

Why American Still Has a Reading Problem - and it has nothing to do with “dyslexia”

by Samuel L. Blumenfeld

Anyone who has kept tabs on the deterioration of America’s public educational system knows that the reading problem is at the heart of it, simply because you can’t learn much of anything unless you can read with some proficiency. Despite the fact that more children are spending more time in school than ever before, the ranks of the functional illiterates are growing not by the thousands but by the millions. In fact, a study published at Harvard University and reported on the front page of the *New York Times* of May 20, 1970, suggested that as many as 50 per cent of our adult population may be functionally illiterate. And the tragic part of it all is that functional illiterates generally keep their reading disability to themselves. Since they can’t read above a fourth-grade level, their lives are severely limited in literary enjoyment or intellectual growth.

The children who do come to the attention of the school authorities are so obviously handicapped by their disability that no amount of hiding can keep them from being detected. Such children are usually labeled as dyslexic. Dyslexia is an exotic word invented to describe the condition of a perfectly normal, intelligent child, who, for reasons which seem to baffle most educators, parents, and doctors, can’t learn to read in the way he is being taught in school.

The difference between a dyslexic and a functional illiterate is purely social. Dyslexics are usually adolescents from middle-class or professional families whose parents assume that their child’s reading problem is more of a medical or psychological problem than an educational one. The child is too smart to be that dumb. A functional illiterate is simply someone who has kept his reading problem to himself and goes through life pretending he can read, avoiding situations which involve reading, choosing jobs which do not reveal his reading disability. He assumes he’s dumb, not sick or neurotic.

Dyslexic or illiterate

But whether you call him a dyslexic or a functional illiterate, the origin of the problem is basically the same. A child who can’t read can’t because he really has not been taught to read. Yes, he has sat for hours and hours in his classroom and, yes, something vaguely resembling reading instruction took place, but the child did not learn to read.

Recently, I was asked to speak at a symposium on dyslexia. I discovered that the great problem plaguing the experts on dyslexia is their inability to find its cause let alone define the term. For example, in 1972 the *Maryland Commission on Dyslexia* was obliged to write the following in its report:

“Despite the controversy over the use of the term ‘dyslexia,’ however defined, and whatever appellation may be given to the term, there is a disorder which manifests itself in an inability to learn to read by conventional pedagogical techniques.”

So I have decided to do what none of the experts has dared to do, define the term dyslexia. **Dyslexia is a learning disorder caused by applying hieroglyphic instruction techniques in teaching children to read an alphabetic writing system.** First, I say it is a learning disorder because we know that it can be unlearned. That is, the technique for curing dyslexia is not a shot of penicillin or an eye operation but merely unlearning and relearning how one was taught to read. Second, dyslexia is a learning disorder, not a disability, because the children who get it are quite able to learn. There is nothing disabled about them. Their problem is that they learn too well and they try too hard to assimilate what cannot really be assimilated. Dyslexia is a learning disorder because it is caused by a teaching disorder. When you impose a hieroglyphic instruction method on an alphabetic writing system you create symbolic disorder - that is, disorder in the use, or I should say misuse, of symbols - which in turn creates a learning disability, which in turn can be straightened out by creating symbolic order.

Symbolic disorder

Now why are our teachers creating so much symbolic disorder? Because they don't know the difference between a hieroglyphic writing system and an alphabetic one. I venture to say that very few educators know the difference, and I include professors on the highest level in our teachers colleges.

To know the difference you have to know something about the symbolic systems human beings use to communicate with one another. The most extensive and efficient symbolic system we use is a sound system. That is, the sounds I make with my voice have meaning to you because we have all agreed that certain sounds will stand for certain things. Thus you equate those sounds with specific objects, people, places, ideas, feelings, actions, etc. As children, we all learned our first few thousand sound-symbols - or words - by trial and error associations. As adults we save time by going to the dictionary.

However, as efficient and extensive as our sound symbol system is, it has one serious drawback. It leaves no permanent record, except in the memories of those who hear it. And memory is hardly permanent or accurate. So the need for graphic symbols to supplement our sound symbols was obvious. Since primitive language was simple, the first graphic system was also simple: A primitive spoken sentence might be something on the order of: "Men hunt, kill many buffalo." To put this in graphic form all you needed were simple pictures of men shooting bows and arrows at buffalo, some of which could be shown falling with arrows in their sides. You didn't have to go to school to learn to read such a writing system. The symbols looked like the ideas they were conveying. But you probably needed training to draw the pictures. This early form of writing is known as pictography, or ideography. In pictography the symbol looks like what it represents. We still use pictography in traffic signs and warning signs so that children and foreigners can understand them easily.

More complexities

As civilization and language became more complex so did the writing system. An ancient Egyptian scribe might have had to record some legal matters, or astronomical observations, or a history of Pharaoh Ramses II. So he had to have many more little pictures representing many more actions, ideas, and objects. And in order to insure accuracy he had to make the symbols as unambiguous as possible. He had to have different little pictures to convey such abstract ideas as open, closed, inside, deity, growth, become, etc. So the Egyptians began to use phonetic clues, which would tie the picture to a specific word in their language. This highly elaborated picture system became known as hieroglyphics because so many of the symbols did not look like anything they represented. You had to be taught what the symbols stood for. So now you **did** have to go to school to learn how to read, and you had to learn the meanings of thousands of symbols and all the little markings that designated tenses, persons, and inflectional endings, and all of the phonetic clues and context clues and pictographic clues. Because reading was now so difficult, literacy became the exclusive province of a small group of scholars who devoted their entire lives to perfecting their reading and writing skills.

The need for a simpler system was obvious and it came with the invention of the alphabet at about 1600 B.C., the greatest single invention in man's intellectual history. The invention was based on a remarkable discovery, the discovery that our thousands and thousands of spoken words were merely the combinations of only a very small number of irreducible voice sounds.

22 symbols

The superiority of the alphabetic method was in its economy. In place of thousands of symbols, all you had to learn were about twenty-two symbols representing the known gamut of speech sounds at the time of the first alphabet, and you could dispense with all of the phonetic clues, and context clues, and pictographic clues, and other complications. The difference was as dramatic as going from candles to electric lights, and all the civilized nations of the Western world adopted the new writing system. Its advantages were obvious. It permitted a greater precision in the recording of spoken language and therefore a greater precision in conveying thought. It permitted a much smoother integration of the reading process with the speaking and thinking processes. It sparked the greatest intellectual advance since the beginning of time because it accelerated learning.

After the invention of the alphabet, learning to read consisted solely of mastering the alphabet letters and acquiring a facility to translate a running inscription into the spoken language it represented. Its simplicity and economy were stunning.

Now, it so happens that children had been taught to read precisely by this method until a rather freakish development in the early 1800s. Over the centuries the English writing system had developed a number of problems. First, it had adopted from Latin an alphabet of 26 letters to do the job of representing some 44 sounds. Second, it was enriched by the invasions of other languages. Third, pronunciations kept changing over the centuries. The result, by 1800, was a writing system with a large number of quaint and perhaps bothersome irregularities and inconsistencies. However, the writing system was still purely alphabetic.

Nevertheless, by 1820 the clamor for instructional reform was so shrill among the professional reformers that anything which promised a shortcut through the difficulties of learning to read alphabetically was welcomed. At about this time, the Rev. Thomas H. Gallaudet, director of the Hartford Asylum for the Deaf and Dumb, thought that he could solve the problem. For years he had been teaching deaf children to read by a sight-symbol method – that is, the association of a picture of a cat with a written word cat, and so forth. In this way, the deaf child was able to develop a reading vocabulary based on sight associations only, that is, a “sight vocabulary.” Gallaudet thought that he could adapt this method for use by normal children. He published a primer based on the method, and in 1837 it was adopted by the Boston school system. You’ll be interested to know that the three main characters in the primer were Frank, Jane and a dog named Spot.

Disastrous look-say

For the next eight years, children in Boston were taught to read English by this “look-say” or “sight-word” or “sight vocabulary” method in which whole words were learned as hieroglyphics. The results were so disastrous that the Boston returned to the alphabet. But the teaching of reading in America would never be the same, for Gallaudet’s method did not die. It went underground and surfaced some decades later, divorced from its deaf and dumb origins, and entered the mainstream of educational instruction as a perfectly legitimate way to teach children to read. By 1945 it had swept the alphabetic method out of reading instruction completely in the United States and was considered the **only** way to teach children to read. As our reading problem grew, parents and educators were at a loss to explain the reasons for it, until 1955 when Rudolf Flesch exposed the situation in his famous book, *Why Johnny Can’t Read*. In that book Flesch had said very bluntly:

The teaching of reading - all over the United States, in all the schools, and in all the textbooks - is totally wrong and flies in the face of all logic and common sense.

What was the reaction of America’s educators to this blunt statement? They closed ranks behind entrenched and institutionalized error and continued doing the same thing: using hieroglyphic instruction techniques to teach children to read an alphabetic writing system, teaching normal American children to read as if they were deaf. The result is that in 1974 we still have a reading problem which still baffles the educators.

In writing my book I did something which had not been done by previous researchers and writers on dyslexia and functional illiteracy. I made a very detailed and thorough examination of the reading instruction books being used in the schools and I came to the conclusion that most of the children exposed to these sight vocabulary or hieroglyphic instruction methods would in time exhibit the symptoms of dyslexia. What are the symptoms? Roger Saunders, president of the Orton Society, described them very succinctly as follows:

It is not uncommon to find, particularly in dyslexic children below the fourth-grade level, regardless of their age, words read in reverse, for example *was* as *saw*, *on* as *no*. A single letter may be reversed, as in *dig* and *big*. Often also there may be a transposition of some of the letters within a word, for example, *abroad* for *aboard*, *left* for *felt*, *how* for *who*. General confusion of words which have only a slightly different configuration abounds, for example: *through*, *though*, *thought*, and *quit*, *quiet*, *quite*. Guesses are frequent, in view of the inability to handle the sounds-symbol system. They grasp for the meaning of unknown words on the basis of a few clues the rest of the printed material has furnished. It is also possible that, while working out a difficult word, there may be such a long pause that the meaning of the previously read words will escape them.

Learning breakdown

In *The New Illiterates* I devoted four chapters to an analysis of the Dick and Jane reading program in order to demonstrate why the use of hieroglyphic instruction techniques on an alphabetic writing system creates reading disability. The reason why this happens is because you set up conflicting learning habits in the child, which finally leads to a learning breakdown. Obviously teachers are not aware that they are doing this. In fact, after a talk I gave in Providence a few weeks ago, a young man came up to me and asked how come the Chinese didn't get dyslexia. Weren't they being taught to read hieroglyphically? Yes, I answered. But their writing system was a hieroglyphic one, and there was no other way to teach it. Their hieroglyphics were distinctive enough. But our alphabetic words were not. How could you distinguish between such similar looking words as *bad*, *bed*, *bid*, and *bud* unless you had a firm understanding of our alphabetic system?

In any case, I realized that it is not readily apparent to teachers why you cannot apply hieroglyphic teaching techniques to written English. My book explains why in great detail and I urge you all to read it. One of the most difficult things in the world, I've discovered, is getting someone to read a book – that includes book reviewers, education editors, and teachers. However, there is no easy way to learning, and any teacher who thinks that there is, is not only kidding himself but kidding his students. Anthony Burgess, the author, said recently, "One should not be annoyed because learning is difficult... Overcoming obstacles is one of the greatest pleasures in the world." And so teachers will have to make a considerable effort if they are to improve their performance. The simple and shocking truth is that the greatest obstacle to illiteracy in America are the teachers of America. They cannot teach children to read because they really don't know how. Confusion over instructional technique has become the greatest obstacle to their endeavors. But since I am afraid that the teachers in this audience may not get a chance to study in detail what I have written, and since I am anxious for them to gain as much knowledge and insight as possible from my talk at this conference, let me summarize why applying hieroglyphic teaching techniques to an alphabetic writing system not only makes functional illiteracy and dyslexia possible but inevitable for many children.

Learning alphabet

FIRST, there is the lack of adequate instruction in learning the letters of the alphabet, their names and shapes, or their sound values before reading whole words. Just learning the alphabet without learning what the letters mean is not sufficient preparation for reading. The child must be taught that the letters stand for something more than mere graphic decoration. If not, he will have trouble differentiating between such similar letters as *d* and *b*, or *p*, *g*, and *q*, or *f* and *t*. He will not understand why the small details in letters are important.

SECOND, in most sight basal programs, there is a deliberate obscuring of the alphabetic principle in the very choice of pre-primer vocabulary, which includes some of the most highly irregular words in the language.

THIRD, the child is taught to look at a word as a whole and to associate it with a picture – which is pure deaf and dumb instruction. He is taught to associate the whole word with an idea, rather than to see it as a sequence of letters with sound values. In the 1955 Dick and Jane, for example, he was taught to divide words into three pictorial parts beginnings, middles, and ends – regardless of the word's phonetic structure. In many programs he is supposed to remember word-form details by such inane configuration techniques as word blocking or framing. This cultivates the really crippling habit of looking at words from all directions, thus contributing to his later failure to read words from left to right or reading them in reverse. After all, when you look at a picture in a frame you don't look at it from left to right. It also contributes to poor spelling and confusing such similar looking words as quit, quiet, and quite. Some pre-primers intersperse the text with rebus drawings, thus encouraging the child to believe that alphabetic words are little pictures representing objects and ideas instead of being sound-symbol transcriptions of spoken words which represent the objects and ideas. This creates associational confusion and symbolic disorder.

FOURTH, the tremendous emphasis on story and picture interpretation at this early stage of instruction distracts the child from the sufficiently difficult task of mastering written words.

FIFTH, an unconscious taboo against the alphabetic principle may be inculcated if the letter names are studiously not mentioned in the pre-primer stage, although the child may want to know them. This was the case in the 1955 Scott Foresman program. None of the experts has yet evaluated the psychic damage done by deliberate withholding of information which would facilitate the child's understanding of the alphabetic principle. Some children are extremely susceptible to subliminal suggestion, and the implicit suggestion that they must not learn the letters may become embedded in their unconscious, creating a later resistance to learning the alphabetic principle on their own, which is one of the reasons why functional illiterates who were taught to read in the 1950s and 1960s are frozen at their present level of ignorance.

SIXTH, in many sight-word programs the child is taught about whole words and sentences before he knows anything about individual letters, thus reversing the natural and logical order of learning.

SEVENTH, he is deliberately made dependent on a controlled context for his ability to read, which makes him insecure and helpless when confronted with books without a similarly controlled context.

Functional illiteracy

Thus, in the pre-primer stage alone, there is enough in sight-vocabulary instruction to set the child on the road to functional illiteracy and dyslexia before we even get to the so-called attack skills. The pre-primers, with their first 58 or so sight words, inculcate all of the bad habits the child needs to prevent him from becoming a good reader. And I have not even mentioned the deadening effect that the constant repetition of sight words can have on a child who may grow to hate reading because of its stupefying boredom. But most damaging of all, sight-word instruction provides him with a basic erroneous concept about the nature of our writing system, a concept which can remain unchanged throughout life.

For example, I tutored a Boston University medical student who had been taught to read by Dick and Jane at an expensive private school. He hated to read and didn't know why. Here was his definition of the alphabet: "A set of symbols, a combination of which form larger symbols we call words and the words in turn should form in our minds pictures of an object, an action." If you noticed, there wasn't the slightest hint or suggestion that those symbols stood for sounds. This student was a perfect product of the sight-word method, and he hated to read although he was bright, articulate, and highly intelligent. He simply had no idea what an alphabetic writing system was about. It took him several weeks before he finally understood that the alphabet was a set of symbols representing speech sounds.

Now what kind of an educational system do we have that can't even teach children to understand what the alphabet is about? I leave it to you to find the right descriptive adjective. "But we do teach phonetics," some of the teachers will say. "We teach initial consonants and final consonants," they add. Yes, they do, but they teach them as phonetic clues – just one clue among several taught as word-attack skills.

What is "word attack?" some naive parent may ask. Since whole words can be hostile little critters if you have no idea what the letters stand for, you have to find a means to "attack" them. So we've been teaching our children to "attack" words for the last 40 years instead of read them. Now I know why some of the college students I've talked to hate words. I suppose you would grow to hate something you've been taught to attack since grade one. And so every child who has had to learn a sight vocabulary has been fighting his own little war with words. When reading becomes something of your own miniature schoolroom Vietnam, never ending, with new enemies everywhere, you may grow to hate it quite easily. In the case of the functional illiterate, by the time he reaches the fourth grade he admits he cannot defeat the enemy and, like America in Vietnam, he makes peace and withdraws. He pledges that he will never attack words again. He leaves them alone, and they leave him alone.

Sound-symbol ignored

Using Dick and Jane as our model, when the child gets to the primer he is finally introduced to the names of 17 consonant letters and their sounds merely as phonetic clues. The sound-symbol structure of a word beyond its first letter is ignored. He must still rely on the memory of word forms to increase his reading vocabulary. In the Book One reader, the child is taught how to apply his knowledge of consonant letters to the ends of words, so that now he can attack from the front or rear. The middle still remains unknown territory.

Not until the Book Two level does the child encounter his first vowel letter. He has already had to learn 335 words by sight without knowing anything about vowels. The vowels are also taught as phonetic clues, but very tricky clues because their sounds keep changing. So how do you know which sound is the right one? You have to learn a whole battery of phonetic rules governing vowel sounds and how adjoining consonant letters serve as visual clues to the phonetic clues. Of course the child still doesn't know what a syllable is, although by the completion of the second level he has supposedly increased his sight vocabulary to 879 words.

Finally, at level three, he is introduced to the concept of the syllable, the pronunciation unit and the rules governing the syllabication of words. After two years of dividing words into these pictorial parts, he is now told of a new way to divide words that conflicts with the old way. Since he must still learn many new sight words, he cannot possibly abandon the old way of dividing words. Thus, the child is placed in the cruel and unenviable position of having to comply with two different methods of looking at words and wondering which to choose. Sometimes I wonder what kind of an educator concocted this refined form of classroom torture.

Rejecting phonetics

It is at this third level, where the mixture of sight-vocabulary and phonetic methods creates such confusion, complexity, contradiction, and general pedagogical chaos that the eight-year-old can take no more of it. He rejects the phonetics because the authors manage to create almost as many phonetics rules and exceptions to the rules as there are words. In addition, like Pavlov's dogs these children are confronted with conflicting instructions and information: alphabetic information disguised as phonetic clues which contradicts three years of hieroglyphic training in which the alphabetic principle has been deliberately obscured and misrepresented. This is the learning confusion and conflict which creates in the child a full-blown reading neurosis. The child's intelligence tells him that written English is an alphabetic system but his training tells him that it isn't. But an eight-year-old cannot permit his intelligence to revolt against the authority of his training. So he has a learning breakdown. That is why parents and doctors are puzzled by dyslexics who are considered "too smart to be that dumb." There are other children, however, who in their frustration do strike out against the authority of their training by burning down the school. Kenneth Polk and Walter Schafer, in their recent book *Schools and Delinquency* tell us,

"Only in recent years has the enormity of educational failure been fully realized. The rising state of juvenile delinquency and adolescent alienation are causing increasing alarm... We propose that educational failure – by schools as well as by students – is directly related to delinquency... Unless, basic, radical, and immediate educational changes are made, delinquency will continue to increase – and will be accompanied by the spread of other social ills that stem from the same roots."

So now you can see the long-range disastrous results of applying hieroglyphic teaching techniques to an alphabetic writing system. And please don't tell me that the new eclectic basil programs are better than Dick and Jane. Some of them are worse. If you want to know why, read the evaluations I've made of them in my book. I've done my homework. Now is up to you to do yours.

In closing let me say that I do not enjoy criticizing others, particularly teachers. I remember my own primary school with fondness. My first grade teacher was a lady named Miss Sullivan, and I remember learning the alphabet and the short vowel sounds and seeing words on flash cards and reading Aesop's Fables. That was over forty years ago in a New York public school before anyone ever heard of word attack or context clues or configurational clues; before anyone knew that learning to read could be a problem. My hope is not to turn back to clock to happier times but to help us all recognize the horrendous mistakes that have been made. Forty years of this sight-vocabulary nightmare are enough. Let's get back to the alphabet and get America back on the road to sanity.

Notes by Internet Publisher: Donald L. Potter

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It gives me great pleasure to publish another of Samuel Blumenfeld's essays. This essay was originally delivered as a speech at the Thirteenth Annual Conference of the *Reading Reform Foundation*, May 16-17, 1974, Washington, D.C., and published in the July 1974 issues of *The Reading Reformer* (Vol. 2, No. 1). I highly recommend that the readers of this eye-opener essay read Sam's other essays on my websites www.donpotter.net and www.blendphonics.org.

At present *The New Illiterates* is out of print. Someday I should like to reprint it as a FREE e-book on my website. It has many profound insights of enduring value. In the meantime you can read my "Select Quotes from *The New Illiterates*" on my website. Sam's highly effective phonics primer, *Blumenfeld's Alpha-Phonics* can be purchased now from the Chalcedon Foundation. It is also available from Amazon under a new title, *Phonics for Success*.

One would think that the sight-word method would have long passed into oblivion. At least in the school district where I live, sight-words are unfortunately taught in every kindergarten and first-grade classroom. Every tutoring student I work with has a list of Dolch List Sight-Words they are instructed to memorize as wholes. This is why they come to me. I help them overcome the well meaning, but nevertheless, harmful sight-word instruction. I believe that any school that will totally abandon their sight-word instruction and allow their teachers to teach the kids to really read with Sam Blumenfeld's *Alpha-Phonics* (or other good phonics-first programs) will obtain astonishing results that will convince them of the folly of teaching sight-word.

Mr. Blumenfeld can be satisfied that he warned America of the dangers of the whole-word, sight-vocabulary method. But above all, he can be satisfied that he published the practical and highly effective instructional materials in *The New Illiterates*, *How to Tutor*, and *Blumenfeld's Alpha-Phonics*. Tens of thousands of parents have taught their children to be fluent, accurate, happy readers with Mr. Blumenfeld's program. .

Mr. Blumenfeld was born in 1927 in New York City; He died on June 1, 2015 in Waltham, Massachusetts.



Samuel L. Blumenfeld

This picture is taken from *The Reading Informer Conference Report* for 1974.