

How the Progressives Changed the Way Reading Is Taught in Our Schools

By Samuel L. Blumenfeld

Many parents wonder why American primary schools don't teach children to read in the proper phonetic manner. The answer is that high literacy is not part of the system's social or academic agenda. Neither is good cursive handwriting and basic arithmetic. Have you noticed the decline in handwriting? I recently gave a birthday gift to a 13-year-old boy, and got back a thank-you note written in chicken scratches. He had attended the public schools of an affluent suburban community.

Now, of course, if you ask any primary public-school teacher whether or not he or she teaches phonics, they will all say that they do. But the kind of phonics they teach is not the intensive, systematic kind that produces a fluent, independent phonetic reader. What they teach are phonetic clues to be used in the context of a Whole Language program that teaches children to read by the sight method.

Ask that same teacher if he or she teaches a sight-vocabulary. If the answer is yes, then you know that they are not teaching phonics in the proper way. In fact, they are teaching the child to look at our alphabetic words as Chinese characters, or little mind pictures. Once that mode of looking at words becomes automatic, the child becomes dyslexic, that is, unable to see the phonetic structure of our printed words.

Now where did this atrocious methodology come from? It didn't come from outer space, nor was it the result of accident. It came from an agenda developed back at the turn of the last century by some of the most intelligent men in America.

It started in the 1890s, when the Progressives began working on a new socialist agenda for the public schools that would promote collectivism through a new curriculum programmed to turn children away from individualism.

Who were the Progressives? They were members of the Protestant academic elite who no longer believed in the religion of their fathers. They now put their faith in science, evolution and psychology. Science explained the material world. Evolution explained the origin of living matter, and psychology provided a new scientific way of understanding and controlling human behavior.

But what about the problems of evil and sin? As socialists they rejected the biblical explanation and instead believed that evil was caused by ignorance, poverty, and social injustice. Socialism, they were convinced, would eliminate all three causes of evil. And so they embarked on a Progressive education crusade that would prove they were right and Bible believers were wrong. Education would eliminate ignorance, which would then eliminate poverty, which in turn would do away with social injustice.

The first step in their crusade was to change the way children were being taught in the primary schools. The emphasis on teaching reading had to be replaced with an emphasis on collectivist socialization. John Dewey, the philosophical leader of the Progressives, explained it all quite openly in an article he authored in 1898 entitled “The Primary School Fetish.” He wrote:

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.

A perversion, mind you. To get rid of this so-called perversion he advocated using a new way of teaching reading that would turn children into little collectivists. That new method turned out to be the sight or look-say method that teaches children to read English as if it were an ideographic writing system like Chinese. To him the emphasis on learning to read phonetically in the primary grades was a perversion. And because Dewey knew that this view would be considered dangerously radical by parents and traditional teachers, he wrote:

Change must come gradually. To force it unduly would compromise its final success by favoring a violent reaction. What is needed in the first place, is that there should be a full and frank statement of conviction with regard to the matter from physiologists and psychologists and from those school administrators who are conscious of the evils of the present regime.

In other words, deceiving parents became a necessary part of the plan if the socialists were to succeed in its implementation. And psychologists, of whom Dewey was one, would be used to carry out this elaborate conspiracy of deception. Dewey then wrote:

There are already in existence a considerable number of educational “experiment stations,” which represent the outposts of educational progress. If these schools can be adequately supported for a number of years they will perform a great vicarious service.

Indeed, Dewey himself conducted such an experimental school at the University of Chicago, and the book he wrote about that experiment, *The School and Society*, became the bible of Progressive Education and the basis of early 20th century school reform. And so, the major work of reform would not be done just by educators, but by psychologists, who found in education a lucrative source of support for their profession.

The new behavioral psychology was born in the laboratories of Professor Wilhelm Wundt at the University of Leipzig. His two American students, G. Stanley Hall (1844-1924) and James McKeen Cattell (1860-1944), came back to America anxious to apply scientific psychology to American education. Hall became a professor of psychology at Johns Hopkins University where he taught the new psychology to his student John Dewey. He later founded Clark University. Cattell introduced mental testing in education as part of the new scientific racism called Eugenics. He later founded the Psychological Corporation.

But it was Edward L. Thorndike (1874-1949) who, after studying psychology under William James at Harvard, went on to become the chief implementer of behavioral psychology in American education. At Harvard he had studied the learning behavior of chickens by using the reinforcement technique, which he later decided should be used to teach children.

After his book, *Animal Intelligence* was published in 1898, he became a leading light at Teacher's College, Columbia University. His much celebrated stimulus-response (SR) technique of teaching children, based on animal training, now dominates American education. He wrote in 1928:

Our experiments on learning in the lower animals have probably contributed more to knowledge of education per hour or per unit of intellect spent, than experiments on children.... The best way with children may often be, in the pompous words of an animal trainer, "to arrange everything in connection with the trick so that the animal will be compelled by the laws of his own nature to perform it."

In short, American children were to be taught in the public schools as if they were little animals. Of course, there is a great difference between humans and animals. Animals can be trained but they can't be educated. Humans, on the other hand, can be both trained and educated because they are born with brains that are far superior to anything animals are born with. But to Thorndike and his behaviorist colleagues, man's brain is just a bit more evolved than the brains of the apes. And if you don't believe that God made man in His own image, that is, with the ability to speak language and use his intellect, then you will believe Thorndike and treat children like animals.