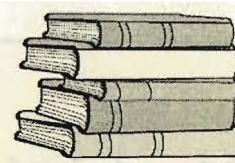


The Blumenfeld Education Report



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The purpose of this newsletter is to provide knowledge for parents and educators who want to save the children of America from the destructive forces that endanger them. The Blumenfeld Education Report carefully documents how America's education system can place our children at grave risk in many ways – from flawed classroom methods and dubious philosophies to special-interest agendas and misguided legislation. Only a well-informed public will be able to reduce such risks.

Creating Dyslexia

It's as Easy as Pie

Earlier this week, I had a demonstration of how easy it is to turn a perfectly normal child into a budding dyslexic. A father, in his early forties, brought his 5-year-old kindergartner to me for an evaluation. The boy had had ear infections which the parents thought might interfere with his learning to read. He had some difficulty distinguishing m's and n's, and his teacher said that the boy "wasn't catching on." Previously, the parents had signed a statement that they would make sure that the child did the homework assigned by the teacher.

The boy's pediatrician recommended that the child be core evaluated. At a core evaluation, teachers, counselors, and psychologists discuss what's wrong with the child with the parents. Then they recommend an individualized learning program. The father had heard about me and wanted my advice about the need or desirability of a core evaluation. Having served as a teacher in a private school for children with learning and behavioral problems, I had taken part in several core evaluations and was familiar with the process. But I wanted to meet the child and

judge for myself whether or not he needed any kind of core evaluation.

The 5-year-old turned out to be very friendly and from all appearances perfectly normal. First, I wanted to see if he could learn to read by intensive phonics. He was able to recite the alphabet but he had not yet learned the letter sounds, and his ability to identify all of the letters correctly required more work on his part. This was quite normal for a 5-year-old.

But I wanted to demonstrate to his father that the boy was quite capable of learning to read by phonics. So I turned to Lesson One in my Alpha-Phonics book and I explained to the youngster that the letter *a* stood for a short *a*, which I then articulated quite distinctly. I asked the boy to repeat the sound, which he did. Then I pointed to the letter *m* and told the boy that the letter *m* stood for the "mmm" sound. And the boy was able to repeat the "mmm" with no problem. I then demonstrated that when we put the short *a* together with the "mmm" we get the word "am."

I then introduced the letter *n* and its sound, "nnn." The boy repeated the sound quite nicely. I then joined the short *a* with the "nnn" to create the word "an." The boy repeated the word. I told him that *an* was a word and asked him if he had ever used it. He said no. So I told him to listen to me, and I said, "I have *an* apple." He got the message. Meanwhile, through all of this he sat on his dad's lap and was smiling happily. I went through the rest of the consonants in the lesson: *s*, *t*, and *x*, showed how the words *as*, *at*, and *ax* were composed of two sounds, articulated the sounds, had him repeat them and demonstrated their use in short sentences. I asked him if he knew what an *ax* was. He did.

The purpose of the lesson was to show the father that his son was quite capable of learning to read by phonics, emphasizing that it would have to be done with much patience and repetition. Repetition, the use of flashcards, were needed to produce automaticity. I did not think that the boy's hearing problem was even a problem. I was sure that his pronunciations would improve as he learned to read phonetically and that his very minor problem with *m* and *n* would clear up as he became a reader.

The father then showed me the papers his son had brought home from school. The math papers were simple counting exercises. There was also an exercise in categorizing. One exercise, which was supposed to test the youngster's ability to follow instructions, was somewhat confusing and got the child a failing grade in the exercise. That upset the father.

Learning Sight Words

But what really perked my interest was the Dolch list of basic sight words which the child was supposed to memorize. The teacher had given the child this list of 90 words which were supposed to be memorized with the help of the

parent -- five words per week, from January to June. The first week's words were: *a, the, yellow, black, zero*. Second week's words: *and, away, big, blue, can*. Third week: *come, down, find, for, funny*. Fourth week: *go, help, here, I, in*. And so on. Now, the child had hardly learned the alphabet and was not aware that letters stand for sounds. So why was he being given this arbitrary list of words to memorize by sight? Most of the words were perfectly regular in spelling and could have easily been learned in the context of a phonics reading program.

E. W. Dolch was a professor of education in the early 1920s who composed a list of the most frequently used words in English. It was thought that if children learned several hundred of these words by sight, that is, by whole-word recognition, before they even knew the alphabet or the letter sounds, they would have a jumping head start in learning to read. But what Dolch didn't realize is that once the child began to automatically look at English printed words as whole configurations, like Chinese characters, the child would develop a holistic reflex or habit which would then become a block against seeing our alphabetic words in their phonetic structure. And that block would cause the symptoms of what is known as dyslexia.

Developing Reflexes

You might ask, what is a reflex? A reflex is a quick, automatic, habitual response to stimuli. There are two sorts of reflexes: unlearned (unconditioned) and learned (conditioned). An unlearned reflex is innately physical, such as the automatic reaction of our eyes when we enter a dark tunnel. The response is automatic and thus unlearned. A learned reflex is the kind we develop through habitual use, for example, in learning to drive. When we see a red light ahead, we automatically apply our foot to the

brake pedal. We do this without thinking, while in the middle of a conversation, or listening to the radio. That's a learned reflex. A learned reflex is not easy to unlearn. For example, an American who rents a car in England, where they drive on the left side of the road, must suppress his right-drive reflex if he is to avoid a head-on collision. In that case, the American driver can no longer rely on his normal reflexes, and must think about every move he makes while driving.

That learning to read involved the development of conditioned reflexes was well known by the professors of reading, especially when teaching a child to read by the sight method. Professor Walter Dearborn of Harvard University, wrote in 1940:

The principle which we have used to explain the acquisition of a sight vocabulary is, of course, the one suggested by Pavlov's well-known experiments on the conditioned response. This is as it should be. The basic process involved in conditioning and in learning to read is the same...

In order to obtain the best results from the use of the conditioning technique, the substitute stimulus must either immediately precede, or occur simultaneously with, the adequate stimulus. As we have explained before, the substitute stimulus in the case of learning to read is the word seen and the adequate stimulus is the word heard. (School and Society, 10/19/40, p.368)

And so it was well understood by the professors of reading that in learning to read, it was necessary to develop automaticity, a reflex. But the correct reflex to develop is a phonetic reflex which comes about by learning the letter sounds and being drilled sufficiently in the consonant-vowel combinations, so that the child learns to see the phonetic structure of a word and can automatically sound out the word by articulating each syllabic unit. In other words, the child automatically associates the letters with sounds. When that phonetic reflex is developed, reading becomes easy, fluent, and enjoyable.

But the development of a holistic reflex, as described by Professor Dearborn, creates an obstacle to the development of a phonetic reflex. It is this conflict, or collision, of reflexes which causes dyslexia. Undoubtedly, the professors of reading were well aware that this conflict would develop, for they were acquainted with Pavlov's experiments in artificially creating behavioral disorganization by creating a conflict of reflexes. All of this was well expounded in a book written by one of Pavlov's colleagues, Alexander Luria, *The Nature of Human Conflicts, Researches in Disorganisation and Control of Human Behavior*, published in 1932. It had been translated from the Russian by W. Horsley Gantt, an American psychologist who had spent the years 1922 to 1929 working in Professor Pavlov's laboratories in the Soviet Union. In his preface to the book, Dr. Luria wrote:

The researches described here are the results of the experimental psychological investigations at the State Institute of Experimental Psychology, Moscow, during the period of 1923-1930. The chief problems of the author were an objective and materialistic description of the mechanisms lying at the basis of the disorganisation of human behaviour and an experimental approach to the laws of its regulation... To accomplish this it was necessary to create artificial affects and models of experimental neuroses which made possible an analysis of the laws lying at the basis of the disintegration of behaviour.

In describing the results of the experiments, Luria wrote:

Pavlov obtained very definite affective "breaks," an acute disorganisation of behaviour, each time that the conditioned reflexes collided, when the animal was unable to react to two mutually exclusive tendencies, or was incapable of adequately responding to any imperative problem.

Luria wrote further:

We are not the first of those who have artificially created disorganisation of human behaviour. A large

number of facts pertaining to this problem has been contributed by contemporary physiologists, as well as by psychologists.

I. P. Pavlov was the first investigator who, with the help of exceedingly bold workers, succeeded experimentally in creating neuroses with experimental animals. Working with conditioned reflexes in dogs, Pavlov came to the conclusion that every time an elaborated reflex came into conflict with the unconditioned reflex, the behavior of the dog markedly changed.

Although, in the experiments with the collision of the conditioned reflexes in animals, it is fairly easy to obtain acute forms of artificial affect, it is much more difficult to get those results in human experiments.

The most successful attempts to produce experimental conflict psychologically are seen in the experiments of M. Ach. He formed some fairly complicated habits, and when he had obtained a stable, perseverative tendency, he brought this into collision with another tendency determined by new stimuli or instruction...

K. Lewin, in our opinion, has been one of the most prominent psychologists to elucidate this question of the artificial production of affect and of experimental disorganisation of behaviour. The method of his procedure – the introduction of an emotional setting into the experience of a human, the interest of the subject in the experiment – helped him to obtain an artificial disruption of the affect of considerable strength.

Here the fundamental conception of Lewin is very close to ours.

Who was K. Lewin? He was the very same Kurt Lewin who came to the United States in 1933, founded the Research Center for Group Dynamics at M.I.T. (which later moved to the University of Michigan), and invented “sensitivity training.” Shortly before his death in 1947, Lewin founded the National Training Laboratory which established its campus at Bethel, Maine, under the sponsorship of the National Education Association. There, teachers were instructed in the techniques of sensitivity training and how to become effective change agents.

And so we know from the experiments conducted by Pavlov and Luria in the Soviet Union in the 1920s and '30s, that the psychologists had developed the means to artificially create behavioral disorganization. In

light of all of this, we are quite convinced that the symptoms of dyslexia developed in perfectly normal, physically healthy school children is the result of a collision of reflexes which occurs as the child advances to the second and third grades.

As Easy As Pie

This is how it works. The child is given a sight vocabulary to memorize before he or she has acquired any phonetic knowledge of our writing system. Subsequently, he or she develops a holistic reflex, that is, the habit of looking at each word as a total configuration and being absorbed at finding something in that configuration to remind the reader of what the word is. (Note: Ach “formed some fairly complicated habits, and when he had obtained a stable, perseverative tendency, he brought this into collision with another tendency determined by new stimuli or instruction.”)

Many, if not most, children can memorize the shapes of several hundred sight words with significant visual associations. But when the child reaches the second and third grade where the number of words to be learned taxes the memory beyond its capacity, the child experiences a learning breakdown somewhat akin to a nervous breakdown. When the child is then taught some phonics, some letter sounds, (“new stimuli or instruction”) as a means of assisting the sight process, the child experiences a conflict or collision of reflexes and develops dyslexia (disorganization of behavior), the inability to see the phonetic structure of our words, the inability to automatically decode a word. The holistic reflex is simply too strong and the phonetic information too insufficient to overcome the holistic reflex which then creates a block against seeing our alphabetic words in their phonetic components.

Unless a child is drilled in the letter sounds and can automatically articulate consonant-vowel syllabic combinations, that child will not develop a strong enough phonetic reflex to overcome the holistic reflex and the blockage (cognitive disorganization) it creates. The way, of course, to avoid this problem is to teach the child intensive, systematic phonics first before requiring the child to read whole words.

The Road to Dyslexia

And so, by teaching this 5-year-old child a sight vocabulary before he could master the letter sounds was putting him on the road to dyslexia. This is particularly harmful because the child's brain at that early age is still in the process of organizing its patterns of thinking and learning, its cerebral habits, habits that are very difficult to unlearn later in life. That accounts for the great difficulty in remediating dyslexics as they grow older and their thinking patterns become more firmly established. It is possible that the brain can be permanently deformed by the early development of thinking and learning patterns based on faulty teaching methods.

Today, millions of American children are being taught to memorize sight words before they even know the alphabet, let alone the letter sounds! Commercial programs sold in supermarkets and bookstores are mostly based on the notion that learning a sight vocabulary is the first step in learning to read. Actually, it's the first step toward becoming a dyslexic. Many parents think they are doing their preschool children a service by purchasing books with audio tapes that permit their children to learn the words in the books by sight while listening to the tapes. They are simply preparing their children to become reading or learning disabled by the time they enter first grade.

Thus, one can see how easy it is to cause dyslexia. Simply have a child memorize a sight vocabulary and develop a holistic reflex. That's all there is to it. That professors of education have perfected the process indicates that they know how it works and what it results in. That is why parents are never warned about teaching their children sight vocabularies. It's a vital part of the dumbing down process that underlies curriculum development in our education system and is supported by professional associations, journals, publishers, federal programs and funding, and the establishment as a whole.

The "Reading War"

There are exceptions, of course, and they are the individuals inside and outside of the establishment who have been fighting the "system" for years and causing the so called "reading war." Recent reports inform us that the reading war is over, that the contending parties have reached a compromise: phonics will be taught with whole language. But what is not made clear is how the new pro-phonics policy will be implemented in the schools. The proponents of whole-language have always contended that they do teach phonics. That statement is supposed to satisfy most parents. But what they don't explain is that the kind of incidental phonics they teach does not help the child develop the crucial phonetic reflex.

If the child is simply given phonetic information in the context of a whole language program, that information will not become a reflex. And therefore, the child will be reluctant to use that information because it will not be automatic and will require work and will slow down the reading process.

This was proven to me by my own tutoring experience. Some years ago, when a friend of mine enrolled his daughter in public school, I

warned him about the possibility that she would become reading disabled because of the teaching methods in today's schools. So he permitted me to start tutoring her in Alpha-Phonics. But she was one of these headstrong children who will obey a teacher in school but raise a fuss at being tutored by a family friend. So the tutoring was rather haphazard. In addition, the father had an abiding faith in the public school.

Nevertheless, he was concerned enough to go to the school and insist that his child be taught to read by phonics. So she was put into some sort of "Superkid" class where she was given a little more phonics than in the normal class but not enough to create a phonetic reflex. In that class she was taught to "take risks" and "guess," and her dad thought that this was an excellent technique. He refused to believe that this standard whole-language methodology could create problems. In any case, his daughter wanted to be right and refused to guess, but she was told to guess and that whatever she blurted out would be okay. Meanwhile, the child developed the whole-word habit, proving that you can mess around with a little phonics here and a little phonics there, but it's no substitute for intensive, systematic phonics.

She is now in the third grade and hates to read. Getting her to read is like pulling teeth. Recently, I was asked to help her with her reading homework. She is a typical sight reader who makes lots of errors but will not sound out anything because it is too much work. So she makes a fuss when being told to sound out a word. She told me that her teacher said that sounding out is not the best way to read, and since she is still being encouraged to guess at words and skip words, why bother with sounding out at all?

I imagine that there are a lot of parents like my friend who simply assume that the teachers know what they are doing and tend to accept

whatever explanations they are given to questions about their children's learning problems. The fact that there are four million children on Ritalin in American schools indicates that parents in general have confidence in their children's educators and are willing to accept whatever they are told by the "experts."

All of which means, that only those parents who are concerned enough, informed enough, and willing enough to do what has to be done to save their children from being dumbed down or turned into dyslexics, will know enough to bypass the government schools and provide their children with an education that makes sense. The spectacular growth of the home-school movement is an indication that more and more parents are doing just that.

Michigan Senate to Study Ritalin Use

The high number of Michigan students taking Ritalin to improve their concentration and behavior in school may drop under two amendments approved 3/24/98 by the state Senate.

"We cannot wait another school year," said state Sen. Mike Rogers, R-Brighton, after a vote on his amendment to pay for research into alternatives to the controversial drug. "We've been sucked into something that is basically a pharmaceutical lobotomy."

Ritalin, a drug that critics call a faint version of cocaine, narrows concentration in children with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). It is claimed that it usually improves a student's self-confidence and academic performance. For some parents and students, Ritalin has been extremely useful.

"He was out of control," said Louise Balash of New Baltimore about her 9-year-old son before she put him on Ritalin three years ago.

"He would never be able to sit through a day of school without it."

But critics complain that parents and teachers push the drug on children because it saps energetic children into sitting still and behaving. According to a report in the Detroit News, Michigan doles out the third highest amount of the drug in the United States – 56 percent more than the national per capita average.

One child psychologist estimated that 90 percent of the children taking Ritalin are misdiagnosed. "I call it dope," said Linda King, who's grandson was pressured onto Ritalin by a teacher at Logan Elementary on Detroit's west side. "To me, it's like the teachers are just too lazy to do their jobs."

During a parent-teacher conference, the first-grade teacher insisted that her grandson be put on the drug, King said. After they found a doctor to prescribe the medicine, the child's behavior worsened, she said.

The other amendment, sponsored by Sen. Dianne Byrum (D-Onondaga), will form a task force to determine if Ritalin is being over prescribed in Michigan. (The Detroit News, 3/25/98)

Wornout D.C. School Chief Quits

General Julius W. Becton Jr., a retired general drafted to run the District of Columbia's troubled schools, said yesterday (3/26/98) he is worn out after 16 months and will quit at the end of the school year.

"I'm tired, I really am, physically, emotionally, mentally, I'm tired," the 72-year-old Becton said at a news conference. "This job has been the toughest job that I've ever had." Becton formerly headed the Federal Emergency Management Agency. "The crisis is not over,

but I feel very good about the progress we have made," he added.

Mayor Marion Barry Jr. said that Becton "was the wrong person for this job... Schools are worse off today than they were a year ago." The District's 77,000-student school system has been plagued by crumbling buildings, poor test scores, violence, and mismanagement so severe that officials were unsure how many employees were on the payroll.

When he took over, Becton quickly closed 11 old and underused schools and put them up for sale to raise money for repairs to the rest. He replaced some principals, installed more metal detectors and posted security guards at every school. But Becton also suffered setbacks, notably a three-week delay in school openings last fall when a federal judge ruled that students could not return until roof repairs were finished.

Senator Sam Brownback, Republican of Kansas, who chairs a committee overseeing the District government, recently railed against Becton when he heard that one in four D.C. students must attend summer school this year for failing math, reading and other subjects. (Boston Globe, 3/27/98)

Teenage Smoking Increases Sharply

Drastic increases in smoking, particularly among black teenagers, have created a public health "time bomb," Surgeon General David A. Satcher warned on April 27, 1998. Issuing the 24th surgeon general's report since 1964 on the perils of smoking, Satcher said smoking among all youth increased 33 percent over the past six years, while smoking among black youth surged 80 percent.

This sharp increase in smoking among black teenagers presents a disturbing turnaround to

public health officials, who had long praised black teenagers for largely resisting the lure of cigarettes. With the increase, about 20 percent of all black high-school students smoke, the same rate as Asian American teenagers, the report found. By contrast, 40 percent of white high-school students smoke, 50 percent of Native Americans, and 33 percent of Latino Americans.

Public health officials estimate that about 3,000 adolescents become regular smokers every day and about 1,000 of them will die prematurely as a result. "Unless they are reversed, these increases in tobacco use are a time bomb for the health of our minority populations," Satcher said.

Efforts by Congress and the Clinton administration to curb teenage smoking may or may not work. Raising the price of cigarettes may lead to the creation of a black market and encourage theft among teenagers. The curtailing of advertising will hardly work since cigarettes will continue to be smoked by popular rock stars and movie celebrities who have become role models for teenagers. Many Republican legislators see the \$516 billion tobacco bill not so much as a means of curtailing smoking but as a vehicle for raising taxes and enlarging the federal bureaucracy. (Boston Globe, 4/28/98)

Suicide Rate for Blacks Increases

School health experts are questioning whether suicide-prevention programs adequately serve black youths in the wake of a federal study showing a sharp rise in suicide rates among African-American adolescents. Suicide rates among black teenagers, which historically had been low, more than doubled over the past 15 years, according to the study released in March

by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta.

In 1995, the suicide rate for 15- to 19-year old blacks was 8.1 per 100,000, a 126 percent increase from 1980, when the rate was 3.6 per 100,000, the report says. In comparison, the suicide rate for 15- to 19-year old whites was 11.1 per 100,000 in 1995, a 19 percent increase from 9.3 per 100,000 in 1980.

Historically, the suicide rate among youths has by far been highest among whites, but in recent decades the gap between black and white teenagers has narrowed significantly, the study found. In 1980, the suicide rate for white children ages 10 to 19 was 157 percent greater than the rate for African-Americans in the same age group. But by 1995, the suicide rate for whites in that age bracket was just 42 percent higher. To complete the study, researchers looked at the death certificates of 31,000 black and white adolescents across the nation who died between 1980 and 1995. (Education Week, 4/1/98)

Comment: Meanwhile, death education continues to be taught in American schools with little knowledge or understanding of its psychologically harmful effects on the students.

U.S. Workers Can't Read Well

According to a Reuters dispatch from Paris, half the workers in the United States are not literate enough to work in a modern economy, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development said on 4/27/98. An OECD study said between one-third and one-half of the work force in the world's main industrialized states cannot read well enough to work in a modern economy. The study called for more education and career training. (Boston Globe, 4/28/98)