

The New Illiterates – Quotes

Introductory Note:

This paper is simply a litany of quotes from Dr. Blumenfeld's carefully researched book, The New Illiterates – And how you can keep your child from becoming one. (Arlington House, 1973). This book is out of print but deserves to be better known. I first read it in the late 1980's and have found it a mine of information. The book is invaluable because it explains in exquisite detail how the sight-vocabulary method produces defective readers. It is especially important because it is the first book to trace the whole-word method back to its true origin as a method designed for deaf-mutes. (The whole-language programs that were popular in the late 1980's and throughout the 1990's all suffered from the same weaknesses mentioned here.) Donald L. Potter, Odessa, TX. Note: My comments are in brackets [].

There is probably no way more calculated to confuse, discourage, and finally frustrate a child than teaching him to “read” via the whole-word method. Not only does this method not teach the child to read, but it places almost insurmountable obstacles to his ever learning to read. The amazing thing is not how many child fail to learn how to read by this method, but how many manage to circumvent the method and learn to read despite it. (31)

Perhaps the best way to demonstrate the absurdity of the method and the damage it can do is to lead the reader through the very course itself as it is given to the child. It is the only way to become fully aware of its horrors. I have read no description of the whole-word method by Rudolf Flesch or anyone else, which adequately exposes its incredible absurdities. Only an analytical and detailed look at the course of study itself can do the subject justice. (31)

[I recommend that the readers of these “Quotes” examine *The New Illiterates* closely to see exactly how Mr. Blumenfeld demonstrates step by step the logical and necessary outcome of teaching the whole-word method and how it would make a normal child into a defective reader]

One of the difficulties of the English alphabet is that its twenty-six letters stand for about forty-five sounds, and unless you introduce this knowledge to the pupil in an organized, step-by-step way, with the simplest and most regular words first, and the most difficult and irregular words last, we our are bond to create great confusion in the young mind. But in whole-word methodology, the entire concept of the alphabet is so obscured, so fragmented, so mutilated, that a great deal of damage is easily done to the child's later learning capabilities. It takes years, sometimes, to straighten out a child who has become so confused in that first year. (60)

A sight vocabulary only serves the purposes of the publisher who wants to make children dependent on his books. The authors admit that some of the errors might be the result of over dependence on context clues. But how do you make an over dependent child into merely a dependent child? The point is that the child need not be made dependent at all on any particular context for his ability to read. A sight vocabulary contributes nothing to the child's intellectual growth; in fact, it is a hindrance, a retarding agent, calculated to delay for as long as it suits the publisher, the pupil's ability to read independently. (69)

Any school which insists that a child master a sight vocabulary before teaching him to read on alphabetic principles is not only wasting the child's time, but endangering his sound intellectual development. Teaching a child a sight vocabulary is, by definition, teaching him to recognize words without knowing the letters of the alphabet or their sound values. This makes it impossible for him to achieve any degree of reading proficiency and independence until he has the knowledge denied him. He becomes totally dependent on a set of books with controlled vocabulary, thus limiting his reading scope to only those books containing those words he can recognize on sight or in a specific context. Placing such artificial limits on the young mind for pedagogical reasons is criminal. Placing such limits on the young mind for the sake of enriching a few authors and publishers is criminal. (69)

We shall examine these word-attack skills later in this chapter and see them for what they are: additional means for guessing at words rather than reading them. It is significant, incidentally, that the whole-word proponents should have concocted a phrase like "word attack" to describe what they do to words. If you can't recognize the word on sight, you "attack" it. You don't sound it out, decipher it, or decode it. You engage in an act of violence against it, as if the word were an enemy. Yet, there is no simpler way to figure out an unknown word than by separating it into syllables and sounding it out each syllable in its proper order. You don't have to attack anything, and you don't have to remember more than 26 letters and their forth-five sounds. (70)

Gray's word-attack skills are woefully inadequate. For one thing, they place additional burdens on the child's already overburdened memory. If the child has had problems acquiring his sight vocabulary, the word-attack skills are like Chinese torture, expecting an already confused mind to absorb even more confusing "information." (72)

This, the emphasis, on the third level, is still on remembering word forms and using structural and phonetic knowledge as a supplementary means of reading. Whereas the phonics or linguistic methods teach a child to read by only *one* method, based exclusively on alphabetic principles, the Dick and Jane program teaches a child to read by several methods at once: by remembering the general configuration of words, by knowing one or more of the phonetic elements in a word otherwise recognized by its configuration, by knowing all the phonetic elements in a word. Thus, the child must hesitate at each word he encounters in order to decide which "reading" method to apply to it. His mind is constantly shifting gears to find the right method or combination of methods to apply to the next word he sees. This is why children taught to read by whole-word methodology read with such hesitation and lack of fluency. (90)

Spoken language is a stream of vocal sounds broken by meaningful pauses. Written language, as represented by letters arranged in sequential pronunciation units, is a symbolic representation of the same stream of vocal sounds, punctuated by the same meaningful pauses. When a child learns to read either by phonics or linguistics method, he translates into vocal sounds a sequence of written pronunciation units, which he has learned to decipher first as single syllables, then as groups of syllables, until his reading pattern is as continuous as his speech pattern. True, when we are adult readers, we can scan a page of words quickly and skip what we don't want to read. But before we can do this we must develop the fluency which makes such quick comprehension possible. (90)

The whole-word method makes it impossible to attain this fluency, simply because it concentrates on word forms and word-form details rather than on a moving sequence of easily learned pronunciation units. In the whole-word methodology, a phonetic element is merely a word-form detail, a clue, not the basic element of words. It is extremely important to understand this distinction, because whole-word teachers will contend that they do teach phonetics, and indeed the second- and third-levels readers of the Dick and Jane series will prove this. However, it is the way the phonics is taught, in what context it is taught, and for what purpose it is taught that counts and which makes the important difference. (90)

In a method based on alphabetic principles, the word would be read phonetically from beginning to end, simplifying the entire process. All words would be read in the same phonetic manner, thus eliminating all of the complicated thought processes which are required of the child in “structural analysis.” It’s these thought processes which make children hesitate so often when reading via the whole-word method. They are stopping to think of how to “attack” the word, instead of just reading it one syllable at a time starting with the first. Some sight readers may eventually learn to do this. But many do not, as the early habits of looking at all words as wholes and remembering to discard his word-form memory habits. (91)

The reason why so many children cannot catch on to the phonetics is that the authors manage to create almost as many phonetic rules as there are words. So the child has the choice of trying to remember the words as a whole or remembering the phonetic rule applicable to the specific word. Thus, his memory is taxed regardless of the method he chooses with which to learn a word. It is true that most phonetic rules apply to a large number of words, but in the whole-word method the child is exposed to such a small sampling of words illustrating any particular rule, that he simply cannot learn it well enough. In a method based on alphabetic principles, the sampling of words illustrating a particular phonetic formation is large enough and read often enough so that whatever the child is supposed to learn he learns well. That, of course, is the purpose of drill, which the whole-word proponents abhor. Yet, before a pianist can play a piece of music well, he spends years drilling the scales over and over. The same is true in learning to read. One does not jump from illiteracy to literacy without the intermediate step of word drill necessary for making certain elementary phonics knowledge automatic. To present the child with an endless list of phonetic rules with a few word samples it illustrate them will not teach him how to read fluently, particularly if the rules are negated by whole-word habits. Curiously enough, the whole-word proponents do not object to the constant repetition of words as long as it is the same word. But to drill a child on common pronunciation units will enable him to learn hundreds of words easily and with minimum of effort is considered abhorrent. (92-93)

The reason why so many children break down in the third level is because, like Pavlov’s dogs, they are confronted with conflicting instruction and information: explicit phonics information which conflicts with what is now the implicit whole-word information on previous levels. (93)

By making responses to syllabic pronunciation units completely automatic, the child can reserve his memory for those exceptional and irregular formations which must be committed to memory. (93) [This is exactly how Mr. Blumenfeld teach irregular words with their proper spelling-family in his *Alpha-Phonics* program. Example: **as**, **has**, **was**.]

In a phonics- or linguistics-oriented reading program, the child learns to recognize a common pronunciation unit automatically without stopping to think of a phonetic rule. He has seen the spelling patterns of the pronunciation unit in so many simple one-syllable words that he easily recognizes it in two- or three-syllable words. Since the printed word will already be in his speaking vocabulary, he will not have to rely on his knowledge of phonics rules to figure out the word, but on his ability to recognize a sequence of common pronunciation units which will sound like a word he already knows and makes sense in the context he is reading. (95)

Of course, some children give up even before the fourth-grade level. These children become known as “dyslexic” - a fancy medical term coined especially to describe the perfectly normal youngster who can’t learn how to read by the whole-word method. (108)

As we commented earlier in this book, what is surprising is not how many children fail to learn how to read by the whole-word method, but how many succeed. The latter are usually children with very good memories, or photographic memories. However, success in reading is a highly disputed concept. Whole-word experts measure success according to their own standards. If a child can successfully read the controlled vocabulary of his reading level, that is considered success. But what if we applied more demanding academic standards? Would these same “successful” readers be successful? (108)... Obviously success is a relative term... A successful reader, on whole-word standards, would not be considered a successful reader on phonics-based standards.

The whole-word experts, however, concentrated most of their criticism on Flesch’s primer in the back of his book. After all, if a child could be taught to read by merely using that simple, inexpensive primer, they’d have no need for the elaborate, expensive basal systems. (176)
[I have successfully taught Flesch’s Primer to kindergartners and remedial students. The “experts” should have tried it on a few students before writing their criticisms.]

In 1961, a group of citizens in New York organized the Reading Reform Foundation, a volunteer endeavor “with the aim of restoring the alphabet (phonics) to its proper place as the basis of elementary reading instruction throughout the nation.” (189)

Under no circumstance should you permit your child to be taught a sight vocabulary. The sight vocabulary is the thalidomide of modern elementary education, and you run the risk of turning your child into a sorry dyslexic by subjecting him to sight-vocabulary methodology. Remember, learning a sight vocabulary is by definition learning words as wholes without knowing the sound-symbol components or letters or phoneme-grapheme correspondences that make up the words being “read.” He begins the process of word-guessing from the very beginning, and this may lead to letter reversals, described by Dr. Orton and Ann Gillingham, reading words from right to left, and other assorted bad habits. ... If your child is beyond the first grade and in a sight-vocabulary basal reading program, you *must* start converting him to sound-symbol reading. The primer in the final chapter can be used for that purpose. It can also be used with adults who were taught to sight read and have always had a reading problem as a result. The conversion process may take a very long time for some students. The bad habits ingrained by the sight-vocabulary technique in first grade can be very difficult to change. But the effort should be made, and it should be made in the home. There are not enough reliable remedial teachers to go around and they can be expensive. (201) [Dr. Blumenfeld’s *Alpha-Phonics* can be used instead of the primer mentioned here.]

Some Valuable History Concerning the
Deaf-Mute Origin of the Sight-Vocabulary Method
and
Important Insights into the Psychology of Reading
(Pages 208-215)

Another area where the teachers of teachers have failed miserably has been in their knowledge of educational history. I found no evidence within any of the journals on reading that any doctor of education was even remotely aware of the whole-word experiment which had taken place in Boston during Horace Mann's time, although many invariably quoted Mann— second-hand, of course—to defend their positions. No one within the reading establishment or among the teachers of teachers, all of whom write dissertations at the drop of a hat, could accurately identify the conceptual source of the sight-vocabulary method. Mitford M. Mathews, in his book *Teaching to Read* (1966), came close to it. He mentioned Gallaudet's contribution to this new methodology, and it was this lead which led me to investigate Gallaudet's role more closely. Perhaps the reason why that excellent historian missed the significance of Gallaudet's original contribution was an unfamiliarity with the details of the whole-word pedagogy as it is practiced by teachers using the guidebooks. It was my close analysis of the Dick and Jane Guidebooks which made me curious about the conceptual origins of a teaching method which flew so completely in the face of all logic. It was difficult to understand how such confusions could have replaced logic in elementary pedagogy. And when I investigated Gallaudet, it became obvious where the original confusion had started: in Gallaudet's mind. Gallaudet confused the teaching of reading with the teaching of language. To prove how completely this original confusion became a part of whole-word methodology, let me quote from an article in the March 1972 issue of *The Reading Teacher* by Kenneth S. Goodman, professor of elementary education at Wayne State University: "We have been teaching children who are competent users of oral language as if they were beginners in language learning." Professor Goodman wrote that without any knowledge of where it had all started: in Gallaudet's mind, based on the latter's experience with deaf children. But that initial confusion, divorced from its original source, is at the heart of whole-word methodology as it has been practiced in our schools for the last forty years. When I finally identified the source of the sight-vocabulary concept, I realized why it made no sense in the teaching of normal children. Yet, a gross ignorance and neglect of educational history made it possible for a group of teachers' teachers to subject millions and millions of normal American children to reading instruction as if they were deaf. But, I would have never been able to discover this for myself, had I not first made a minute, detailed analysis of the whole-word method itself as it was being used.

It is one thing to denounce the whole-word method as illogical. It is another to know why it is not only illogical, but also insane—that is, unhealthy. It was the utter insanity of the method, as outlined in the Guidebook lessons, which made me curious enough to want to identify its conceptual origins. I wanted to know in whose mind such insanity could have originated. Perhaps some far-out phrenologist had thought it up.

But when the evidence indicated that it had originated in Gallaudet's mind, it was obvious that it was the honest confusion of an honest man. Gallaudet thought he had discovered a great new way of teaching normal children how to read based on his experiences with the deaf. It is probable that he was as disappointed in the final results in the Boston schools as were the Boston schoolmasters, which might account for why he wrote nothing to defend his method after it had been so brilliantly demolished by Samuel S. Greene. Gallaudet was interested in getting children

to read, not in defending an indefensible method. Those who adopted his method after it had been divorced from its conceptual origins, eventually had something else to defend in the face of criticism: their pedagogical status and their textbook royalties. They had done what Gallaudet had never done. They built a whole complex system of instruction on the original confusion and carried it to insane lengths.

It is important to understand the confusions that have made reading instruction for the last forty years the most illogical in history. The first confusion concerns the process of learning how to read and the process of learning language. When Gallaudet was teaching the deaf children to read, he was teaching them language for the first time. These children had no concept of language since they could not hear nor speak language. As a result, their thinking and intellectual processes were virtually undeveloped. When Gallaudet taught them to recognize words, to read, he actually started teaching them language. This was the process which started these deaf children on the road to some intellectual development. Their vocabulary consisted solely of their reading vocabulary, and each word had to be learned not only for the way it appeared on paper, but for its meaning. That is how "reading for meaning" began. The deaf child had to read every word for meaning, because he previously knew none of them. In addition, because of his hearing deficiency, language for the deaf child became sight-associational, that is, words were associated with visual pictures, not sounds. The normal child with perfect hearing, however, comes to the first grade with a speaking vocabulary of between three and four thousand words, all of which he has learned through his ears, and with a considerable intellectual development as a result of that knowledge. Through the use of spoken language he has undergone a considerable mind expansion in a very short time. He is ready for much more. He already knows the meanings of look, run, see, jump, etc. He does not have to be taught their meaning as if he had never heard these words before. At this point it is important to understand the role of language in intellectual development, or to put it more simply, in developing the uses of the mind. When men lived in caves and spoke in a kind of grunting language, their ability to communicate with one another was limited and imprecise. As language developed, so did the speed and accuracy of communication. So did the thinking process. Language serves as a tool of communication. But it also serves as the tool of thought. We think in terms of language. When we think, we internalize speech, we debate internally, we talk to ourselves. It is this internal verbal exercise which expands our mind's capacity. When we add to our own thoughts the thoughts of others, we increase the expansion of our minds tremendously. Thus, the basis of all thinking is language, and language is, by definition, spoken, the word language itself referring to the tongue.

The alphabet was a perfect means of recording the spoken language on paper by way of a sound-symbol writing system. Before that men had not recorded language per se. They first drew pictures of objects, which then evolved into complex characters representing words. The leap from character writing to alphabet writing was a tremendous intellectual advance, and in reality it started man on the road to modern civilization. It was the key intellectual tool which permitted mind expansion on an unprecedented scale. Some ancients were so overwhelmed by the alphabet that they considered it of divine origin.

We identify the Greeks as the starting point of Western civilization. The Greeks were the first to use the alphabet for intellectual purposes. The inventor of the alphabet, a Phoenician, seems to have invented it for commercial reasons, although we really are not sure. But the invention of the alphabet represented an incredible piece of mental work. It meant pinning down and identifying the separate and distinct sounds of a language and designating a set of written symbols to represent them. Not an easy thing to do. Yet, it was done because man's intellectual requirements

forced him to invent a better method for mind development than had been previously used. Character writing was simply too inadequate for the purpose, and man's mind was bursting beyond the limitations set by so inadequate a system.

When writing of the inventor of the alphabet, most historians refer to "the man or men." I like to think that it was invented by one man, merely because it is the kind of intellectual discovery or invention which only one mind, figuring out things for itself, could hit upon. Of course, there were primitive elements of sound-symbol writing in hieroglyphics, but the inventor of the alphabet realized that the entire hieroglyphic system had to be scrapped and a new system, completely based on sound-symbol principles, devised to replace it.

It is vitally important to understand that the thinking process is carried out in terms of the spoken language, and until a written language was invented which could represent that spoken language precisely, accurately, and as a fluid continuum, man's mental development would be hampered. Even the teachers of the deaf recognized this connection of the thinking process with the spoken language and developed the school of articulation, to get the deaf to speak, so that their minds could think and develop further. Thinking is internalized speaking.

There is also a confusion between thinking, dreaming, and daydreaming. Dreaming is a free flow of mental images stimulated by emotional associations while we are asleep. Daydreaming is a more controlled version of the same process which occurs when we are awake. In both dreaming and daydreaming elements of speech are present along with mental imagery. But both dreaming and daydreaming are characterized by their free-associational flow. Control is absent in dreaming and very relaxed in daydreaming. However, in the process of thinking, control is the sine qua non, and it is carried out in terms of the spoken language. That does not mean that there are no mental images in thinking. But the mental images are stimulated by the spoken language rather than by the emotions as they are in dreams. Emotions can stimulate outbursts in terms of spoken language—when we shout in anger or communicate our strong feelings to others. But that is not thinking. Thinking, as an intellectual process, is a very specialized form of mental activity which follows certain logical rules. It is a learned process, a process which can be developed with effort—control always requiring effort, but it is a language process.

It is easy to see how the invention of the alphabet could facilitate the thinking process. In the first place it made it possible for man to reproduce as accurately as possible his spoken language, and in the second, it made it possible for men to communicate their thoughts with one another in as accurate a way as possible. This was most crucial for intellectual development, for it made it possible for one man's mind to use the best insights and thinking of other men's minds, thus speeding up the learning process enormously. If each one of us personally had to go through the laborious processes which have produced the greatest breakthroughs in knowledge, learning would be a very slow, tedious process. But we develop on what other men have already done, and the only way we do this is by *reading* what other men have said and thought. That is the meaning of reading as an intellectual tool. It opens the door to other men's minds, thoughts, insights, inventions. The printed word is the avenue whereby intellectual exchange is carried out. Your mind cannot grow and expand unless it has access to the thoughts of others, and only books provide us with that access. Therefore, the ability to read is vital to intellectual growth and mind expansion. The inability to read can stifle intellectual development. It can be an enormous source of frustration for an active intelligent mind. The "dyslexic" child with an intelligent mind has been pitifully crippled by teaching methods used in the earliest days of his education.

Some teachers cannot understand why some intelligent children cannot figure out the sound-symbol system for themselves despite the obstacles placed in their way by the sight-vocabulary

method. But as we pointed out in the earlier chapters, and as Dr. Orton found out in the 1920s, some children, despite high intelligence, cannot learn to read our written language when it is taught pictographically—or sight associationally. This is perfectly normal. My conviction is that no child actually learns how to read our written language in that way, and our colleges are full of the new illiterates to prove it. These college students have probably learned more from the mere use of spoken language than from the written language. But their deficiencies are quite apparent to the college professors. You simply cannot expand your mind or learn adequately enough by way of the spoken language alone. You can pick up a lot of stray information in that way, but organized learning can only occur with the aid of books, and books require many hours of reading, quiet concentration, and absorption.

Whole-word advocates would argue that they do teach children to read—to read for meaning—and that phonics people are only creating “word callers.” They disputed Rudolf Flesch on his definition of reading. It seems to me that the confusion here is between two entirely different processes: that of *learning how to read* and that of reading. They are two distinct processes and the sight-vocabulary basal textbooks hopelessly confuse them. Learning how to read is a highly specialized intellectual feat. It consists primarily of mastering the sound-symbol system of which our written language is composed. Learning how to read is not reading. It is an entirely different process and should be considered and treated so.

The sound-symbol system is one of the great intellectual achievements of mankind. Because we have had the alphabet for so long, its recognition as an incredible feat of human genius is often overlooked. It was quite an achievement for someone to have been able to isolate the separate sounds of speech and to designate separate symbols to represent them on paper. When you teach a child this system, you impart to him some of the intellectual excitement of this great achievement—the idea that each sound of the language can actually be isolated and represented by a symbol! What a tremendous insight that gives him into the nature of both the spoken and written language and the relationship between the two.

Although the human race has been in existence for perhaps a million years, it was only three thousand years ago that man had reached the intellectual and cultural development enabling him to invent the alphabet. It was the revolutionary work of a brilliant mind and has probably had more influence on the further development of civilization than any other single invention. A child cannot help but feel the excitement and sense of achievement that the mastery of such an enormously useful tool will give him. For a child who has already mastered several thousand words in his speaking vocabulary, the mastery of the sound-symbol system immediately gives him an intellectual power of tremendously greater dimension. To deprive a child of this mastery is criminal, especially in a complex industrial world where he must have it to survive.

Therefore, we can say that the whole-word method has been built on two great confusions: the first, that learning to read is the same as learning the language; the second, that learning how to read is the same process as reading. A method based on such confusions will have a very debilitating effect on the minds of children exposed to it. That is why one can characterize a sight vocabulary as the thalidomide of modern elementary education, because of the crippling effect it has on the minds of some children. In the first confusion, the child is taught as if he were deaf and knew no language. In the second, the natural order and sequence of learning is reversed so that the logic in language and the sound-symbol system is destroyed. The child assumes that written language is a mess of arbitrary symbols, requiring a photographic memory to visualize as word forms and the memorization of numerous dull rules in order to learn the right phonetic clues. What a totally false understanding of what an alphabetically written language is. It is in-

teresting how despite the fact that the conceptual origins of the whole-word method as a means of teaching the deaf to read have not been known until the publication of this book, others have detected in the whole-word methodology exactly those confusions that go right back to its origin. We have cited Professor Goodman's observation earlier. Mary Johnson's book [*Programmed Illiteracy*] provides further awareness that this is so. In describing her home remedy for converting sight-readers to sound-symbol readers, she writes: "If an older child finds oral spelling, even of three-letter words, discouragingly difficult, it helps to explain to him that this is because he has not learned to think with his ears. He has been spelling and reading just with his eyes—and his ears haven't been doing their share of the work. Once his ears have learned to cooperate they will be able to help his eyes and this will make reading and spelling much, much easier."

This probably explains why so many sight-readers have such difficult reading comprehension problems. A sound-symbol reader 'thinks with his ears' and therefore more easily hooks up reading to thinking, because, as we have shown, thinking is internalized speech and writing is thinking on paper. A sight-reader, however, is trying to think with his eyes, which simply cannot be done. The thinking process is a direct extension of the speaking process, and you short-circuit or break up the smooth flow of the process by inserting a sight-reading technique between the written language and the thinking mind. In sight-reading, the child associates words with ideas rather than with sounds. Therefore, the process of reading and thinking is constantly interrupted by sight associations.

We can get an idea of what the interruptive process is like if we had to read a sentence like the following: 'The # of \$ & ¢ I have is a small % of the total.' The sentence is easy enough to read because the symbols are common ones, quite distinctive in appearance, and are few and frequently used. But the symbols \$ & ¢ do not convey what the words dollars and cents convey in terms of fluent, accurate spoken language, that is, if you know what the letters stand for in terms of sound. But imagine what it must be like for a child trying to learn to look at each word as if it were a whole distinctive symbol like a dollar sign, especially words which look so much alike as dad, bad, bab, dab, hid, bid, bib, did, lid, etc. When such word symbols must be memorized by the thousands, or figured out on the basis of phonetic clues, the child is hopelessly lost. He is back in the pre-alphabetic period when man's mind was handicapped by an inadequate method of writing. And he is even more handicapped than a learner of hieroglyphics because our words were never meant to be read as characters and therefore are not distinctive enough.

Yet we have forced millions of children to read as if the alphabet had never been invented. And we have seen an entire educational system perverted to accommodate the illogic and confusion of a defective teaching method. **It is easy to see that the neural disorganization which some dyslexic children exhibit is a result of imposing a sight-association method on a sound-association writing system.** The mind can get so mixed up trying to reconcile two irreconcilables that it ceases to function properly at all. And this is why no parent should permit his child, under any circumstances, to be taught a sight vocabulary. It is inimical to healthy associational organization—which is what every child's mind requires for the proper and orderly absorption of knowledge. (208 -215)

When one begins to think of the incalculable damage done to young minds of America through defective teaching techniques, one can scarcely contain one's anger. Flesch was accused of writing in anger by his critics, as if anger were an inappropriate reaction to gross pedagogical malpractice which has had a ruinous effect on the literacy of millions. (219)

Chall's book had several notable failings: one, she did not clearly differentiate between an alphabetical system of writing and a hieroglyphic one. By defining the great debate in beginning reading in terms of decoding emphasis vs. a meaning emphasis she inadvertently fell into a confusing semantic trap. The man who invented the alphabet was very much concerned about reading for meaning. In fact his system was invented particularly to facilitate reading for meaning – with a much greater degree of accuracy and ease. Dr. Chall fell into the trap that whole-word advocates have been in since they went down their pedagogical road to ruin: confusing *learning how* to read with reading. Everyone who learns to read expects to read for meaning. Why do we learn how to read? But before you can read for meaning, you must know *how* to read, and that process consists of mastering the sound-symbol system of which our written language is composed. ... Which brings us to the second failing in Dr. Chall's book: her lack of understanding of the look-say method's contribution to reading disability: If we have characterized a sight-vocabulary as the thalidomide of elementary education it is because there is overwhelming evidence in the sheer number of remedial cases that imposing a sight-associational technique on a sound-associational system can create in perhaps one out of three or four children a severe case of associational confusion – or dyslexia, reading disability, or whatever else you care to call it. The severity of such cases is legendary, and some children have had to undergo remedial training for years at great expense to their parents in order to undo the associational confusion caused by Dick and Jane.” (222) [J. Chall, *Learning to Read: The Great Debate*. 1967/1983/1996.]

...we strongly recommend that the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare do the following: (1) issue an order requiring all schools to cease using sight-vocabulary programs, and to have such removed from the schools at once; (2) supply sufficient funds to replace all sight-vocabulary reading programs with programs based on the alphabetic, sound-symbol principle; (3) provide funds for the retraining of all reading teachers who do not know how to teach reading on sound-symbol principles. (224) These are minimal drastic measures, which are called for if we are to stop creating dyslexics with every new class of children who enter the first grade. We have cited enough evidence in this book – based on an analysis of the whole-word method, an investigation into its conceptual origins, an examination of the causes of reading disability, and an exposure of the professional and commercial conflict of interest involving leading members of the reading establishment – to make it absolutely imperative that the federal government act in behalf of the parents of this country and the millions of school children who will be exposed to pedagogical thalidomide during the next ten years. Nothing short of such intervention will put an end to such widespread educational malpractice and restore some measure of faith in the educational system. It would be criminal, in the light of the information presented in this book, for the federal government to permit one more American child to be exposed to the dangers of the sight-word method in public school. (224)

[I knew several veteran teachers who clung to their old phonics textbooks, even during the heyday of the whole-language revolution - especially the Economy, *Phonetic Keys to Reading*.]

There is no reason why any child should be subjected to reading instruction based on an outmoded method of teaching the deaf to read when there are in print excellent reading instruction textbooks based on sound alphabetic principles. We are still waiting for the cure to cancer. But the preventive cure of reading disability exists *now*. There is no earthly reason why any American child in any American school should be given anything else. (226)

I have not written this book to put publishers out of business, embarrass educators, or stir up public indignation against public schools. I have written this book for three very simple reasons: to spare millions of children unnecessary suffering, to increase their enjoyment and knowledge of the written word, and to make this country once more a fountainhead of literary greatness. (226)

Teaching the alphabet can be fun. You can use blocks. You can use alphabet books. I would discourage the use of pictures in conjunction with learning the alphabet. The picture he should be looking at is the *letter itself*, not an apple, or a ball, or an elephant. I make this point because shortly after he knows the letters, he will be taught to identify them with sounds, and that is very crucial. It is not the symbol of anything else. Thus, it is important for the child to see the letter as symbolizing sound, a noise. The letter is supposed to stimulate his mouth, lips and tongue to shape themselves into a particular sound. It is not supposed to make him think of an apple or an elephant. He must translate groups of letters into speech, and he will do this more easily the better he associates the letters with sounds. . . . The child sees lots of pictures around him. The letter is simply another picture among them. But he must know that the letter stands for something. It has meaning. It means a sound, not an object. Sound, *nothing else*. (230-231)

In the course of learning the sound-symbol system, however, the child will learn a lot of new words simply because these words fall into the most common and regular spelling patters that best illustrate the alphabetic principle. They will represent a considerable expansion of his own vocabulary. After the child has shown that he can read these words, it is not necessary to spend too much time on their meaning just yet, since he will not be using these words in his own speaking vocabulary for a while. Emphasis on comprehension and meaning should not begin until *after* the child has mastered the sound-symbol system and can read and write with ease every work in his own spoken vocabulary. When this is done, the emphasis can then be shifted to the comprehension of new words and the general expansion of the child's vocabulary. (233)

It should never be forgotten that the written language is merely a shadow of the spoken language and that the spoken language is one's guide to the pronunciation of the written word. In most cases the written word provides sufficient indication of stress and accent. But in multisyllabic words, the reader's knowledge of the spoken language becomes an indispensable requisite to correct pronunciation. The dictionary, of course, helps us to determine how an unknown word is pronounced. (234)

Any child who is exposed to the sight-vocabulary method risks becoming a dyslexic or a disabled reader requiring laborious, painful remediation instruction later in his school career. (290)

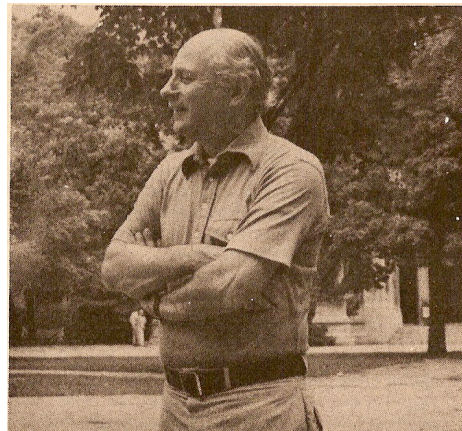
If your child is being taught to read via one of the well-known sight-vocabulary basal series, you had better start teaching him how to read at home via the primer in the final chapter of this book. If he is being taught to read via a sound-symbol method (phonics or linguistic), you can check his knowledge and progress by having him go through the primer in this book. It will reinforce what ever he is being taught in school. (290)

[See Dr. Blumenfeld's *Alpha-Phonic* or *How to Tutor* for an updated version of the primer mentioned here. I consider this the absolutely most important quote. Read it carefully. EVERY parent (and grandparent) should have a good phonics book handy and make certain that their child has mastered it before the third-grade – starting in kindergarten.]

Any system of reading instruction which mixes fragments of the sound-symbol system with contextual word guessing is essentially hieroglyphic. The unusually heavy emphasis on context clues is bad teaching. The search for context clues, in a sound-symbol system of writing, is only valid when dealing with homographs. Otherwise, one should have no more need to hunt for context clues to understand a written word than one does in understanding a spoken word. The child understands the meaning of the written word as he understands the meaning of the spoken word – in context of speech – not writing. Looking for context clues as a means of “reading for meaning” negates the idea that written language is a sound-symbol reflection of spoken language. The child should not “read” for meaning, but *listen* for meaning, for when he reads he listens. Hieroglyphic writing is read for meaning. It is not listened to. The distinction is quite important in differentiating how one reads alphabetic writing as opposed to hieroglyphic or ideographic writing. The importance of that difference is what made the invention of the alphabet so significant. (301, 302)

Imposing a hieroglyphic system of instruction on a sound-symbol writing system can cause associational confusion, dyslexia, strephosymbolia, and other reading disabilities. (303)

Samuel L. Blumenfeld RRF Conference Speaker in 1980



Sam Blumenfeld was a featured speaker at our (Reading Reform Foundation) 13th Annual Conference in Washington, D.C. (“Why America Still Has a Reading Problem”); our 14th Annual Conference in Scottsdale, Ariz. (“Twenty Years After Rudolf Flesch”), and our 15th Annual Conference in Clearwater Beach, Florida (“How to Tutor”).

He speaks out loud and clear on the horrors of the sight word system and the necessity of returning to intensive phonics in the classroom.

It is well to recall Sam’s opening remarks at Washington:

“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 proficiently. Despite the fact that more children are spending more time in school than ever before, the ranks of functional illiterates is growing not by thousand but by the millions”

And today we echo his closing remarks: “Forty years of this sight vocabulary are enough. Let’s get back to the alphabet and get American education back on the road to sanity.”

Sam has long been active in the **Reading Reform Foundation**. He formerly served as State Chairman in Massachusetts and now is senior executive advisor to that state’s chapter.

The above little article was taken from *The Reading Informer*, Vol. 7, Number 4 – May, 1980. G.K. Hodenfield, Editor.

BOOK REVIEW

THE NEW ILLITERATES

**And How to Keep Your
Child from Becoming One.
By Samuel L. Blumenfeld
(Arlington House 358 pp \$9.95)**

With chaos in reading in most American schools today, the author's purpose is to turn parents into "reading experts." If you read his incisive, no-jargon information, you will be one.

Blumenfeld tells you why a normal child becomes a crippled reader: sight-word method "thalidomide" in his first year of school.

He explains clearly how it is taught, and why it prevents a majority of children from learning to read well, no matter how much teachers try to help them in later grades.

This book tells you why this mental thalidomide is still used in three-quarters of the nation's schools, creating millions of functional illiterates. (If they live in good neighborhoods, educators call them "dyslexics" or "learning disabled.") Bluntly, the sight-word method is very profitable to a few, and you will learn how they maintain control of most basic reading instruction.

Ask the brand name of the primary-grade basal reading program in your schools. Then look it up in the appendix of "The New Illiterates," where the author has provided brief discussions of the most-used programs. You will know in minutes whether your child's program is good or poor.

It is easy to see how the near-total monopoly has been maintained. But how did these blatantly bad sight-word programs gain that first firm foothold 40-odd years ago, back in an era when the experienced teacher knew children needed the phonetic approach instead? By long research the author has found some glimmers of light in this mystery, in old library files.

And in rare-book archives he has uncovered a treasure. In education journals of the 1800s he found the true original source of the sight-word method, a history never told in modern texts. Blumenfeld discovered that a dedicated man, the Rev. Thomas Gallaudet, invented the whole-word, no-phonics (i.e. no "sounds"), sight method to try to teach reading to non-hearing, non-speaking children at his Asylum for the Deaf and Dumb.

Horace Mann, then top school administrator for Massachusetts, endorsed the adoption of this new "deaf and dumb" sight-word primer for all the speaking, hearing, normal children in Boston's public schools. The method was a failure. Within a few years Boston teachers succeeded in forcing the Gallaudet books out of the schools, after a rousing year-long battle with Mann.

Author Blumenfeld tried many avenues to try to find one copy of this first pure sight-word reader – but they seemed to have vanished from old library collections. (And in a 1930s bibliography he found a provocatively strong clue that any remaining copies may well have disappeared by theft, at the same time all copies of some other much newer reading textbooks did, apparently in the 1920s.)

**Reviewed by Kathryn Diehl
Research Director
Reading Reform Foundation**

Note by Internet Publisher: Donald L. Potter

June 15, 2005
Odessa, TX

Thanks to Dr. Blumenfeld for giving me permission to publish my selection of quotes from his book on my web site: www.donpotter.net.

Just from these twelve pages of quotes, the thoughtful reader will quickly perceive the profundity of Dr. Blumenfeld's insights and the depth and accuracy of his research.

NOTE CAREFULLY THE FULL TITLES

Rudolf Flesch: *Why Johnny Can't Read and what you can do about it.*

Samuel Blumenfeld: *The New Illiterates – and how to keep your child from becoming one.*

Flesch and Blumenfeld not only sounded the alarm, they both **provided effective phonics methods** that were successfully used by tens of thousands of parents to teach their children to read. Both books provided a workable solution to the problem of functional illiteracy. The persistent problem of massive illiteracy afflicting our nation can be solved in a single year if every first-grade teacher were to implement one of these two programs. IT IS THAT SIMPLE.

As an experienced elementary reading teacher (14 years in public elementary classrooms and 5 more in private school education.), I can personally testify to the effectiveness of both programs. I have used Flesch's *72 Exercises* and Sam's *Alpha-Phonics* to teach both beginning and remedial readers. Both programs are available at very nominal costs on the Education Page of my web site: www.donpotternet.net.

The following articles by Dr. Blumenfeld are available on my website:

1. Can Dyslexia be Artificially Induced in School? Yes, says Researcher Edward Miller
2. Miscue Analysis: Training Normal Children to Read Like Defective Children."
3. How to Cure Dyslexia.
4. How Should We Teach Our Children to Write? Cursive First, Print Later!
5. Letter Precision
6. Twenty Years After Flesch: Are the New Basal Reading Programs Doing the Job?
7. Dyslexia: The Disease You Get in School.
8. Why Pictures are Harmful in Reading
9. Why America Still Has a Reading Problem

Dr. Blumenfeld's picture and article by Hod from *The Reading Reformer* added 11/24/06.

Kathy Diehl's review was taken from the January 1974 *Reading Informer* on June 14, 2010