Dyslexia: The Disease You Get in School

By Mr. Samuel L. Blumenfeld

Dyslexia is an exotic word, concocted from the Greek dys, meaning ill or bad, and lexia, meaning words. It was invented to describe a condition that affects many normal and intellectual youngsters who, for some reason that seems to baffle most educators, parents, and physicians, can't learn to read.

The difference between a dyslexic and a functional illiterate is purely social. Dyslexics are usually adolescents from middle-class or professional families whose parents assume that their child's reading difficulty is more of a medical or psychological problem than an educational one. The child is too smart to be that dumb.

The functional illiterate is simply someone who has kept his reading problem to himself and goes through life pretending he can read, avoiding situations which involve reading, choosing, jobs which do not reveal his reading disability. He assumes he's dumb, not sick or mentally disturbed.

However, in the last ten years, with the growth of federally funded Special Education and the proliferation of early testing, more and more children with reading difficulties are being labeled "learning disabled," or LD, in the first grade or even kindergarten. These children are being "diagnosed" as suffering from minimal brain damage, minimal brain dysfunction, neurological impairment, perceptual impairment, attention deficit syndrome, or dyslexia.

The Symptoms

What are the symptoms of dyslexia? The Academic American Encyclopedia (Vol. 6, page 320) gives us as good a summary of the disease as we shall find anywhere. It says:

"Dyslexia refers to an impaired ability to read or comprehend what one reads, caused by congenital disability or acquired brain damage. Dyslexia is independent of any speech defect and ranges from a minor to a total inability to read."

"Specialist used the term specific dyslexia to refer to inability to read in a person of normal or high general intelligence whose learning is not impaired by socioeconomic deprivation, emotional disturbance, or brain damage. Psychologists disagree about whether specific dyslexia is a clearly identifiable syndrome. Those who think it is clearly identifiable note that it persists into adulthood despite conventional instruction; tends to run in families; and occurs more frequently in males. It is also associated with a specific kid of difficulty in identifying words and letters, which dyslexics tend to reverse or invert (reading p or q, or example or on for no). Competing theories exist about the causes and nature of dyslexia.

Although there is disagreement among "experts" over the causes of dyslexia, there is general agreement that the most effective "cure" is remedial programs that stress phonics.

Dr. Orton's Findings

But it is somewhat puzzling that there should be so much disagreement over the cause of dyslexia, when, as early as 1929, a leading physician attributed its cause to a new look-say, whole word, or sight method of teaching reading that was being introduced in the schools of America. In February 1929, there appeared in the Journal of Educational Psychology an article entitled "The 'Sight Reading' Method of Teaching Reading as a Source of Reading Disability." written by Dr. Samuel T. Orton, a neurologist at Iowa State University.

Dr. Orton, a brain specialist who dealt with children's language disorders, had been seeing a lot of children with reading problems at his clinic. In diagnosing the children's problems at his clinic he came to the conclusion that their reading disability was being caused by this new instruction method. He decided to bring these findings to the attention of the educators, and he did so in as diplomatic a way as was possible. He wrote:

"I wish to emphasize at the beginning that the strictures which I have to offer here do not apply to the use of the sight method of teaching reading as a whole but only to its effects on a restricted group of children for whom, as I think we can show, this technique is not only not adapted but often proves an actual obstacle to reading progress, and moreover I believe that this group is one of considerable size and because here faulty teaching methods may not only prevent the acquisition of academic education by children of average capacity but may also give rise to far reaching damage to their emotional life."

This warning to the educators was quite explicit: this method of teaching will harm a large number of children.

D. Orton expected the educators to respond to his findings. They did – negatively. In fact, they accelerated the introduction and promoted of the new teaching methods throughout the primary schools of America. And it didn't take very long before America began to have a reading problem.

The Disease Spreads

Although Dr. Orton went to become the world's leading authority on "dyslexia," and in effect created on of the most effective remediation techniques, the Orton-Gillingham method, his 1929 article is nowhere referred to in the literature on the subject.

I came across it quite by accident while doing research for my book, The New Illiterates, which was published in 1973. But why the experts on dyslexia have not found it, I don't know. In any case, dyslexia was virtually unknown in this country until the 1940s when, suddenly millions of American children were coming down with the disease. Life magazine reported in April 1944:

"Millions of children in the U.S. suffer from dyslexia which is the medical term for reading difficulties. It is responsible for about 70% of the school failures in the 60 to 12-year-age group, and handicaps about 15% of all grade-school children. Dyslexia may stem from a variety of physical ailments or combination of them – glandular imbalance, heart disease, eye or ear trouble – or form a deep-seated psychological disturbance that 'blocks' a child's ability to learn.

The article then described the treatment for dyslexia giving a young girl at Chicago's Dyslexia Institute on the campus of Northwest University: "thyroid treatments, removal of tonsils and adenoids, exercise to strengthen her eye muscles. Other patients needed dental work, nose, throat or ear treatment, or a thorough airing out of troublesome home situations that throw a sensitive child off the track of normality."

Enter Dr. Flesch

In 1955, Dr. Rudolf Flesch published his famous book, Why Johnny Can't Read, in which he revealed to parents the true cause of the reading problem. He wrote:

"The teaching of reading – all over the United States, in all schools, and in all textbooks – is totally wrong and flies in the face of all logic and common sense."

And then he explained how in the early 1930s the professor of education changed the way reading is taught in American schools. They threw out traditional alphabetic-phonics method, which is the proper way to teach a child to read an alphabetic writing system, and put in a new look-say, whole-word, or sight method that teaches children to read an alphabetic writing system, and they put I a new look-say, whole-word, or sight method that teaches children to read English as if it were Chinese, an ideographic writing system. Flesch contended that when you impose an ideographic teaching method on an alphabetic writing system you cause reading disability.

Dr. Orton had said as much in 1929, but in 1955 Flesch could cite millions of reading-disabled children as substantiation of what he was saying. Naturally, the educators rejected Flesch's contentions.

Most people, of course, don't know the difference between an alphabetic system and an ideographic one. But one must know the difference in order to understand how and why look-say can cause dyslexia.

The Alphabet

Ours is an alphabetic writing system, which means that we use an alphabet. What is an alphabet? It is a set of graphic symbols – we call them "letters" – that stand for the irreducible speech sounds of the language. In other words, alphabet letters are not meaningless configurations. They actually stand for something. Each letter represents a specific sound, and in some cases more than one sound.

All alphabets are the same in that regard. The Russian, Greek, and Hebrew alphabets all stand for sounds of their respective languages, and the English alphabet stands for the sounds of the English language.

How does one teach a child or anyone else to read an alphabetic writing system? For hundreds of years it was done very simply in three steps. First, the child was taught to recognize the letters of the alphabet; second, the child was taught the sounds the letters stood for; and third, the child was then given words and sentences to read.

How was the child taught the letter sounds? Usually it was done in the simplest mechanical way possible. For example, the child was taught the consonant sounds and then drilled on the consonant-vowel combinations arranged in column form, such as ba, be, bi, bo, bu; da, de, di, do, du etc. the purpose of the drill was to enable the child to develop as quickly and easily as possible an automatic association between letter and sound. Developing that association is at the heart of learning to read an alphabetic writing system.

Pictographs and Ideographs

The first alphabet was invented about 2,000 B.C. Prior to that invention, the earliest form of writing we know of is pictograph – the pictures represented objects and actions. You didn't have to go to school to learn to read pictographs, for the symbols looked like the things they represented.

However, as civilization became more complex, the scribes had to begin drawing pictures of things that did not lend themselves to easy depiction. For example, how would you draw pictures of such concepts as good, bad, dream, reality, persuasion, confidence, memory, intent, liberty, justice, etc? You can't. So the scribes drew symbols, none of which looked like the concept they represented. Thousands and thousands of such symbols – called idiographs – were created. And now you had to go to school and be taught what all these symbols meant. The result was that literacy was limited to a small class of scholars, scribes and priests. Ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics is an ideographic writing system, and so is modern Chinese. The Chinese use 50,000 ideographs, of which 5,000 must be mastered if an individual is to be able to read a Chinese newspaper. Thus, ideographic writing is cumbersome, difficult, and time-consuming to master.

However, somewhere around 2,000 B.C. someone in the area of ancient Phoenicia (today's southern Lebanon and northern Israel) made a remarkable discovery. He discovered that all the human language, everything we say, is actually composed of a small number of irreducible speech sounds arranged in endless combinations. It occurred to him that by creating a set of symbols to stand for the irreducible speech sounds of the language, he could create a new form of writing based on actual transcription of the spoken word. And so alphabetic writing was invented.

Advantages of the Alphabet

And now for the first time an had an accurate, precise means of transcribing the spoken word directly into written form, and an equally precise means of translating the written word back into its spoken form. It was the most revolutionary invention in all history. It did away with hieroglyphic and ideographic writing and accelerated the speed of intellectual development. It also made learning to read simple and available to the population as a whole.

The invention of the alphabet also had great spiritual significance for mankind. It permitted the word of God to be put down on paper accurately and precisely in the form of the Scripture. It made the word of God accessible to the human race.

Clearly, alphabetic writing had enormous advantages over ideographs: I it permitted greatly increased speeds and accuracy in communications, it was easy to master, and it facilitated a tremendous expansion in vocabulary, permitting the human mind to develop ideas hitherto inconceivable.

In the light of all these advantages, it seems strange that professors of education in the 1930s would decide to teach American children to read English as if it were an ideographic writing system. How could you possibly teach children to read that way? To a logical mind the whole idea seems not only absurd but insane. Yet, that is what the professors did.

Going Backwards

Their idea was that it was better for children to look at whole words as pictures and have them associate them directly with objects, actions and ideas rather than have them learn to associate the letters with sounds. And so they eliminated step two in the three-step alphabetic learning process and had the children go directly from step one to step three; sometimes they would even skipped step one and started out with whole words.

Essentially, the method works as follows: the child is given a sight vocabulary to memorize. He is taught to look and say the word without knowing that the letters stand for sounds. As far as the pupil is concerned, the letters are a bunch of arbitrary squiggles arranged in some arbitrary, haphazard order. His task is to see a picture in the configuration of the whole word – to make the word horse look like a horse.

Of course, the word horse does not look like a horse. So how does a child remember that the word is horse? Anyway he can. There isn't a professor of education anywhere in the world who can tell you how a child learns a sight vocabulary. The only research we know of that addresses that question was done by Josephine H. Bowden at the elementary school of the University of Chicago around 1912. A description of the studies was given by Prof. Walter F. Dearborn in 1914 as follows:

> In the first study of pupils, who had no instruction in reading, were taught by a word method without the use of phonics and the problem was to determine by what means children actually recognized and differentiated words when left to their own devices. The following quotation indicates the methods employed by the experimenter: "First, incidents; for example, one day when the child was given the cards to read from, it was observed that she read with equal ease whether the card was right side up or upside down. This incident suggested a test which was later given. Second, comments of the child; for example, when she was asked to find in context the word 'shoes,' she said that 'dress' looked so much like 'shoes' that she was afraid she would make a mistake. Third, questioning; for example, she had trouble to distinguish between 'sing' and 'song.' When she had mastered the words she was asked how she knew which was which. Her reply was, 'by the looks.' When questioned further she put her finger on the 'i' and the 'o.' These three types of evidence correspond to introspection with an adult. The fourth type of evidence is comparison of the words learned with the words not learned as to the parts of speech, geometric form, internal form, and length. Fifth, misreadings; for example, 'dogs' was read 'twigs,' and 'feathers,' 'fur.' Sixth, mutilations; for example 'dogs' was printed 'digs,' lilac' was printed 'lalci.'"
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> Some of the conclusions may be cited, first as regards the kinds of words most easily learned on the basis of the word form. Four out of six children learned more 'linear' words, i.e., words like "acorns," "saw," in which there were no high letters, than of any other group. In but one case were the "superlinear" words more easily recognized
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> Misreadings or the mistaking of one word for another occurred most frequently in these early stages, first when the words were of the same length (which again converts Messmer's findings); secondly, when words had common letters, the "g" and "o" of "igloo" caused it to be read as "dogs"; thirdly, when the initial letters of words were the same; and fourthly, when the final letters were the same. Words were recognized upside down nearly as easily as right side up, but [only] two children noticing any difference. The word seems to be recognized as a whole, and as the author notes, recognized upside down just as the child would recognize a toy upside down. The general conclusion of the study may be quoted:
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> "The comments and the questions, as well as misreadings, seem to show that children learn to read words by the trial and error method. It

> may be the length of the word, the initial letter, the final letter, a characteristic letter, the position of the word in the sentence, or even the blackness of the type that serves as the cue. ... There is no evidence that the child works out a system by which he learns to recognize words. That he does not work out phonics for himself comes out quite clearly in the transposition test. Furthermore, only once did a child divide a word even into its syllables. There is some evidence that conscious of letters, except in the case of "E," who so analyzed the word "six." Sometimes, when the child seems to have made a letter analysis, he failed to recognize the word a second time, and in some cases did not learn it at all."

And so it was obvious to the professors as far back as 1914 that the sight method was a totally horrendous, inefficient and illogical way to teach a child to read. And despite Dr. Orton's warning in 1929 that the method would harm many children, they proceeded to put their new reading programs in all the schools of America.

Look-Say Strategies.

Of Course, they beefed up their sight vocabulary approach with a battery of "word recognition strategies." They provided configuration clues – putting sight words in frames; picture clues – loading the page with illustrations depicting the words; context clues – inane stories in which the word could be easily guessed on the basis of context; and phonetic clues – teaching initial and final consonant sounds to reduce some ridiculousness of some of the guessing.

It is important to note that teaching phonetic clues is not the same as teaching intensive, systematic phonics. The latter helps the child develop an automatic association of letters and sounds and teaches blending. The former simply teaches isolated consonant sounds with no connection to the rest of the syllable.

That this method of teaching can cause symptoms of dyslexia is not difficult to surmise. What are the symptoms? Dr. Harold N. Levinson, founder of the Medical Dyslexic Treatment Center in Lake Success, New York, and author of Smart But Feeling Dumb which he dedicated to "40 million dyslexic Americans," lists the symptoms as follows: (1) memory instability for letters, words, or numbers; (2) a tendency to skip over or scramble letters, words, and sentences; (3) poor, slow, fatiguing reading ability prone to compensatory head tilting, near-far focusing, and finger pointing; (4) reversal of letters such as b, d, words such as saw and was, and numbers such as 6 and 9 or 16 and 61.

Most of these symptoms sound like the very mistakes made by those children back in 1912 who were trying to learn a sight vocabulary. Some of those children even read words upside down!

Poor Spelling

But it is obvious that if you are told to look at words as a picture, you may look at it from right to left as easily as from left to right. You will reverse letters because they look alike and you have not been drilled to know them by sound as well as by sight. You will be a poor speller because the sequence of letters seems completely arbitrary, with no rime or reason. Of course, to a phonetic reader the sequence of letters is most important because it follows the same sequence in which the sounds are uttered.

Other symptoms include transposing letters in a word, for example, abroad for aboard, left for felt, how for who; confusing words with others of similar configuration, such as, through, though, thought, or quit, quite, quiet, guessing at unknown words.

Dr. Kenneth L. Goodman, America's top professor of reading, calls reading a "psycholinguistic guessing game." And that's exactly what it is for most American children in today's primary schools. The result is an explosion in Special Education, which has become the growth industry for educators so worried about falling enrollment. The primary schools create the learning disabilities, and the federal government is funding a new industry to deal with them. In the 1976-77 school year there were 976,000 learning disabled students in Special Education. In 1983-84 there were 1,806,000. Dyslexia is booming!

Obviously, the prevalent teaching method causes dyslexia. I have visited many American cities on my lecture tours and have seen for myself the look-say basal reading programs being used in today's primary classrooms all across the country. You can imagine my feelings when I know that the minds of millions of American children are being permanently crippled, their futures handicapped, their self-esteem destroyed by educators who should have known better. This criminal malpractice is going on right now in your community. And yet there is little one can do about it. The professors of education won't listen – after all, they write the textbooks. The book publishers publish what the educators want and what the textbooks committees adopt. The classroom teachers, as a whole, now no other way to teach; the professional organizations promote look-say; the principals, administrators, and superintendents leave the teaching of reading to the "experts."

Circumventing the System

But there is some hope. There are a growing number of private and church schools that are teaching children to read by alphabetic, systematic, intensive phonics. Also, the home-school movement has largely adopted phonics as the technique to teach reading. And here and there one finds a teacher in public schools who uses an alphabetic-phonics approach or even a school district that has adopted a phonics-oriented basal.

However, for the nation as a whole, there is little hope that the vast majority of schools will change their teaching methods in the foreseeable future – unless a group of well informed top business leaders make the teaching of reading a top priority issue and force the educators to change their ways. But considering how poorly informed our business leaders are and how difficult it is to reach them, let alone brief them on this rather complex subject, there is little likelihood that they will act effectively on behalf of the children entrapped in the public schools.

(The quotation from Dr. Dearborn is from The Psychological Researches of James McKeen Cattell: A Review by Some of His Pupils, Archives of Psyschology, No. 30, 1914, pp. 40-41.)