

"READINGATE": THE 40-YEAR COVERUP OF EDUCATIONAL MALPRACTICE

By

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Last year an American collegiate debating team toured the Soviet Union for two weeks, engaging their Soviet counterparts in a series of spirited debates. During one debate, a Soviet man in the audience asked the Americans a very embarrassing question. He said:

"Recently I came across some statistics which shocked me. Your journal, U.S. News and World Report, wrote that 23 million Americans, that is to say one out of every five Americans, does not know how to read and write well enough to cope with the demands of everyday life. What can you say in regards to this? Can it really be that this is possible in such a developed country as the USA?"

The American at the podium, Bill Skundrich, a bright, articulate young man from the University of Pittsburgh, replied in fluent Russian:

"Well, what can I say? I can simply say that it is not true. I mean, look at how many Americans we have with us here today.

According to those figures one of us would have to be illiterate. Perhaps you're saying that I'm the one."

The Soviet questioner had indeed embarrassed the Americans, and Bill had tried to get out of it by denying the veracity of a respected American magazine and joking about his own possible illiteracy.

If Bill Skundrich couldn't really answer the question, it is because very few Americans can, even though the answer does exist. The trouble is that the answer is actually far more embarrassing than the question, for it strikes at the very integrity of our education system.

The simple truth is that we are living through the greatest coverup of educational malpractice by professional educators this nation has ever known. And we shall not be able to correct the situation until enough Americans know about it to make a difference.

While most people know something about medical malpractice, very few know anything about its educational counterpart. But the mental and emotional damage inflicted by this form of malpractice is now so widespread in our culture, so far-reaching in its effects on the economy, that it may be impossible for us to ever recover from it. We know, for example, that functional illiteracy is a prime factor in the development of juvenile delinquency and crime, in keeping hundreds of thousands in low-paying jobs and on welfare. There are literally millions of people who have been permanently handicapped by their so-called "education." And the sad tragedy is that none of this need ever have happened.

Americans first became aware that there was something desperately

wrong in our schools back in 1955 when Rudolf Flesch came out with his sensational and devastating book, Why Johnny Can't Read. Flesch had written the book to explain to a somewhat baffled public why more and more primary-school children were having terrible difficulties learning to read, difficulties that parents had begun to notice and complain about in the 1940s. The clear-thinking, Vienna-born author pulled no punches in stating the cause of the problem. He wrote:

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

He then proceeded to explain that from about 1925 to 1950, beginning reading instruction in American schools had been radically changed by the professors of education. They had decided to make American children read English as if it were Chinese. Written English was no longer to be taught as a sound-symbol, alphabetic system with a relatively small number of phonograms to learn, but as an ideographic system, like Chinese, where every word is a little picture or collection of little pictures, or like ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics with its thousands and thousands of individual symbols to remember. This was news to a lot of parents who assumed that their children were being taught to read the way they had been taught. How else could you possibly learn to read, they wondered.

The professors based their new method on an experiment conducted in 1885 by a 25-year-old American psychologist, James McKeen Cattell, who was studying under Wilhelm Wundt in Leipzig, Germany. Wundt,

founder of experimental psychology, believed that human beings were devoid of spirit and self-determinism and, like dogs and other animals, could be conditioned to behave as society wanted. Man, in other words, was nothing more than a stimulus-response mechanism. This concept formed the basis of behavioral psychology and its views on behavior modification.

Cattell was anxious to see how these principles could be applied in early education, particularly in the teaching of reading. In his experiment, he "discovered" that adult readers read words as whole units, or total word pictures like Chinese symbols. If that's the way adults read, he thought, why not teach children to read total word pictures from the very beginning? It sounded like a wonderful idea, except that he failed to realize that an adult reader recognizes the letters in words so quickly that it seems as if he is reading them as wholes. Indeed, one had to first learn the letters and the sounds they represented before one could become a proficient reader.

Also, Cattell's idea was not exactly new. In fact, it had already been tried. The whole-word method of teaching reading had actually been invented in the early 1800s by Thomas H. Gallaudet, founder of the Hartford Asylum for the Deaf and Dumb. Gallaudet thought that he could apply to normal children some of the techniques used in teaching deaf-mutes to read.

Since deaf-mutes have no conception of a spoken language, they could not learn a sound-symbol system of reading. Instead, they were taught to read by way of a purely sight method consisting of pictures and whole words. Thus, as far as the deaf pupil was concerned, the