

**OVERSIGHT ON ILLITERACY IN THE
UNITED STATES**

HEARING

BEFORE THE

SUBCOMMITTEE ON ELEMENTARY, SECONDARY,
AND VOCATIONAL EDUCATION

OF THE

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March 10, 1986

The Honorable Augustus F. Hawkins, Chairman
Subcommittee on Elementary, Secondary and Vocational Education
House of Representatives
Rayburn Building - Room B 364 C
Washington, D. C. 20515

Sir:

Your support, and the support of your committee, for Senator Zorinsky's bill, The National Commission on Illiteracy Act, would be most appreciated.

Concerning the March 20 hearing of your subcommittee on illiteracy, I am enclosing my written testimony, which I will appreciate your including in the written record on the hearing.

I am also sending a copy of this material to Senator Zorinsky.

Very truly yours,


Geraldine E. Rodgers

Encl.

cc (with enclosure): The Honorable Edward Zorinsky
United States Senate
443 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, D. C. 20510

PHONICS FIRST

Talk Given at the Eagle Forum on September 21, 1985
Washington, D. C.
by Geraldine Rodgers

The Kurzweil Reading Machine “reads” books for the blind, turning print into human voice. We are born with what amounts to a Kurzweil Reading Machine in our heads. It just has to be programmed to read print by learning letter sounds.

Dr. Wilder Penfield, a neurosurgeon, said the conscious activity of the minds goes from the higher brain stem up into parts of the two sides of the brain. He called this conscious part of the brain the “higher brain mechanism.” Running from the brain stem up into the other parts of the two sides of the brain is another system he called the brain’s computer. We can decide to turn the switch on or off, listening to what our computers are doing, changing their behavior, or ignoring them, in which case the computers carry out an activity as we think about something else.

Dr. Hilda Mosse, the pediatrician/psychiatrist, said most of our daily actions, once learned, are handled by our brain’s computers. Nothing is ever learned without paying conscious attention to it WHILE being learned. Once learned, it can be done automatically, while we think of other things. These actions include walking, talking, tying shoelaces, typing, and many more including READING. Reading problems come from not being able to form necessary conditioned reflexes so our computers can do decoding automatically, or by establishing and practicing wrong reflexes, according to Dr. Mosse.

She said the “set” on meaning should not be interrupted when reading, once we learn how to turn print to sound. Our brains’ computers would function like the Kurzweil machine, automatically. Our minds should be totally filled with the ideas on the page for maximum reading comprehension. A reader who starts to think about decoding in reading is like a walker who starts to stare at his feet. Like the walker, the reader will stumble.

It is, therefore almost UNBELIVABLE that the method for teaching reading in most American first grades forces children to focus PERMANENT, CONSCIOUS attention on decoding itself. Such reading mimics the activity of a partly deaf person when straining to catch a conversation, he CONSCIOUSLY GUESSES at missing words. THAT is what basal reader phonics REALLY is: teaching children to use only a FEW letter sounds consciously to GUESS at a missing word from the context of the memorized sight-words they can already read. By contrast, true phonics programs teach most children by January of first grade to form reliable conditioned reflexes between all 44 phonemes in English as they occur in syllables. More practice is needed after January to develop those skills to automaticity, but eventually their brain’s computers operate just like the Kurzweil machine. If their conscious minds choose to listen (remember: their minds attention is free) they will have MAXIMUM comprehension, with NO guessing.

The Japanese do not have our alphabet. They use Kanji picture characters and Kana syllable characters. Some Japanese stroke patients can read ONLY the Kanji picture characters while others can read ONLY the Kana syllable characters. Memories of different kinds of print are obviously stored in different parts of the brain.

In 1890, William James wrote of what was common knowledge then from autopsies of stroke patients who had lost the ability to read. Alphabetic sound bearing print was stored on the left side of the brain in the angular gyrus region.

All the evidence points to the fact that conditioned reflexes are established to the left angular gyrus area for print as sound but to the right angular gyrus area for print read as pictures or sight words.

Today work is being done in the brain in which living people are observed as they read. Americans today, who learned with sight-words and phony phonics, can read alphabetic print with BOTH sides of the brain, unlike William James' classical stroke patients. So the ultimate effect of reading by sight-words, some FEW letter sounds and context guessing is mixed dominance, using memory banks of BOTH sides of the brain on the same stimulus. Mixed dominance is very undesirable. To use Samuel Blumenfeld's term, we are jamming the reflexes in children's brains.

Something else interferes with automatic reading. First-graders need two fixations to see a sight-word, but Japanese characters need only one fixation. How can a child read a sight-word "all at once" with the right brain which sees things "all at once" when he can see only the first half of the word all at once? By conscious guessing, of course.

Two hundred fifty of the high frequency words are three-quarters of words in children's books. When children know them and how to guess from a few letter sounds, the damage is hidden till they leave controlled vocabulary for harder books where guessing does not work since they never heard the new words. Texts today THROUGH HIGH SCHOOL are dumbed down since most children cannot really read. So they never learn to vocabulary and syntax of Western Civilization's literature. This is the reason the SAT scores are dropping.

Geraldine E. Rodgers
Lyndhurst, New Jersey 07071



Geraldine E. Rodgers, workshop presenter

PRESENTATION GIVEN AT THE CHRISTIAN BROADCASTING
NETWORK PROGRAM AT FIRST BAPTIST CATHEDRAL,
BROOKLYN, NEW YORK, SEPTEMBER 9, 1985

**WHY SING, SPELL, READ & WROTE IS THE CORRECT PROGRAM
FOR TEACHING CHILDREN TO READ**

By Geraldine E. Rodgers
© September 9, 1985

For the past twelve years, I have had the good fortune to be using *Sing, Spell, Read and Write* but the MISFORTUNE to have to use it only as a supplemental reading program in the school in which I teach. I used *Sing, Spell, Read and Write* to overcome the damage done by the basal sight-word readers, those programs. Dr. Rudolf Flesch has rightly named the “Dismal Dozen.” I have used it for remediation at the second and third grades and as supplemental material at first grade. It works, really works. Why it works is something of a mystery to the outsider, because even the Dismal Dozen all claim to use good, solid phonics. So, what **is** the difference between GOOD phonics and BAD phonics? I will talk about what separates them.

In 1977-1978, I took a six months’ sabbatical leave and tested the oral reading accuracy, relative speed, reversals, and reading comprehension of about 900 second graders, in this country and in Luxembourg, Holland, Sweden, Germany, Austria and France. My results showed that we were developing different kinds of readers, based on the programs used in first grade. Real phonics programs like *Read, Spell, Sing and Write*, both here and in Europe, develop very accurate, fast readers, who were capable of excellent reading comprehension. Programs which did not teach real phonics produced readers who made many errors, read slowly, made many reversals, and were not capable of reading with high comprehension.

My data was sent to “reading experts,” almost all of whom never replied, and I began to dig in the literature for the reason for the rejection of my flat proof that real phonics works best, here and in Europe. For the past seven years, I have been digging into libraries and in historical material. I will talk of the conclusions I have made, one of which is that we have institutionalized reading failure in this country, and most “reading experts” have a vested interest in that sinking ship. They are not interested in the water pouring through the holes in their ship, or in the fact that the Soviet Union, which teaches real phonics, has no reading problems.

Concerning my conclusions: to read alphabetic print properly means to hear the printed page as well as we hear the human voice. The Kurzweil Reading Machine is a remarkable invention. It “reads” books for the blind, turning print into a human voice. Even more remarkable is that we are, almost all of us, born with what amounts to a Kurzweil Reading Machine inside our heads. Our brains just have to be programmed to read print the way the Kurzweil machine does, which is, of course, by learning the sounds of the printed letters, or phonics.

Our brains are a remarkable gift of God, like two-way sending and receiving radio sets, with a computer inside. The evidence indicates that one side of our brain deals, for the most part, with space, and the other side deals with material, for the most part, that concerns time. It is fascinating that our brains appear to be divided, more or less, so that our minds can deal with the two aspects of the material world, space and time. With the use of our brains, our minds therefore can interact and deal with the material world, and our bodies can carry out the orders given to them by our minds.

Dr. Wilder Penfield, the famous neurosurgeon who died not long ago, a religious man, wrote *The Mystery of the Mind*. After many years of operating on human brains, he came to believe that the mind is first observable at what he called the higher brain stem, deep inside the brain. The activity of the mind travels from the higher brain stem up into parts of the two sides of the brain. Dr. Penfield called this conscious part of the brain the “higher brain mechanism.” But also running from the brain stem up into the other parts of the two sides of the brain is another system, which he called the brain’s computer (its automatic sensory motor mechanism). Dr. Penfield told of a kind of switch deep inside the brain to turn the switch on or off, which is to say, to listen to what his computer is doing, to alter its behavior, or to ignore it, in which case the computer can carry on an activity while the person is thinking about something else.

DR. Hilda Mosse, the pediatrician/psychiatrist, wrote, *The Complete Handbook of Children’s Reading Disorders* (ignored by our “reading experts” and never mentioned in the much talked of U. S. Government report, *Becoming a Nation of Readers*, which was written by “reading experts.”) Dr. Mosse said most of our ordinary daily actions are handled by our brain’s computer, once we have learned them, which is to say, once they have been “conditioned.” Nothing is ever learned or conditioned without paying conscious attention to it WHILE it is being learned. AFTER it is learned, it can be done automatically. While we had to pay conscious attention to an activity while it was being learned, once it is “conditioned,” we can then think about other things while our computer is handles the work. These activities, to which we once had to pay conscious attention and which now should

be done automatically, including walking, talking, tying shoelaces, typing, and many, many more things including significantly, READING. Dr. Mosse said reading problems come from not being able to form the necessary conditioned reflexes so that our computers can do the work automatically, or by establishing and practicing wrong reflexes. Another term she used for wrong reflexes was “an impairment of automatic mechanisms.”

Let us consider what an impairment of automatic mechanisms might mean in other daily activities besides reading. One which is most obvious is talking. When this is not automated, the result is stuttering. Consider what happens with something else, as simple as brushing your teeth. If you picked up your toothbrush in the morning and had to study consciously in which direction to move the toothbrush to get it inside your mouth, and then, when it was finally inside your mouth, you had to decide carefully whether to brushy back and forth or up and down, you had to study the cap on your toothpaste tube and then consciously decide whether to turn it clockwise or counterclockwise to get it of, you would from an impairment of automatic mechanisms. Almost nobody thinks about these things except a baby learning to do them, and we laugh at its little awkwardnesses.

We are enchanted with a baby’s fumbling, bumbling first steps while he is learning (conditioning) the automatic activity of walking. But, if we concentrate consciously on our steps the way the baby does, we will not only be impairing our automatic mechanism (which he does not have yet), but we will most likely fall on our faces. Our minds should be free, when walking, to think about WHERE we are going, and not HOW we are going to move our bodes in that direction.

So with reading. Dr. Mosse said the “set” on meaning should not be interrupted when reading, once we have learned how to read. Our mind should be totally occupied with the ideas on the page, if we are going to read with maximum reading comprehension. Once the reader starts thinking about the act of reading itself, he is like the walker who starts to stare at his feet, and, like the walker, he will fall flat on his face. He will stumble or stammer.

We actually have statistical proof that present-day readers, trained in the phony phonics of the basal readers, are stumbling more than reading than in times gone by. Studies of eye movement while reading for modern readers show them making for more regressions than in years past, where the eye goes back to look print it has already seen. Regressions in reading are like stuttering when speaking. This has happened because the sight-word basal reader, phony phonics deliberately interferes with the formation of true, automatic conditioned reflexes in reading and makes it necessary for the reader ALWAYS, so to speak, to watch his feet. No wonder they develop problem readers! They are like people who are hard of

hearing, and who have great trouble following conversations because of all the words they miss. Hard-of-hearing people have to guess the missing word from the context of the conversation. Listening, of course, should be as automatic an activity as talking, but for these poor people whose hearing has deteriorated, it is no longer automatic. It is, therefore, almost UNBELIVABLE that the method of teaching reading in most American schools, which claim to use phonics, is based on the same kind of activity that a partially deaf person goes through when straining to catch a conversation: using only the few sounds he has heard, and context of the conversation, he CONSCIOUSLY GUESSES at the missing words. That is what basal reader “phonics” is: using only a few letter sounds consciously to GUESS at a missing word, the way a partly deaf person does. By contrast, *Sing, Spell, Read and Write* phonics means to form a totally reliable, AUTOMATIC conditioned reflex between all the 44 phonemes in English, as they occur in syllables, so that when the eyes travel across the page, the brain’s computer automatically produces a flawless internal voice speaking the print, just like the Kurzweil reading machine. If the conscious mind chooses to listen to the product that the computer is producing so flawlessly (remember: the mind’s attention is free), the conscious mind will have MAXIMUM reading comprehension, with NO guessing. How can ANYONE want readers to GUESS print instead of to HEAR it? Yet the fact is that most reading experts are on the side of consciously guessing! Obviously, the readers they produce can never read automatically.

English has perhaps half a million words, all of which must be read by syllables, as the ancient Greeks and Romans read them. Instead of teaching syllables, sight-word basal readers teach high-frequency words. Since only 100 words make up half of anything in print, and since 250 of the highest-frequency words are three-quarters of the words in children’s books, the damage the basal readers is hidden for the majority of children until they get into harder books (as in high school), where guessing unknown words from letter sounds simply does not work, because the children never heard these harder words. Children should be taught SYLLABLES, not WORDS, just as was done by the ancient Etruscans about 600 B. C., by the Ancient Greeks and Romans, and by all of Europe until the 19th century. When phonics students meet difficult words in the upper grades, they sound them out so that they can say them, and figure out the meaning from the material they are reading. So they learn the language of books by the same way they learned the spoken language, from hearing the words and figuring out what the words meant from the conversation (context). But the little basal reader guessers cannot hear the words, and so they never learn the language of real literature. This is the reason the SAT scores are dropping.

As I told Sue Dickson once, the author of *Sing, Spell, Read and Write*, I enjoy the fact that her “Ferris Wheel” song (which my first graders have always loved) is really practicing syllables very like those taught in ancient Greece. H. I. Marrou of France said there is evidence that ancient Greek children sang the alphabet, and he told of the elaborate syllabary, a 300 B. C. teachers’ guide dug out of the sands in North Africa, with Ferris-Wheel type syllables on it! I suspect those ancient Greek children sang not just the letters but the syllables, very much as Sue Dickson has her 20th century children do it with the Ferris Wheel song, which they loved so much. Years ago, my principal used to talk down the hall to stand outside the door, to hear the children go through this exercise, as they were enjoying it so much and it sounded so nice.

The ultimate aim of first-grade reading should be to teach children to form correct conditioned reflexes between printed phonemes and their sounds, and between printed syllables built from their sounds. *Sing, Spell, Read and Write* includes 17 little story books with totally uncontrolled vocabulary, giving the necessary heavy practice on printed syllable-to-sound correspondences, on which proper, automatic conditioned reflexes are based. They provide quite a contrast to the controlled-vocabularies, phony phonics, “guessing” basal readers in most schools today.

Our public schools have been making children partly deaf when faced with print since at least 1930, making it IMPOSSIBLE for students to read automatically, and the children are actually DRILLED in guessing, like the hard-of-hearing. So, while experts are destroying the ability to read with a complete concentration on meaning, which means to read completely automatically, they have the gall to say they are teaching for “meaning!”

But teaching children to guess at print, instead of to sound it out as *Sing, Spell, Read and Write* does, is not ALL the reading experts have been doing. To understand a particularly vicious effect of the sight-word, phony phonics basal readers, we have to jump over to Japan and watch how they handle print. The Japanese do not use our alphabet. Instead, they have Chinese characters (which are pictures with meaning) and also symbols of their own which stand just for syllable sounds (like fe, fi, fo, fum, in the nursery rhyme.). The best way to get the effect of reading Japanese is to read the sentence we all know. I ♥ New York. The picture of the heart is like the Chinese characters, or like part of the Japanese writing called Kanji. We read the picture of its MEANING. The rest of the sentence is made of letters, which have sounds, so they are like the syllable part of Japanese writing, the Kana.

Some Japanese stroke patients, who have had brain damage, can read ONLY the Kanja picture characters, while some other Japanese stroke patients can read ONLY the Kan syllable characters. It is obvious they are storing the memories in the different kinds of print in different parts of the brain, it is not surprising to read that Kanji is considered to be “decoded” by the right brain. Since sound, which is a timed activity, is handled, in its speech aspects, by the left side of the brain, it is to be expected that Kana characters would be stored on the left side of the brain.

Back in 1890, the famous psychologist William James wrote of what was common knowledge at that time concerning where alphabetic print was stored in the brain: unquestionably, on the left side, the side that was known to control speech. Some stroke patients in this country and in Europe had lost the ability to read print. When autopsies were done on these people, it was found that they had damage in a part of the left brain known as the Angular gyrus region, called also Brodmann’s Area 39. Dr. Mosse said the same kind of regions appear on both sides of the brain, so it may be assumed that the Japanese Kanji pictures are stored in the RIGHT angular gyrus, Brodmann’s 39 region, which should deal with print SPATIALLY, instead of a sequential SOUND, or timed, basis. James and all the other nineteenth century psychologists were not surprised that alphabet print memories were stored on the left side of the brain, because they knew language was handled there.

So, as James and other psychologists reported before 1890, stroke patients who had damage in the area of the left angular gyrus lost ALL ability to read print, unlike the Japanese who lose **either** the sound **or** the picture portions. That was because, at that time, printed word memories were stored in alphabetic language ONLY in the area of the left angular gyrus. People who learned to read alphabetic print used ONLY the memory banks on the left side of the brain, the sound side. There was no reason to use the PICTURE side to read print based on SOUND.

Today work is being done on the functions of the brain with new techniques, so that its actions can be seen in living people, as well as observed by autopsies on those who have died. These new techniques, today, show that people reading alphabetic print in America are reading with BOTH sides of the brain, unlike the earlier stroke patients reported by James and others. So here is the ultimate effect of teaching children to read by sight-words, (print, considered like pictures), some few letter sounds, and context guessing. Children are being drilled to use BOTH memory banks in the brain: the “picture” and the “sound” one. As might be expected, the brain research today shows readers are storing printed memories on BOTH sides of the brain.

This is not a good thing, like using two eye, or two hands. To perform an activity like reading, dominance should be established for picture print SOLELY to the right, and for sound-bearing SOLELY to the left. Mixed dominance on such activities is very undesirable. For instance, it can be one of the causes of stuttering, when speech is on both sides of the brain. Drilling children to look at words as picture forms (sight-words) and, AT THE SAME TIME, as letter-sounds (by guessing from a few letters) is a direct cause of mixed dominance, in my opinion, and means that we are jamming the reflexes in our children's brains. That, by itself, should cause conscious guessing, and make a true reflex an impossibility.

But something else interferes with forming an automatic conditioned reflex when alphabetic print is read like Chinese, by the right side of the brain, spatially, or "all at once." Little children at first grade require two fixations (movements of the eyes) to see ALL of a sight-word. Yet the right side of the brain does not operate sequentially. If the child is using that side of the brain, he "reads" the sight word "all-at-once," with the first fixation, before he has been able to see the whole word. How does he read the whole word when he can only see the first half? By guessing, of course. In *Becoming a Nation of Readers*, clear confirmation is given on page 11 that "reading experts" expect readers to start "guessing" a word as soon as they see its first few letters, and sight-word trained "guessing" a word as soon as they see its first few letters, and sight-word trained readers DO that, using the consciousness and showing an impairment of automatic mechanisms, because they have been drilled to use the right side of the brain, the "all-at-once" side. But children who learn to read by TRUE phonics, like *Sing, Spell, Read and Type*, use the memory banks on the LEFT side of the brain, which operate sequentially. They do not make up their mind what a word is till they have seen ALL of it. They read it BY SOUND, automatically, and DO NOT GUESS.

But even the guessing is not the end of the sad story and all the reason for our terrible reading disabilities in this country. Reading is only the door into the tower of knowledge, to refer to a medieval picture drawn to show "learning." Once children know how to read, they can START to be educated. Marva Collins of Chicago, who teaches real phonics, has her third graders read Chaucer, and her upper graders reading even heavier, REAL literature. It is no wonder her students' essays show incredible language ability: wonderful syntax, marvelous vocabulary. She has been feeding them wonderful syntax, marvelous vocabulary. She has feeding them wonderful syntax and marvelous vocabulary in the books she has them reading. Yet basal readers and most subject area texts in our schools today are "dumbed down" so the children never have a chance to acquire the complex vocabulary and syntax of the literature of Western Civilization.

When all is said and done, perhaps the best books for growth in syntax and vocabulary are those that Abraham Lincoln used as a child: Shakespeare and the Bible. The majestic language of his speech was no accident, but he would never have developed it if he had been limited to comic books and TV like the 20th century children caught in the wilderness of the inner-city schools, where the opportunity to learn has been destroyed by reading experts, because they have been wiring our poor little children's brains wrong.

Sing, Spell, Read and Write does justice to the little children. It not only provides all the essential training and practice necessary for forming permanent, automatic conditioned reflexes between print and sound, but it is assured when their interest is aroused, and, without conscious attention on an activity or lesson, the activity or lesson can never be learned. *Sing, Spell, Read and Write* has the built-in child-delight that guarantees the interest which produces attention. Children love it, and what they love, they pay attention to, and what they pay attention to, they learn.

Sing, Spell, Read and Write is an extraordinarily effective reading program, and I know of no other like it. I am delighted that CBN and you are arranging to use it in your school.

Geraldine E. Rodgers
Lyndhurst, New Jersey

(Talk given at Pilgrim Baptist Cathedral, 628 Central Avenue, Brooklyn, N. Y. 11207, September 9, 1985.

Note from Internet Publisher: Donald L. Potter

July 24, 2010

In 2010 Samuel L. Blumenfeld sent me a copy of two Hearings:

1. *Reading Emphasis Programs, 1973*. HEARING Before the Subcommittee on Education on the Committee on Labor and Public Welfare, United States Senate, 93rd Congress, First Session on S. 1318 to Amend the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, to Authorize Reading Emphasis Programs to Improve Reading in the Primary Grades, and For Other Purposes. S. 2069, To improve National Reading Skills, April 4 and 5, 1973.

2. *Oversight on Illiteracy in the United States, 1986*. HEARING Before the Subcommittee on Elementary, Secondary, and Vocational Education of the Committee on Education and Labor, House of Representatives, 99th Congress, Second Session. Hearings Held in Washington, DC, March 20, 1986. Serial No. 99-91. Printed for the use of the Committee on Education and Labor.

Miss Rodgers' material was taken from the second document, *Oversight on Illiteracy in the United States*. I find Miss Rodgers' explanation of the **cause** of illiteracy to be the epitome of clarity, such as is sorely needed to penetrate the smokescreen of educational jargon manufactured by the high priests of look-and-say (recently called whole-language, but now masquerading as under the term, guided-reading) that obscured an understanding of the simple and otherwise easily understood facts in the case. I dare say that if you ask 100 teachers, who claim to teach phonics, you will find that 99 of them will say they **also** teach sight-words (such as the Dolch List of common service words). That "phonics" teachers will **mix two mutually exclusive teaching methods** shows that there continues to be a need for clear, uncompromising explanations. Many of my elementary tutoring students bring me the Dolch List words they are required to memorize in their schools.

Other valuable material by Miss Rodgers is available on my website, either as free short articles or links to her books.

Sue Dickinson's reading method is still available. I recommend skipping the kindergarten materials. Miss Rodgers is referring to the first-grade program, not the new kindergarten program.

I can personally recommend two free, easy-to-teach phonics-first programs that are available on my website: 1) Florence Akin's 1913 *Word Mastery*, and 2) Hazel Logan Loring's 1980 *Reading Made Easy in First Grade with Blend Phonics*. www.blendphonics.org

Rudolf Flesch's 72 Exercises in his inexpensive 1955 *Why Johnny Can't Read* are very effective.

It is relatively easy to tell if a student is guessing simply by listening for mistakes in their oral reading. *The Miller Word Identification Assessment* is an easy-to-administer test that will tell the teacher if a student has been taught to guess from a context base of memorized sight-words. Mr. Miller's assessment may be downloaded for free from my website www.donpotter.net.

I cannot say that the situation with basal readers has improved much. Whatever improvements there may be are largely negated by classroom teachers' persistence in subjecting the student to sight-word instruction, **prior too** and **along with** phonics. A practice I assume they learned in their teachers' college.

Document revised 6/17/13.