



**Sam Blumenfeld**

## **Children Taught With Look-Say Method Lack All Sense of Precision of Letters**

by Samuel L. Blumenfeld

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I should like to talk with you today about some of my recent experiences in tutoring children. I know from the experiences of others that phonics works extremely well, and I wanted to have my own personal experience tutoring children in order to gain some first-hand knowledge.

In Boston, as you know, we have a situation where many parents are keeping their children out of school because of the busing situation. A volunteer group of tutors was organized to help these children, and through this organization I had the opportunity to tutor a 9-year-old girl and a 15-year-old boy.

The girl had had a year of sight reading in her elementary school, so she could read a few sight words “see” and “look,” and not much else. But she did, at least, know the alphabet.

The 15-year-old boy was a total mess, an absolute total mess, a complete sight-reading mess. It is really very hard to understand how bad the situation is until you come into contact with such a child.

I learned a very great deal, including the fact that sight reading leads to some very bad habits. One of the first things you notice is that they have no sense of precision in regard to letters, so you have to start teaching the letters. Since they look at words as wholes, you have to get them out of that habit and teach them to see the letters as representing sounds. That took some time with the little girl, but she learned.

I soon realized that teaching phonics is not necessarily easy. Phonics requires a great deal of drill, a great deal of work. It’s like learning to play the piano. You know, you can tell a child what a particular note sounds like, but he still must play that note many times to really learn it.

I realized that the road to literacy is not an easy one, even with the best phonics program. How much harder it must be with sight words!

The schools have the children for five hours a day, five days a week. That should give them plenty of time to teach the children to read. I was tutoring these two children three sessions a week for about an hour and half each session. I was making very good progress, but I could see how much more progress you could make if you had them every day, for five hours a day. The schools have them for all that time, and yet they can’t teach them to read.

In my tutoring, I was tremendously impressed by the necessity of having great patience, of being persistent, and of making certain that the children learn accurately. Accuracy, I think, is one of the most important things in phonics – it’s the most important thing in reading. That’s why I was so incensed when Professor Goodman came out with this statement about the pony and the horse. If you can’t tell the word “pony” from the word “horse,” why should you bother to tell a “B” from a “D,” or a “G” from a “Q”?

You have to start teaching accuracy from the start, and correct a child when he makes a mistake. Children want to be accurate, but you cannot assume anything. Every letter has a meaning, and the sequence of letters has a meaning, but you cannot assume that a child will read the letters in sequence, particularly if that child has a background in sight reading. In fact, you can't assume anything when teaching a child to read. Even the best phonics program requires very patient, accurate instruction - but it works, and it works beautifully.

I also learned through my tutoring that one of the reasons the sight word programs are so destructive is that they never permit a child to develop the ability to concentrate. Those programs are full of distractions.

The biggest distractions are the pages full of pictures that take the child's attention away from the words on the page. And the pictures don't add anything to a child's reading ability, not a whit. I object to the tendency to add more and more pictures in beginning instruction books, and this is true also of the phonics books. There are more pictures this year than in the phonics books of last year. There are the so-called new basal series that have linguistic consultants, and the first thing they do is violate the linguistic prohibition against pictures.

Then there is the trend toward open classrooms. This also destroys the child's ability to concentrate with the constant distractions.

I find that the only way you can really teach a child to read is to teach him to concentrate, teach him to focus his eyes on the letters, and put the letters together into words.

You might be surprised, but you can tutor a child for an hour and a half, and the child will be absorbed throughout that entire period, with almost no desire for an interruption. He is absorbed because learning to read with phonics is absorbing.

The 15-year-old boy had many more problems than the 9-year-old girl because he was the result, the end product, of eight years of very poor instruction in the schools. It was a matter of teaching him from the very beginning. You have to backtrack with these children; you have to go back to the very beginning. The boy had something of a sight vocabulary, and that was about it.

You discover with these children who have a limited sight vocabulary that printed English is almost like a foreign language to them. Even if they can read the words on the page, they don't understand half or two thirds of them. Usually, they can't read because sight reading programs never permit a child to expand his use of the language. That's why you have to go back to the beginning and teach a child a larger vocabulary. This takes an enormous amount of time.

I don't know how we're going to undo the damage which is being done to these children in elementary school. On this very day, there are millions of children in this country who are being taught with the sight method. They are going to be with us, and we're going to have a great many problems.

I wish I could be as optimistic as Dr. Weber about the future, as far as our struggle goes. I think it's going to get worse before it gets better. I read the professional magazines; I read what the teachers are saying to each other. There isn't any indication in the professional journals that these people intend to change their ways.

If change is to come, it's going to come grudgingly. It's going to come in islands, in particular schools in particular areas. I believe the heart of the struggle is before us.

## Note from Internet Publisher: Donald L. Potter

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This speech is from the May 1976 *Reading Informer*, published by the *Reading Reform Foundation*. I deeply appreciate Kathryn Diehl for sending me her duplicate *Reading Informers*. The editor at that time was G. K. Hodenfield.

Thirty years have now passed since Mr. Blumenfeld delivered his all-too-prophetic address. It is my privilege to acknowledge my indebtedness to Sam for helping me achieve great success teaching reading to many children during my years as a public school teacher. I found his book *Alpha-Phonics* to be easy to teach and highly effective. Sam mentioned Ken Goodman in his speech. I became aware of Goodman in 1990 when I started teaching second grade for the Ector County Independent School District in Odessa, TX. The district had adopted a whole-language reading program and trained all the teachers in whole-language philosophy and techniques. The older, experienced teachers were appalled at the new programs. I recall several of them telling me that it was a good literature program but not a beginning reading program. Many of the older teachers kept using their phonics charts and books. Some of the schools were able to use Lorna Simmons' *Classroom Phonics* (now *Saxon Phonics*) to good effect. I certainly commend those schools for figuring out how to supplement (override) the whole-language adoptions. Later efforts tried to mix whole-language and a little (very weak) phonics in what was called Balanced-Literacy or Guided-Reading, of which *Reading Recovery* was an example of this very weak method. America certainly cannot survive another 30 years of poor beginning reading instruction.

Notice that Mr. Blumenfeld mentioned that sight word methods and phonics methods keep adding more and more pictures to their text. I believe this explains why some of the highly touted phonics basal methods have failed to improve reading as much as many of us had hoped they would. Mr. Blumenfeld's *Alpha-Phonics* remains the perfect paradigm of what a superior reading program should look like.

Several valuable essays by Mr. Blumenfeld are available for free download on the Education Page of my website, [www.donpotter.net](http://www.donpotter.net), note especially the Samuel L. Blumenfeld Reading Clinic webpage on my site.

Mr. Blumenfeld passed away on June 1, 2015 at the age of 89. I spoke briefly with Sam on the phone before he passed away. I cherish my many years of email correspondence with Sam. I appreciate the guidance in understanding the all the issues related to successful reading instruction.

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