

The Century of Miseducation of American Teachers

by Robert W. Sweet, Jr.
President and Co-Founder
The National Right to Read Foundation, 1996

The literacy rate for adults who have been to school for at least six years will be less in the year 2000 than it was in 1900. We are fast becoming a nation divided between those who can read and those who cannot. Every day, somewhere in America, news headlines shout at us, "ILLITERACY IS INCREASING; OUR KIDS AREN'T BEING TAUGHT TO READ." How is it possible that a nation that prides itself on having the most educated population in the world can deny to its own children the ability to read?

We are spending almost a half trillion dollars on education at all levels, (1) and a third of a trillion of that tax money is being spent on elementary and secondary education. We are all being drawn into the vortex of the World Wide Web whether we like it or not. We are rushing to place a computer terminal in every classroom, and yet the simple concept of teaching our children the 26 letters of the alphabet, the 44 sounds those letters make, and the 70 common ways to spell them, is being rejected by the education elite, without regard to the overwhelming scientific evidence to the contrary.

Yes, we have had almost a century of education malpractice when it comes to teaching our children to read. We must apply some common sense and stop the academic child abuse that goes on under the guise of what today is called "whole language," and in the 1920's was called "look and say" reading instruction.

My purpose today is to explain why I believe illiteracy is rampant in America, but I offer a solution. It will not cost millions of dollars, and it will unlock the door for countless children, who would otherwise be left to aimlessly wander the corridors of beautiful school buildings, unable to read job notices on the bulletin boards.

Although statistics are always subject to challenge by some, the overwhelming evidence from such prestigious sources as the National Assessment of Education Progress, (2) (which found that "70 percent of fourth graders, 30 percent of eighth graders, and 64 percent of 12th graders did not... attain a proficient level of reading") cannot be ignored. These students have not attained the minimum skill level in reading considered necessary to do the academic work at their grade level. The National Adult Literacy Survey, after a five-year study, confirmed that finding indicating that 42 million adults can't read, and that 50 million more recognize so few printed words they are limited to a 4th and 5th grade level of reading. (3)

Even more troubling are the findings of The Orton Dyslexia Society, that illiterate adults account for 75 percent of the unemployed, one third of the mothers receiving AFDC, 85 percent of the juveniles who appear in court, 60 percent of prison inmates, and nearly 40 percent of minority youth. Of people in the work force, 15 percent are functionally illiterate, including 11 percent of professional and managerial workers, and 30 percent of semiskilled and unskilled workers. (4) Is it any wonder that a Census Bureau survey released in February of this year found that "American employers regard the nation's educational system as an irrelevance?" Rather "businesses ignore a prospective employee's educational credentials in favor of work history and attitude." (5)

Graduate can't read diploma

We must keep in mind that statistics represent real people, children and adults who often suffer the indignity and frustration of illiteracy alone. It is a quiet pain that only the illiterate can describe. Let me give you some real examples of what these statistics mean.

Demetrius Wilkins graduated from T.C. Williams High School in 1993. He was a model student, never a discipline problem. In fact if you had seen him on K Street, here in the District of Columbia, you could have easily mistaken him for one of the up and coming young law clerks. He had near perfect attendance for his twelve years of schooling, and yet when he walked across the stage to accept his diploma from the smiling superintendent of schools, it was a sad day, because Demetrius couldn't even read it. The taxpayers had anted up more than \$100,000 for his schooling. And according to the U.S. Labor Department, this young man represents nearly 20 percent of high school seniors graduating from our schools today.

But his story doesn't end there. After graduation he found a job in a meat packing plant. He lasted just a few days, because he couldn't read the labels on the meat. He tried desperately to find other employment, but because of his lack of reading skills, couldn't find a job. Finally, he was encouraged by some friends to go to a local adult reading clinic for help. He did so, and in a few weeks was reading for the first time in his life. According to the news reports, the only added ingredient he received was instruction in phonics, that is, mastering the letter/sound relationships he should have been taught in first grade. (6)

We cannot tolerate the kind of education malpractice this story represents any longer. It must stop now. Thousands of calls come to The National Right to Read Foundation, from parents whose children have been passed on grade after grade without being taught to read. The story is almost always the same. My child has been diagnosed by the school as having Attention Deficit Disorder, or dyslexia, or as being mentally retarded, or as having some other conduct disorder that places the blame on child or parent. And almost inevitably these children are in classes where "whole language" is used, and where almost no direct instruction in teaching phonics is present.

"When the kids call you a retard, it makes you cry."

One more poignant story comes to mind that illustrates how painful illiteracy can be. At a meeting this spring, I commented that many parents tell us how depressed their children become when they are required to memorize little books without the ability to sound out new and unfamiliar words. Often the children express great frustration and anger when faced with the requirement of reading science, history, literature and math before they have learned to read with fluency and comprehension. A young lady sitting in the front row, jumped to her feet and almost shouted, "That's me! That's how I feel." "When the kids call you a retard, it makes you cry and it makes your heart hurt inside."

This 14-year-old girl, normal in every other way, had been placed in special education for seven of her years of schooling. No one had tried to find out if she just needed some direct instruction in phonics. There is a happy ending to this story. We were able to refer Bonnie Belle to a reading teacher who quickly diagnosed her reading skill deficit, and after just two sessions of direct phonics instruction, Bonnie Belle began to read and understand that there is a system. She is on her way to success. But what of the lost years of schooling? What of the frustration, pain, and lost self-esteem she had experienced? Unfortunately, that cannot be repaid, or replaced. How tragic, how unnecessary, how outrageous.

This is the plight of thousands of young people all across America today. Shunted into special education classes, or Chapter I programs for disadvantaged youth, passed on year after year without ever mastering the basic skills essential for success in life. This reminds me of another story.

Two teenage boys were fishing by a stream one day when they noticed someone floating downstream. They both jumped in, pulled the person out of the water, gave mouth-to-mouth resuscitation, and saved his life. The next day, they were fishing in the same spot and noticed another person floating down the stream. Again, they jumped in and saved that person's life. From then on, people floating downstream happened quite consistently and many died en route to the hospital. The city council decided to build a hospital on that very spot so that they wouldn't have to transport the nearly drowned patients to the nearest hospital, which was eight miles away. The hospital became very busy and began to grow and expand. In fact the hospital became

very well known across the country. Many interns came there to serve their residencies. One day, one of those interns approached the administrator and thanked him for the opportunity to do his internship with the hospital. “There is one thing that bothers me, though. Has anyone ever gone upstream to see why people are falling into the river?” “No,” the administrator answered. “We just don’t have time. We are too busy treating the victims.”

Well, it’s time we took a trip upstream!

For generations the educational pendulum has swung from one extreme to the other...teaching skills but with little reading of quality materials, or teaching literature without the skills necessary to actually read it. We know now, that doing one without the other dooms large numbers of our children to failure and closes the door to further learning.

Reading is the gateway skill; without the abilities necessary to read, our children will be unable to go through the gate to all other areas of learning; for they all depend on this one skill. From the time the first alphabet was invented some thirty five hundred years ago, learning to read consisted of learning letter/sound correspondences. Anyone of normal sight, hearing and intelligence, if taught properly, could learn to read their native language with relative ease. According to historian David Diringer, the invention of the alphabet is often said to be “the most important invention in the social history of the world. It was the creation of a revolutionary writing, a script which we can perhaps term democratic or the people’s script.” (7)

As Thomas Jefferson said: “A nation that is ignorant and free, is a nation that never was and never will be.” Ignorance is only dispelled by a people who know how to read, and then read to know. It has just been within the past century that we have abandoned teaching of the body of knowledge we call phonics, to our children as a first step in reading instruction. English is an alphabetic language. Its spelling system is at least 90 percent regular, (8) and by teaching children the 26 letters of the alphabet, the 44 sounds those letters represent, and the 70 most common ways to spell them, children can read nearly every word in English. This instruction can be done in a matter of months, and should be introduced in first grade at the latest.

Daniel Webster, one of America’s great heroes, said: “There is nothing so powerful as truth— and often nothing so strange.” And the truth is this. We can solve illiteracy in America now. Poor people, rich people, rural residents and city dwellers, all have equal opportunity to master the skill of reading, if they are properly taught. The history of reading instruction from the inception of our nation can be separated into three general eras, each one shorter than the one preceding. The first era runs from colonial times until the latter part of the nineteenth century. Then the process of reading instruction was simple and straightforward. “Teach the code, then have children read.” (9) Learning the code unlocks at least 85 percent of the words in the English language. (10) It worked then; it will work now. Why did the system change? As the old saying goes, “If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it!” More about that later.

From Webster’s blue-backed speller to Dick and Jane

Noah Webster, who lived contemporaneously with Daniel Webster, was probably the most influential American in the history of modern reading instruction. He published “An American Dictionary of the English Language” in 1806. It standardized English spelling, and that spelling system remains virtually the same today. Noah Webster published the famous New England Blue-Backed Speller. For a century, more than 24 million copies were sold. It was second in sales only to the Bible. (11) Keep in mind that the population of America in 1800 was approximately 5 million people. By the early part of the twentieth century, the population had increased to over 100 million. Immigrants from every nation on earth had come to America. They all wanted to learn English, and most of them did. The Blue-Backed Speller, as it was called, was the tool millions of Americans used to teach their children to read, whether at home or at school.

But influential educators, like Horace Mann of Massachusetts, and after him John Dewey of Columbia Teachers College, rejected the teaching of phonics. In the mid-1800's when Horace Mann was Secretary of Education for Massachusetts, he is quoted as saying: "...it is upon this emptiness, blankness, silence and death, that we compel children to fasten their eyes; the odor and fungeousness of spelling book paper; a soporific effluvium seems to emanate from the page, steeping all their faculties in lethargy." (12) One does not need much imagination to sense Mann's disdain and disgust of "spelling books!" An interesting note here. Horace Mann's wife published an early "look and say" reader. It was based on the ideas of Thomas Galludet who was developing reading programs for the deaf. One of the first lines in her early reader was this: "Frank had a dog, his name was Spot." (13) Well, I am sure Spot never dreamed how famous he would become.

The second era began at the turn of the twentieth century, and lasted until the late 1960's, as Horace Mann's philosophy of reading instruction, aided and abetted by the spread of the Normal School for training teachers, firmly entrenched the "look and say" teaching of reading. For example, the early "look and say" primers were published by Scott Foresman in 1914. The basic premise was, teach the children to memorize the most commonly used words in the English language, adding new words each year and reaching a total of about 1500 words by the end of 4th grade. (14)

In the 1930's other publishers, seeing great profitability in selling "look and say" readers, jumped on the bandwagon. Thus the rejection of phonics as the first step in teaching reading started the slow, but inevitable death of phonics. By the 1950's illiteracy rates were steadily rising, and parents of students who couldn't read were told their children needed "remedial" help. In 1955, Rudolph Flesch, another great American hero, sounded the alarm in his classic book, *Why Johnny Can't Read*. In a follow-up volume, *Why Johnny Still Can't Read* published in 1981, he reaffirmed the problem and the solution once again. And his solution was simple. "The truth is, of course, that any normal six-year-old loves to learn letters and sounds. He is fascinated by them. They are the greatest thing he has come up against in life." (15)

Teach those principles directly and systematically, and you will have lifelong readers who love books. But his admonition fell on deaf ears. In two unpublished letters to a friend, Dr. Flesch describes his frustration: The first was written in 1955, shortly after his first book was released. "My Editor at Harpers, Mr. George Jones, can't get over his amazement at seeing a whole profession coming down on one poor little guy who wrote a book. He just didn't know what you and I know, namely, the enormous scandal of this whole thing, and the burning desperation of millions of parents." In 1986, just a few days before he died, Dr. Flesch wrote another letter to the same friend: "Dear John, When will all this lunacy end? It's over 50 years and it's going on and on. Pity the poor children. Pity the poor country - misguided, mistaught, defrauded from the first day of school. With all best wishes, Rudi." (16)

The third era began in the early 1970's and continues today. This "new" reading philosophy was called "whole language." In fact it was a more radical version of the "look and say" approach so popular in the early part of the century. "Whole language" relies on whole word memorization, but the words memorized are whatever happens to be in the "authentic literature books" the children are required to "read." "Whole language" theorists believe that children learn to read just the same way they learn to speak. Medical and linguistic research have conclusively refuted such a notion, (17) but "whole language" advocates ignore such research because it upsets their theory of learning. They continue to believe that we are born with the ability to read, and all that is required is to surround children with books, reading to them and watching them become readers by osmosis.

With whole language, no longer were the most commonly used words memorized, as was the case with the "look and say" readers. Despite the inane stories of Dick and Jane, Spot and Puff, we all learned to memorize certain words that made it possible to function quite well. But many of us who were victims of Dick and Jane attest to being poor spellers, and many others don't really enjoy reading. "Whole language" took us to new heights (or depths) of illiteracy because memorization of difficult words like *forsythia* in first grade is virtually impossible for a large percentage of students. Parents became frustrated, angry and felt guilty thinking they were the reason their otherwise normal children couldn't read. In fact, the real reason was the refusal or inability of teachers to instruct their first-grade students in how the alphabetic code works.

The phonics revolution

Today, we are in the midst of a revolution. It is one of the most crucial of this century. It doesn't hit the mainstream media very often, and yet the outcome of this revolution will spell success or defeat for welfare reform, reducing delinquency, improving our competitive edge among the industrial nations of the world, and very likely the survival of our Republic. If the solution is so simple, then why isn't it implemented now? That is a fair question, and it deserves an answer. There are ten reasons why I believe the education system which perpetuates illiteracy is almost impossible to change. Here they are: (18)

1. The public education monopoly is not held accountable for results.
2. There is an interlocking protective network, of teacher educators, teacher organizations and their publications, state and federal departments of education, school officials and publishers of school textbooks, that is exceedingly difficult for outside criticism to penetrate.
3. There is general agreement, with few exceptions, within this network that direct and systematic teaching of reading is ineffective, harmful and an insult to learners' self-esteem, dignity and freedom.
4. There is general ignorance about what experimental research has proven to be the benefits of teaching direct, systematic phonics.
5. There are many in the network who consider systematic teaching of phonics information as a "conservative political plot." There is abhorrence among many in the network for any teaching seen as "traditional."
6. There continues to be a lack of utilization of the findings of experimental research, which overwhelmingly support direct, systematic phonics.
7. There is a denial among those in the network that there is a crisis of illiteracy in America.
8. There has been no easy nor regular accommodation from the courts for grievances over malpractice in reading instruction.
9. The monopoly over teacher education allows reading teachers to be wrongly trained with impunity.
10. Most Americans won't take the time to understand the deeper roots of illiteracy, but they will act with their feet. During the past decade parents have increasingly been teaching their children to read before they enter school or as a supplement after school begins. Products like Hooked on Phonics, The Phonics Game, Sing, Spell, Read and Write, Action Reading and many others, have taken the country by storm. And yes, children are learning to read using these programs. That, despite the attack against Hooked on Phonics by the Federal Trade Commission in 1995. (19)

States like California, stung by the effect of falling literacy rates, have taken action to reverse the trend by passing legislation to require that explicit, systematic phonics be taught in their elementary classrooms. (20) Texas, North Carolina, Wisconsin, Florida, Virginia, Maryland, Massachusetts and Ohio are among the leaders in requiring direct phonics instruction as a first step in teaching children to read. (21)

There are several large roadblocks that remain if we are to return some common sense instructional practices to our schools. Most important is the denial by the education industry that there is a problem. (22) Second is the ignorance and unwillingness of teacher trainers to apply the research available today, to make sure that any prospective teacher of reading is well grounded in the knowledge of the alphabetic principles and how to teach these decoding skills to all first-grade children.

Can all children be taught to read successfully? Yes they can. Ask the teachers and parents at Barclay school in Baltimore, Maryland. As John Leo of U.S. News and World Report describes it: "Barclay is a rigorous, back-to-basics public school, that combines confidence building with high expectations. It gets results that elite private schools would be proud of, and it gets them from inner-city students, 85 percent of them black, 60 to 65 percent from single-parent homes. Barclay's approach is a rebuke to the reigning theories at our education schools. Barclay ignores "whole-language" theory. It believes in "direct instruction" (a dismissive educational term for actual teaching). It doesn't build self-esteem by excusing or praising failure. It ignores "learning strategies and multicultural claptrap. All it does is churn out bright, achieving kids." (23)

Or ask Thaddeus Lott, Principal of Wesley Elementary School in Houston, Texas. (24) When I visited his school last year, almost all of the kindergarten children were reading, and understanding what they read. They eagerly clamored to read their books to me as I observed their class. Almost all of the children in Wesley Elementary come from the same general population described in Barclay School in Baltimore, Maryland. Many more parents from more affluent areas of Houston move to the Wesley School District, just so their children can get a solid foundation in reading. I have visited schools in Washington, DC, Chicago, IL, Los Angeles, CA, and many other pockets of instructional sanity, and the results are consistently successful. Children can read with fluency and comprehension. Teachers are satisfied that they are truly professional. Parents are happy, but of more importance, the children have a chance to reach their highest potential in life without the secret shame of illiteracy.

Earlier I mentioned California, and its return to phonics instruction. A word of caution is needed here. Although the message from the State Legislature, the Governor, The State Department of Education, and the State Board of Education is clear, implementation of explicit phonics instruction will be strenuously resisted by the network. Already the solution being pushed by many California educators is a teaching scheme called Reading Recovery. It comes out of New Zealand, and its godmother is Dame Marie Clay. (25) It is “whole language” pure and simple. At least five major research studies released within the past two years demonstrate that not only is it extremely expensive, but there is little evidence that the educational benefits are lasting. (26) Reading Recovery is now sweeping the nation as a “solution” to the illiteracy crisis.

An effective answer to illiteracy

Let me offer a less costly, and more effective answer. I have here a twenty-five-page booklet called *Blend Phonics* (27) written by Hazel Loring, a master teacher born in 1902, who taught under both “whole word” and phonics systems. The legacy she has left us is powerful. Within the pages of this little booklet is the cure for illiteracy as we begin the twenty-first century. She writes:

I found I could provide this tool adequately in its simplest form to my school children in daily half-hour sessions in the first grade. By starting in September, children have gained a working knowledge of the 44 phonetic elements in the English language and an overall concept of its basic structure before winter vacation. While their knowledge may not be 100 percent perfect, it will be sufficient so that they can, with the teacher’s continuing help as needed, utilize the phonic key to unlock 85 percent of the words in the English language. (The other 15 percent, while largely regular, contain phonetic irregularities which sometimes require a little extra help from the teacher.) By the time the 44 units had been completed, the children had the feeling of security that comes from knowing that the language was basically an ordered, dependable system. As we came to words in our books that contained irregularities, they were welcomed as something surprising, unique, different and thus easy to remember.

Blend Phonics is just about the easiest lesson to teach that can be imagined. No preparation is needed (except to have at hand a copy of the groups of words as given in the lesson plans); no papers to correct for this phase of the reading lesson; no compulsory tests to be given. The children themselves do most of the work by making up sentences, and thus they learn by doing. It’s easy; it’s inexpensive and it works!

If every pre-service reading teacher, every reading supervisor, every kindergarten, first- and second-grade teacher in America had the information contained in Hazel Loring’s 25-page booklet and taught it this fall, there would be such a dramatic decrease in illiteracy in this country that the national media would be forced to take note.

One final story: Once there was an Army Commander named Naaman. (28) He was a powerful General, but he had leprosy. One day one of his Hebrew servant girls said to Naaman's wife, "If only my master would see the Prophet who is in Samaria. He would cure him of his leprosy!" Naaman asked his master the King if it would be all right to seek out the Prophet. The King readily agreed.

When Naaman found the Prophet, to his surprise and anger the Prophet told him, "Go, wash seven times in the Jordan, and your flesh will be restored." He was furious that the Prophet hadn't the courtesy to at least examine him, and see how to treat his disease. He fumed, "I could have washed in the rivers near home. They are much cleaner than this muddy Jordan."

Naaman's servants went to him and said, "If the Prophet had told you to do some great thing, wouldn't you have done it? Naaman thought about it, and after grumbling some more, he found a clump of trees where the Prophet couldn't see him, and with turned-up nose and glowering countenance, dipped himself seven times in the muddy Jordan River. When he came up for the seventh time, his skin was as clear and clean as that of a youth. He was ecstatic. He rushed back to the Prophet's house and presented the gifts he had brought. But the old Prophet wouldn't take it. He just said, "Go in peace, my son. And God be with you." There is much more to the story, but the moral is this:

When there is a simple solution to an insoluble problem, we must not let pride prevent us from getting the help we need.

For the sake of our children, let's not let another year go by without applying to reading instruction what common sense and years of research tell us. We don't have a moment to lose.

Endnotes

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Note from Internet Publisher: Donald L Potter

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I first read this article by Mr. Sweet back in 1999. I was deeply impressed by Mr. Sweet's remarks concerning Hazel Loring's *Reading Made Easy with Blend Phonics for First Grade*. I immediately got a copy of Loring's pamphlet through the Interlibrary Loan. I published the pamphlet on my website, www.donpotter.net, in 2003, but did not teach it at that time. In 2007 I started to use it in my private tutoring. I also launched the www.blendphonics.org website in 2007 to promote the Nationwide Blend Phonics Literacy Campaign. In 2015 I published a paperback edition of *Blend Phonics*, which included my own *Blend Phonics Fluency Drills*. I have also published a set of 62 decodable stories that children learning to read with Loring's method enjoy. Each story has four comprehension questions and a list of spelling words. The book is entitled *Blend Phonics Lessons and Stories*. It is available from Amazon (See links below.) and Barnes & Noble. There are no pictures in the book because I consider pictures a distraction from the primary task of building automatic decoding responses to print.

Mr. Sweet's bold declaration concerning Hazel Loring's *Blend Phonics* led to a dynamic turning point in my life. I would like to recommend it to every reading teacher in America.

If every pre-service reading teacher, every reading supervisor, every kindergarten, first- and second-grade teacher in America had the information contained in Hazel Loring's 25-page booklet and taught it this fall, there would be such a dramatic decrease in illiteracy in this country that the national media would be forced to take note.

Reading Made Easy with Blend Phonics: <http://amzn.to/2v5ylBF>

Blend Phonics Lessons and Stories: <http://amzn.to/2t7vBCy>

The following is the cover letter that was included with each copy of Hazel Loring's booklet sent free of charge to more than 5,000 Michigan teachers. (*Reading Informer*, March 1982)

Dear First Grade Teacher:

This booklet is sent to you free of charge by the non-profit Logan Institute for Educational Excellence, thanks to the generous contribution of Mrs. Raymond Rubicam, who has unselfishly devoted many years to the purpose of improving the teaching of reading and of combating illiteracy. It was Mrs. Rubicam who inspired me to write about my work in teaching reading to a first grade classroom. When Dr. Ralph W. Lewis read my description of the method that I had used, he commented that we should find some way to get it into the hands of every first grade teacher in Michigan. And here it is.

Please read the little booklet and try it out. It will take very little time and cost nothing. Simply allot half an hour each day for about four months in which to teach blend phonics to your children and thus provide them the important ingredient that too often is missing from reading programs, namely, directional training.

Except for this half hour, use materials of your choice, as you ordinarily would do. There is no need to disrupt the program to which you are accustomed though, of course, I am sure you will find it useful to utilize blend phonics techniques while attacking new words in oral reading, spelling, and writing. Your own judgment will dictate to what extent you make use of this tool during the school day.

Please try it. It can make all the difference for those children who might otherwise fail. I found this to be true in my classes. With best wishes for a successful school year.

Sincerely,
(signed)
Hazel Logan Loring