work with Blumenfeld's phonics method and the historical and theoretical work of Miss Geraldine Rodgers. Charlie recommended that I read Miss Rodger's massive three-volume history of reading instruction in America. I suppose I have since read everything Miss Rodgers has published. He also initiated the correspondence between Miss Rodgers and myself, which has been most fruitful and productive. I began my website in 2003 as a serious personal effort to inform my fellow educators concerning the importance of teaching reading "from the sounds" and the horrendous results of teaching reading "from the meaning."

After reading Miss Rodgers work, I became aware that the reading difficulties children were experiencing was the direct result of teaching methods that were popular in the schools. It was at that time that Charlie Richardson sent me a copy of Edward Miller's *Miller Word Identification Assessment* that purported to detect and measure artificially induced whole-word dyslexia. Initially, I question whether dyslexia could be induced artificially by faulty beginning reading instruction. According to Miss Rodgers, a student's reading strategies are determined by their initial reading instruction and are very difficult to change after second-grade. I wondered just how early the damage was being done. To find out, I observed a regular kindergarten class for a few weeks. To my utter dismay, the students were being drilled in sight-words and were expected to read predictable text using a wide variety of guessing techniques. To test Miss Rodgers' theory of two kinds of readers, we eliminated all sight-word memorization and put away the predictable texts the students were expected to read using the psycholinguistic guessing game techniques. We taught them 68 phonograms that include all the major spelling patterns in the English language. They also read special sentences I had written that used the phonograms they had mastered. The students' progress was amazing. Their first-grade teacher told me they were the best readers she ever got. From reports of their later grade level teachers, I was able to determine that they became very good students. I give credit to Miss Rodgers for helping me understand these critical factors in producing superior readers.

The modern term for cut and paste, deaf-mute, intrinsic phonics is "whole-to-part phonics." Barbara Mustafa's *Beyond Tradition Phonics* is a perfect example of such a method.

On page 561 of *The Hidden Story* Miss Rodgers gives a **comprehensive summary** of the truth about why much reading disability is “hidden,” that is goes unrecognized.

Silent reading comprehension tests” do not really test reading, provided the subjects have the ability to read at least a modest number of sight-words out of the half-million-or-so words in English: at upper grade levels, a thousand or so highest-frequency words which are 90% of most texts, or even as little, in very intelligent people, as 300 or so of the highest-frequency words which are 75% of most texts. What “reading comprehension tests” really test instead of reading ability is inborn intelligence, plus degree of attention.

All the high stakes testing (for example the Texas TAKS & STAAR) is silent comprehension tests, usually multiple choice. I recall a third grader one time who read on a low second-grade level. His teacher told the mother that he did not have a reading problem. In fact the teacher said he was one of the best readers in the class. The mother knew he had a serious reading problem because he missed lots of words when he read and could not remember his spelling words for the weekly spelling test. The Miller Word Identification Assessment for artificially induced whole-word dyslexia indicated that he had a severe guessing problem CAUSED BY having been taught sight-words in kindergarten and first grade. Every elementary teacher in my district is issued a set of high-frequency words, usually Dolch List words, for the students to memorize, specifically stating that they are not to sound-out the words, but rather memorize them for instant recall going from the visual form of the word to the meaning without regard to spelling. The mother was devastated, thinking that he would fail the TAKS test for third-grade. I looked her and remarked, “He will pass the test, but he will be there till the sun goes down.” [The test was untimed.] I knew that the boy was highly motivated and would use all the guessing strategies that he had been taught to select the most likely choice. A few weeks later, she came to me saying: “He passed! And he was there till the sun went down, just like you said!” Guessing is a slow way to take a test. The good phonic readers would simply read the text and answer the question - and go home early! Unfortunately, his teacher never realized that this bright student and his fellow classmates were all highly defective readers because her standards were defective. Stated as an aphorism: **“Defective methods measured by defective tests give defective reading scores.** He came to me for tutoring. We used Rudolf Flesch’s method of isolating the student from his word-guessing environment (quit outside reading) and taught him phonics from a beginning to advanced level using my free program, *Blend Phonics Reader: The Standard Edition*. He went on to become a very good reader once we had been able to erase the sight-word and replace them with a reading strategy that involved “looking at all the letters the right way, with no guessing.” He actually helped me perfect my *Reader*, for which I am grateful.

The cumulative high-frequency word effect is the element that enabled the deaf-mute-method function to produce semi-functional readers. Leonard Ayres explained this in his 1915 *Measuring Scale for Ability in Spelling*. Quoting Ayres (pages 10f):

These [1,000 commonest] words, together with the figures showing the frequency of appearance of each, per 100,000 running words, are given in List A beginning on page 12. The figures inserted after each 50 words show the cumulative frequencies from the beginning. Thus the first of these figures shows that the 50 commonest words are repeated so frequently that with their repetitions they constitute nearly half of all the words we write. The first 300 words make up more than three-fourths of all writing of this kind and the 1,000 words with their repetitions constitute more than nine-tenths of this sort of written material. (*The Hidden Story*, p. 478)

Miss Rodgers continues,

By reporting the cumulative statistics on those 1,000 highest frequency words, Ayres was able to demonstrate that the one thousand highest-frequency words compose over 90% of most texts. It was precisely that astonishing fact which made it possible to use the deaf-mute-method on hearing children, and not just in first grade, but all through their schooling and throughout their entire lives. (*The Hidden Story* 476).

You may wonder if the reading experts knew that the deaf-mute, look-and-say, sight-word, Dick and Jane readers produced a particular type of reader as Miss Rodgers claims. The answer comes from an unexpected confession by one of the leaders of the movement. This information is taken from Miss Rodgers' *History of Reading Instruction*.

Gray unwittingly confirmed that failure to understand the real nature reading skill was the reason for these deaf-mute-method texts. In *Teaching to Read, Historically Considered*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, Illinois: 1966, Mitford Mathews reported on the excellent first-grade reading at the end of the school year in a Chicago school about 1940 which was using the new phonetic Bloomfield method. Gray, then Dean at the University of Chicago, visited the class with the Press, first-grade children were picket at random to read orally from upper-grade books, and did so successfully, one boy pronouncing with ease, the word "satellite" from a sixth-grade book.

Mathews said:

Father Stoga asked him what the word meant and the child said it meant a big object in the sky. Dean Gray found this answer unsatisfactory, showing that the child was reading, that is pronouncing, quite beyond the vocabulary appropriate to his age, and not getting the sense of what he read. He explained to the other visitors that what the children were doing was in no sense remarkable. He said that reading experts had long known that children could read quickly be taught to pronounce words with remarkable glibness, but that real reading with understanding of what was read was another matter entirely. He pointed out that these children were mere word callers, that they were pronouncing well beyond their mental ages, and that they were heading straight for serious trouble later in their reading development.

Miss Rodgers continues her comments,

The child was actually demonstrating the oral reading accuracy which underlies a proper automatic conditioned reflex in reading, but Gray did not understand that. An obvious reason exists for Gray's remarks discounting the value of correct oral reading. That reason is the arrival of the silent reading comprehension test," and, with it, its incorrect interpretation. The reason for that incorrect interpretation will become obvious after the deaf-mute guessing methods history is outlined.

I would like to interject here an experience I had at a school where I was doing remedial work with several fourth-grade students. One of the girls scored very poorly on Mr. Edward Miller's *Miller Word Identification Assessment* for artificially induced whole-word dyslexia. This is a form of dyslexia that I believe is caused by teaching sight-words without reference to the sound represented by the letters. The practice of drilling students on sight-words like the Dolch or Fries Lists is very common in classrooms all across America. This girl could read the Holistic List (sight-words) on Mr. Miller's list, but have severe difficulties reading the simple regular short vowel words on the Phonetic List. I showed her classroom teacher the assessment. The teacher's

response was very interesting. She said that all oral language tests are invalid since the only test the schools care about are silent reading tests given at the end of the year. She further shocked me by saying, "Some of my worst oral readers are my best students!" I asked if the poor oral readers would ever enjoy poetry, which requires precise attention to the sounds and exact words. She commented that the kids would not be tested on their appreciation of prose or poetry. Miss Rodgers explains why this teacher's training had left her deficient in her ability to pass a valid judgment on a student's reading ability. (*The Hidden Story*, pages 622 to 623).

Almost endless examples could be given of simple words which the great majority of phonetically-taught first-graders can read and spell with ease, but which most "meaning" taught third graders cannot even read.

Yet most third-grade teachers do not even know that there is a real problem. If a child stumbles over a lower frequency word which has not already been taught, the teachers pronounce it and think the problem is solved, because most children can read their controlled-vocabulary sight-word reading books very well and can score very well on the phony standardized "reading comprehension" tests given annually. This is, of course, because only 1,000 words compose about ninety per cent of most reading materials. Once children know those 1,000 words, they are automatically reading above frustration level on most reading comprehension test materials. They are therefore able to guess the meaning of most of the unknown words from the context of the selection, and they can guess the answers to the questions. If third-grade teachers gave their "good" "meaning-trained" readers a list of low frequency words to read, which list would have no context help in guessing, they would be astonished at the degree of failure.

Children's inability to read independently only shows up on such oral word lists test or on the oral reading of paragraphs with unknown, low-frequency words whose meanings they cannot guess. Disabled "meaning"-trained readers cannot pronounce (and therefore cannot hear) such low-frequency words because they are not already in their spoken vocabularies.

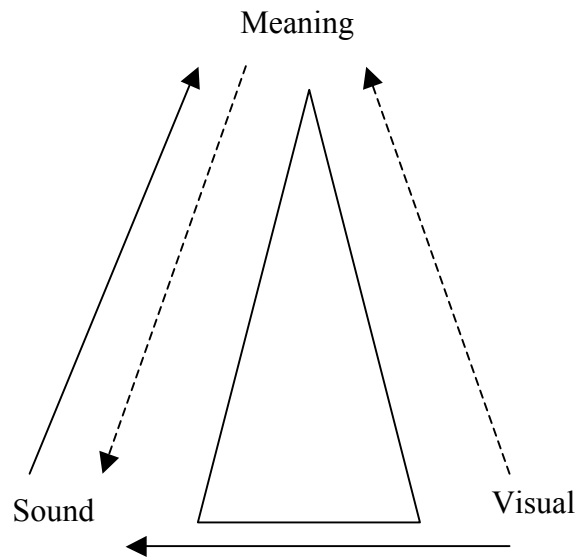
However, at about the fifth-grade, most "meaning"-trained children to achieve some success in using conscious, phony phonics on unknown words if they make an effort to do so, but they commonly sip such unknown words when actually reading to themselves silently, in order to avoid that unpleasant effort.

As a result, instead of accumulating vocabulary through their reading, as they should be able to do, "meaning"-trained children are arrested in their vocabulary development and become like badly deaf-mutes whose growth in vocabulary is so severely limited. Yet group oral-accuracy tests which could reveal the reading failure of the "meaning"-trained classes are almost non-existent. .... Reading comprehension tests are an invalid test of reading ability, whether they are used on "meaning"-trained or "sound"-trained classes.

This document as last revised by Donald Potter on May 12, 2014.

# The Reading Triangle

## Perceptual Routes to Meaning



1. **Clockwise** perceptual path: “Sound” approach to teach reading. The Objective Route: Visual to Sound to Meaning. No guessing. Largely left brain activity. Sequential.
2. **Counter clockwise** perceptual path: “Whole-word, sight-word “meaning approach to teaching reading. The Subjective Route: Visual to Meaning; Sound appearing as an afterthought. Guessing is built into this method. Largely right brain activity. Holistic.

Early American Psychologist “wrongly concluded that only one stop on such perceptual routes could be performed automatically, but that secondary stops had to be performed consciously. They mistakenly thought students might get stuck at Sound and not make it to Meaning. For this myth they created the term, “word callers.” Henry Suzzalo published this chart in 1913.

This is a *conflict diagram* because a student trying to read from the “meaning” and from the “sound” at the same time will experience a conflict. Students who are taught the “meaning” method first will usually experience difficulty learning to read with phonics. This is often misdiagnosed as dyslexia.

Note that the path between the “Visual” and “Sound” is shorter (easily automated), but the route from “Visual” to “Sound” to “Meaning” is two stop, whereas the “Visual” to “Meaning” is one stop; but to get from the “Meaning” to the “Sound” then requires guessing.