

# COMMENTARY

## Progressive Left Used Reading Methods To 'Dumb Down' Nation

To the Editor:

Your recent Commentary by Dianne Sirna Mancus and Curtis K. Carlson illustrates to what lengths the proponents of the "look-say" method of teaching reading, or psycholinguistics, will go to discredit intensive phonics ("Political Philosophy and Reading Make a Dangerous Mix," *Education Week*, Feb. 27, 1985). The simple truth is that proponents of intensive phonics come in all shapes, sizes, ages, religions, races, and political persuasions.

It is not the so-called New Right that has politicized the teaching of reading, but the progressive left. The switch from phonics to look-say in this country was perpetrated by the progressives as part of their radical reform of the public-school curriculum.

It was John Dewey who, early in the century, identified a high level of literacy and the instructional methods that produced it as one of the major obstacles to socialism in America. According to Dewey, a high literacy level produced selfish, self-centered, independent individuals who tended to reject collectivized activity. As early as 1898, he wrote the following in an article entitled "The Primary Education Fetish [sic]": "The plea for the predominance of learning to read in early school-life because of the great importance attaching to literature seems to me a perversion." And in 1935 he wrote in *Liberalism and Social Action*: "The last stand of oligarchical and anti-social seclusion is a perpetuation of this purely individualistic notion of intelligence."

These are only a few of the many quotes I could cite not only from Dewey but from others who were also responsible for the "reforms" in reading instruction that have resulted in our present costly and seemingly insoluble literacy problem. There has been a deliberate effort by the progressives to lower the level of literacy in this country—to "dumb down" the nation—in order to make Americans more amenable to manipulation and control by a behaviorist-scientific-technological elite.

To what extent today's educationists are aware of this scheme is hard to tell. But what we do know is that, despite the expansion of public education and compulsory school attendance, and the massive infusion of federal money, literacy has declined seriously in this country. Attempts to introduce intensive phonics in the primary classrooms of America have been met with an opposition and hostility bordering on the fanatical.

Indeed, the situation is so bad that in 1975 the National Academy of Education (hardly a New Right organization), in *Toward a Literate Society*, made this astonishing statement: "We believe that an effective national reading effort should bypass the existing education macrostructure. That is, the planning, implementing, and discretionary powers of budgeting should not rest with those most likely to have a vested interest in maintaining the status quo, especially given their unpromising 'track record.'"

What that report was telling us, in effect, is that the greatest obstacle to literacy in America is our own educational establishment and that if we want to achieve real literacy in our country we shall have to circumvent that establishment.

And that is what thousands of parents who have taken their children out of public schools and put them in private or church schools or educated them at home have done. It is certain that many thousands more will do likewise so long as our public educators insist on using instructional methods that have been proven beyond a doubt to produce not only functional illiteracy, but learning disabilities on an unprecedented scale and serious behavioral and emotional problems.

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