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## A NATIONAL BLIGHT

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"Illiteracy in this country is turning out to be a blight that won't go away." So stated John H. Sweet, chairman of *U.S. News & World Report*, in his introduction to the magazine's cover story of May 17, 1982, on America's declining literacy. He further observed: "While the United States has the highest proportion of its young people in college of any major nation, it has not yet figured out how to teach tens of millions of its citizens to fill out a job application, balance a checkbook, read a newspaper or write a simple letter."

Illiteracy has now joined unwed motherhood, herpes simplex, and budget deficits as one of the nation's insoluble problems that get periodic attention in the media with the usual call that something be done about it. Americans, however, are already paying an army of over 2 million teachers who supposedly *are* doing something about it. They are the experts and professionals, with college degrees and certification. We have a universal compulsory education system that costs taxpayers over \$100 billion a year, created to guarantee that everyone in America learns to read and write. So we have teachers, we have schools, we have laws. We have more educational research than we know what to do with. But the system evidently doesn't work.

In fact, among people who have had as much as twelve years of schooling, there is an ever-growing population of functional illiterates – people who cannot read training manuals, books, magazines, or product labels written above a fourth or fifth-grade level. Some parents have gone so far as to sue public school systems for graduating their children without teaching them adequate literacy skills so that they can get jobs. Experts' estimates of the extent of functional illiteracy among our adult population range from twenty-five to fifty percent. It may account for the decline in voter turnout and the growing dependence on television as the sole source of information and knowledge.

According to Vyvyan Harding, director of Literacy Services of Wisconsin, which provides reading tutors to functionally illiterate adults, "It seems like a futile battle against overwhelming odds. I've never seen so many non-reading adults in my life."

Nor is this decline in literacy skills limited to the lower-income, less academically inclined population. Karl Shapiro, the eminent poet-professor who has taught creative writing for more than twenty years, told the California Library Association in 1970: "What is really distressing is that this generation cannot and does not read. I am speaking of university students in what are supposed to be our best universities. Their illiteracy is staggering... We are experiencing a literacy breakdown which is unlike anything I know of in the history of letters."

Literacy skills are now so poor among high school graduates that about two-thirds of U.S. colleges and universities, including Harvard, MIT, and the University of California at Berkeley, provide remedial reading and writing courses for their freshman. The decline in reading skills is also causing a general debasement of our use of language. Popular writers, seeking larger audiences among a shrinking number of readers are using shorter sentences, more monosyllabic words, and much smaller, simpler vocabularies. Complex ideas are very often avoided because the vocabulary required to deal with them is too difficult for most readers.

So we get high school and college textbooks that treat the complexities of life with comic book simplicity and novels written without richness of language or depth of character. To many Americans, highly literate English is now a foreign language.

All of which may lead any intelligent American to ask a number of pointed questions: Why should the world's most affluent and advanced nation, with free *compulsory* education for all, have a "reading problem" in the first place? What, indeed, are the kids doing in school if not learning to read? How is it that our network of state-owned and -operated teachers colleges with strict certification requirements doesn't produce teachers who can teach?

And how is it that in a nation that has devoted more of its money and resources to education than any other nation in history, we find a Jonathan Kozol on the *MacNeill-Lehrer Report* advocating that we learn from Communist Cuba how to eradicate illiteracy in America? Is our much-vaunted educational system indeed inferior to that of Castro's Cuba? How is it that our educators are in quandary over our declining literacy skills and don't know what to do about it except ask for more money? And how is it that the more federal money is poured into public education the worse the SAT scores get?

Don't expect any answers to come from the people in charge. If they knew the answers, we would not have the problem. But the answers do exist, and the reason why they have gotten very little attention in the media is that they are too incredible, and our educators will neither confirm nor deny them. The result is that the public doesn't know who or what to believe.

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## WHY JOHNNY CAN'T READ

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The trouble is that you have to become an expert if you want to confront the educators on their own turf. My own introduction to the reading problem began in 1962 when Watson Washburn, who had just founded the Reading Reform Foundation, asked me to become a member of his national advisory council. Washburn, a distinguished New York attorney, had become concerned about the reading problem when he discovered that several of his nieces and nephews, who were attending the city's finest private schools, were having a terrible time learning to read. He found that they were being taught to read via the "look-say" method, a method that Rudolph Flesch had exposed and denounced in his 1955 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 enormous difficulties learning to read, difficulties that parents had already begun to notice and complain about in the 1940s. The incisive, Vienna-born author was quite blunt in identifying the cause of the problem: "The teaching of reading all over the United States, in all the schools, and in all the textbooks," he wrote, "is totally wrong and flies in the face of all logic and common sense." He then went on to explain that from about 1930 to 1950, beginning reading instructions in American schools had been radically changed by the professors of education from the traditional alphabetic-phonics method to a new whole-word, or hieroglyphics, method.

Written English was no longer taught as a sound-symbol system but as an ideographic system, like Chinese. 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.

In 1962, despite Flesch, the schools were still teaching the look-say method, which is why Washburn created the Reading Reform Foundation – to try to get the alphabet and phonics back into primary education as the dominant form of reading instruction. At that time I was a book editor in New York and had little interest in primary education. But the foundation's goal seemed quite laudable, so I joined the advisory council.

That was the extent of my involvement with the reading problem until I started working on my first book, *How to Start Your Own Private School — And Why You Need One*. In researching that book, I had spent eighteen months of 1970 – 71 substitute teaching in the public schools of Quincy, Massachusetts, in order to get a first-hand view of what was going on in the American classroom. I suddenly became aware that a great many high school students were reading very poorly. In fact, some of the students reminded me of the foreign-born I had grown up with in New York. They read in that same halting, stumbling manner.

My parents, immigrants from Eastern Europe, had both been illiterate in English. My mother had no literacy in any language even though she was quite intelligent; she was simply the product of Old World poverty and neglect. Her children, however – three of whom were born in Europe; two, including myself, in the United States — all learned to read and write quite fluently in the public schools of New York with no apparent problems. Although no one ever spoke of the alphabet as a “sound-symbol system,” we were all aware that the alphabet letters stood for sounds.

Yet I remember the terrible difficulty I had when I tried to teach my mother to read. Her illiteracy had been something of a challenge to me. It seemed like such an appalling state for a normally intelligent person to be in: to have no access at all to the world of the written word; not to be able to read street signs, advertisements, newspapers, magazines. Thus, I grew up very much aware of the terrible limitations illiteracy placed on a person and also of the frustrations and shame it sometimes caused. My mother tried going to night school, but the teachers were unprepared for total illiteracy, and my mother returned home humiliated by the experience.

And so, while going to City College, I decided to try to teach my mother to read. I started off by teaching her the alphabet. She learned it quite well. But then I was not too sure how to proceed from there. So I started teaching her to read whole words in short sentences, like: *Sara is my name. My name is Sara*. She learned to repeat the sentences, but she did not learn to read them. I didn't know what was wrong. I tried to convey the idea that letters stood for sounds, but I did it rather haphazardly, as an afterthought, as if the idea was so obvious that anyone could catch on to it. It's so simple, I thought impatiently, why can't she learn it?

What I didn't realize is that an illiterate, as well as a small child, has no conception of a set of written symbols standing for the irreducible speech sounds of a language.

The assumption of the illiterate is that printed words represent ideas rather than sounds. To an illiterate who does not have a key to the sound-symbol code, printed words are therefore undecipherable markings.

What I also didn't realize is that our alphabet system is somewhat complicated. We use twenty-six letters to represent forty-four sounds; there is an important distinction to be made between the letter names and letter sounds. And because the system has many quaint irregularities, it has to be taught in a logical, organized sequence, starting with the simplest regular combinations and proceeding to the more complex irregular ones.

Had I known this, I would have known how to teach my mother to read. Unfortunately, my own ignorance was so appalling that I gave up in the attempt and blamed my failure on my mother's inability to learn. It took me twenty-five years to find out what an ignoramus I had been. In the meantime, my mother had died and the problem of teaching reading in America had become the educational dilemma of the century.

When my book on private schools was completed, I suggested to my publisher that I do one on the reading problem. My confrontation with the semiliterates in the schools of Quincy had opened my eyes to its seriousness, and I was curious to find out why, fifteen years after the publication of *Why Johnny Can't Read*, Johnny was still fumbling and mumbling the written word. My publisher liked the idea, and I got to work.

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## THE ROOTS OF THE LOOK-SAY METHOD

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First, I wanted to find out what it was about the look-say, whole-word method that made it the cause of so much reading disability. So I decided to study one of the whole-word programs, going through the entire "Dick and Jane" course of instruction, page-by-page, line by line, from the pre-readers to the third-grade readers. It was an excruciating, tedious task, and the more I read, the angrier I got. I could not understand how professors of education could have concocted an approach to reading instruction so needlessly complicated, difficult, illogical, and ineffective. This look-say method was far worse than Flesch had described it in his book. You had to be an expert guesser or have a photographic memory to get anywhere with it. I knew that if I had been subjected to this blatant educational malpractice at the age of six, I too would likely have wound up among the reading disabled.

But how was it possible for such an imbecilic method to have come to use so universally in American primary schools? I became determined to find out who had started it all. What "educator" was insane enough to think that you could successfully teach children to read English as if it were Chinese? After considerable digging through the historical archives, I found the "culprit." But he turned out not to be a culprit at all. In fact, he turned out to be someone quite interesting, important, and sympathetic.

He was Thomas H. Gallaudet, the venerable founder of the Hartford Asylum for the deaf and dumb. I discovered that his *Mother's Primer*, first published in 1835, was the first look-say primer to appear. I had the pleasure of inspecting a rare copy of the book, which is kept in a

vault at Gallaudet College in Washington, D. C. Its first line reads: "Frank had a dog; his name was Spot."

Gallaudet was an unusual teacher who brought to the learning problems of the deaf and dumb great empathy and a talent for innovation. He thought he could apply to normal children some of the techniques used to teach 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 written language represented ideas only and had nothing to do with sounds made by the tongue and vocal chords. Might not such a method work even better with normal children?

In 1836, the Boston Primary School Committee decided to try Gallaudet's primer on an experimental basis. Horace Mann, who became secretary of the Massachusetts Board of Education in June 1837, was very critical of the traditional alphabetic teaching method, and he heartily endorsed the new method as a means of liberating children from academic tyranny. In November the Primary School Committee reported favorably on the Gallaudet primer, and it was officially adopted for use in the Boston primary schools. Pretty soon other textbook writers got on the whole-word bandwagon and they began producing their own versions of the Gallaudet primer.

All of this took place in the context of a great movement for universal public education, which was expected to eradicate the ills of mankind by applying science and rationality to education. In 1839 Mann and his fellow reformers established the first state-owned and -operated college for teacher training – the Normal School at Lexington, Massachusetts. Gallaudet had been offered the school's directorship but declined it. The man who did accept the post, Cyrus W. Pierce, was just as enthusiastic about the whole-word method as Mann. And so, in the very first year of the very first state teachers college in America, the whole-word method of reading instruction was taught to its students as the preferred and superior method of instruction. Thus, educational quackery not only got a great running start with state-controlled teacher training but became a permanent part of it.

During the next five years, Mann's *Common School Journal* became the propaganda medium not only of the public school movement and the state normal schools but of its quackery – particularly the whole-word method. But finally, in 1844, there was an incredible reaction. A group of Boston schoolmasters, who had had enough of the nonsense, published a blistering book-length attack on Mann and his reforms. Included in the attack was a thorough, detailed, and incisive critique of the whole-word method, the first such critique ever to be written.

This attack ignited a bitter dispute between Mann and the schoolmasters that was to last for more than a year and result in a return to common sense in primary reading instruction. The state normal schools, fledgling institutions at best, were simply not yet powerful enough to exert a decisive influence in the local classroom. Professors of education were still a long way off in the future. So the alphabetic method was restored to its proper place in primary instruction. But the whole-word method was kept alive in the normal schools as a legitimate

alternative until it could be refurbished by a new generation of reformers in the new progressive age.

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## THE INFLUENCE OF JOHN DEWEY

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The whole-word method began to make its comeback around the turn of the century and eventually took over modern primary instruction. A new progressive philosophy of education was being propounded by socialist John Dewey, who wanted to change the focus of education from the development of individual academic skills to the development of cooperative social skills. The object of socialism had been from the very beginning to remake man from the competitive being of capitalist society to a cooperative being in a collectivist state. Education was considered the best means to achieve this. Dewey's famous Laboratory School at the University of Chicago (1896 – 1904) and later, the Lincoln School (1917 – 46) at Teachers College, Columbia University, where Dewey opened shop in 1905, set the new direction for teacher education.

Curiously enough, one of the patrons of the Lincoln school was John D. Rockefeller, Jr., who sent four of his five sons to be educated there. Jules Abel, in his book on the Rockefellers, revealed some interesting details about what the Lincoln School did for the boys' literacy:

The influence of the Lincoln School, which as a progressive school, encouraged students to explore their own interests and taught them to live in society has been a dominant one in their lives... Yet Laurence gives startling confirmation as to "Why Johnnie Can't Read." He says that the Lincoln School did not teach him to read and write as he wishes he now could. Nelson, today, admits that reading for him is la "slow and torturous process" that he does not enjoy doing but compels himself to do it. This is significant evidence in the debate that has raged about modern educational techniques.

The tragedy is that there are millions of Americans like the Rockefellers who must endure the crippling consequences of such malpractice.

It is, of course, no accident that the two leading developers and advocates of the new teaching method spent their entire careers at the two main centers where John Dewey's influence was greatest and where most of the progressive ferment was taking place. William Scott Gray joined the faculty at the University of Chicago in 1914 and was dean of its college of education from 1917 to 1931. He was chief editor of the Scott S. Foresman & Co. "Dick and Jane" basal reading program from 1930 until his death in 1960.

Arthur I. Gates toiled in the vineyards of Columbia Teachers College as a professor of education from 1917 to 1965. He was chief editor of the publisher Macmillan's basal reading program from 1930 well into the 60s. He died in 1972.

Both Gray and Gates wrote hundreds of articles on reading instruction for the professional journals as well as numerous textbooks used in teacher training. Gray was especially instrumental in organizing the International Reading Association in 1955. It has become the

world's largest and most influential professional organization devoted to reading instruction, and it is perhaps the only organization of such size in which a form of educational malpractice has been enshrined as the highest pedagogical good and its practitioners awarded prizes for their "achievements."

While Flesch was the first to expose look-say to the general public, he was not the first to question the new method's soundness or to confront the professors with its potentially harmful effects. The first to do that was Dr. Samuel T. Orton, a neuropathologist, who in 1929 published an article in *Educational Psychology* reporting that many children could not learn to read via the new whole-word method. He warned that this method "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."

Orton had discovered all of this in the 1920s while investigating cases of reading disability in Iowa, where the new method was being widely used. But the professors of education decided that Orton didn't know much about education and went ahead with their plans to publish the new basal reading programs. Later they made use of Orton's own medical diagnosis and terminology to identify what was wrong with the kids having trouble learning to read. But they never admitted that it was the teaching method that caused these problems to develop.

So, as early as 1929, the educators had had some warning from a prominent physician that the new whole-word method could cause serious reading disability. Despite this, the new basal reading programs turned out to be huge commercial successes as whole school districts switched over to Dick and Jane, Alice and Jerry, Janet and Mark, Jimmy and Sue, Tom and Betty, and other whole-word basal series that were earning substantial royalties for their professor-of-education authors.

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## THE EDUCATION MONOPOLY

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By the 1940s, schools everywhere were setting up remedial reading departments and reading clinics to handle the thousands of children with reading problems. In fact, remedial teaching had blossomed into a whole new educational specialty with its own professional status, and educational research on reading problems had become a new growth industry.

Researchers, seeking the causes of growing reading disability, began to develop a whole new lexicon of exotic terms to deal with this previously unknown problem: congenital word blindness, word deafness, developmental alexia, congenital alexia, congenital aphasia, strephosymbolia, binocular imbalance, ocular blocks, dyslexaphoria, ocular-manual laterality, minimal brain damage, and whatever else sounded plausible.

What were the cures recommended for these horrible diseases? *Life* magazine, in a major article on dyslexia in 1944, described the cure recommended by the Dyslexia Institute at Northwestern University for one little girl with an I.Q. of 118: thyroid treatments, removal of tonsils and adenoids, exercises to strengthen her eye muscles. It's a wonder they didn't suggest a prefrontal lobotomy. With the boom in remedial teaching also came the creation of professional organizations to deal with it. In 1946 the National Association for Remedial

Teaching was founded, and two years later the International Council for the Improvement of Reading Instruction was organized. Both organizations held annual conventions, published bulletins, and provided publishers the opportunity to exhibit their wares.

At this point, one might ask, how could the professors get away with this blatant educational malpractice in a free country where parents and elected representatives are supposed to have ultimate control over the public schools? Flesch gave the answer:

It's a foolproof system all right. Every grade-school teacher in the country has to go to a teachers' college or school of education; every teachers' college gives at least one course on how to teach reading; every course on how to teach reading is based on a textbook; every one of those textbooks is written by one of the high priests of the word method. In the old days it was impossible to keep a good teacher from following her own common sense and practical knowledge; today the phonetic system of teaching reading is kept out of our schools as effectively as if we had a dictatorship with an all-powerful Ministry of Education.

Apparently, government monopolized education, even without a dictatorship, is quite capable of stifling dissent. In the matter of reading instruction, what we have had to contend with is a private monopoly of professors of education within a state-controlled and regulated system. These professors had a strong economic and professional interest in pushing and keeping their textbooks and methodology in the schools, and the state system made it easy for them to create a monopoly and maintain it indefinitely. Teacher certification laws require that young teachers be trained by these educators, who not only prepare the curriculum for teacher training but also hold sway over the professional journals the teachers read and the organizations they join. In addition, the professors of education are organized professionally along national lines and therefore can exert a nationwide influence over the teaching profession as a whole.

As state institutions, the public schools are well protected from the forces that normally determine the success or failure of a private enterprise. Monopolies flourish in the public sector because of the latter's hierarchical bureaucratic structure, which rewards conformity and discourages competition. Those who work their way up to positions of power and control in the hierarchy use that power by way of tenure to solidify and perpetuate their control. They supervised the doctoral programs and set the standards for promotion within the hierarchy, and they advance only those who support them. Thus, the system is self-perpetuating.

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## THE EDUCATION ESTABLISHMENT COUNTERATTACKS

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What was the reaction of the professors of education to the publication in 1955 of *Why Johnny Can't Read*? They denounced Flesch in no uncertain terms, accusing him of misrepresentation, oversimplification, and superficiality. Arthur Gates wrote an article in the *National Education Association Journal* entitled "Why Mr. Flesch Is Wrong," which the textbook publisher Macmillan reprinted for wider distribution among parents and teachers. Other authors of whole-word classroom materials referred to Horace Mann's endorsement of the



method. Of course, they never pointed out that Mann was a lawyer, not an educator, and that he never taught primary school.

William S. Gray, to whom the profession looked for leadership, did an article for the *Reading Teacher* of December 1955 entitled "Phonic versus Other Methods of Teaching Reading." In the same issue, F. Duane Lamkin of the University of Virginia wrote a piece entitled "An Analysis of Propaganda Techniques Used in *Why Johnny Can't Read*."

To Gray, the Flesch attack was actually nothing new. In 1951 there had been so much lay criticism of whole-word reading instruction that the *Reading Teacher* of May 15, 1952, published an article entitled "How Can We Meet the Attacks?" In the January 1952 issue of *Progressive Education*, Gray had specifically addressed himself to that problem, and he did so again in September of that year in a piece for the *Elementary School Journal*. Teachers were reassured by Gray's research evidence, which was described by a writer in the *Reading Teacher* as a "veritable storehouse of ammunition."

In the year of Flesch, another important event took place. Gray and his colleagues decided to combine the National Association for Remedial Teaching and the International Council for the Improvement of Reading Instruction to form one major professional organization: the International Reading Association (IRA). It would, in a few short years, become the impregnable citadel of the whole-word method. Gray, as expected, was elected its first president.

In 1956 the IRA had 7,000 members; today, it has about 65,000. It publishes four journals and holds an annual convention that attracts as many as 13,000 registrants. In addition, many of its state organizations hold annual local conventions of their own. So if you've wondered why reading instruction in America has not gotten better since the publication of *Why Johnny Can't Read*, there's the answer. The profession is simply too well insulated from public or parental pressures. As long as the schools continue to buy the books that the professors write, why change anything?

Meanwhile, in those twenty-five years, criticism of the whole-word method has continued unabated. Charles Walcott's *Tomorrow's Illiterates* appeared in 1961; Arthur Trace's *Reading Without Dick and Jane*, in 1965. The Council for Basic Education was founded in 1958 by a group of concerned academicians who advocated a return to phonics, and the Reading Reform Foundation was organized in 1961. My own book, *The New Illiterates*, was published in 1973. But compared to the IRA, the combined opposition is like a swarm of flies on the back of an elephant.

Despite the furor among parents raised by Flesch's book in 1955, no major publisher brought out a phonics-based reading instruction program until 1963, when three publishers – Lippincott, Open Court, and the Economy Company – entered the market with the new phonics programs. But the big companies – Scott, Foresman; Macmillan; Ginn; Harper & Row; Houghton Mifflin; American Book Company; etc. – continued to publish and aggressively sell their whole-word programs to about 85% of the primary school market.

Then, in 1967, a book was published that caused the IRA a bit of a problem. The book, *Learning to Read: The Great Debate*, was written by Dr. Jeanne Chall, a respected member of the IRA and a professor of education at the Harvard Graduate School of education. After several years of research into a mountain of studies done on beginning reading instructions, Chall came to the conclusion that the phonics, or code, approach produced better readers than the whole-word method. In short, it was a vindication of what Rudolph Flesch had asserted twelve years earlier.

Since the book, financed by a grant from the Carnegie Corporation, had been written for the educational rather than the popular market, it did not make the kind of waves in the general press that Flesch's book did. Still, Chall had given ammunition to the IRAs worst enemies, and the profession dealt with her in its own way. The reviewer in the IRA's *Journal of Reading* (Jan. 1969) wrote:

What prevents Chall's study from achieving respectability is that many of her conclusions are derived from a consideration of studies that were ill-conceived, incomplete and lacking in the essentials of suitable methodological criteria. In her eagerness to clarify these studies she allowed her personal bias towards a code emphasis to color her interpretations of the data...

It seems rather odd that a researcher intent upon dispelling confusion should have allowed herself to be moored on a reef of inconclusiveness and insubstantiality. Reviewers in the *Reading Teacher*, *Elementary English*, and *Grade Teacher* were just as critical, all of which seriously reduced the impact that Chall's findings could have had on teachers of reading.

Meanwhile, whole-word authors found it necessary to come up with new arguments to counter potential competition from the phonics- based textbooks entering the market in the mid-'60s. The argument they used most effectively was that "research" had shown that there is no one best way to teach reading to all children. Of course, debating *this* took the focus off debating particular methods. Adding to the academic confusion in reading pedagogy was an expansion of the pedagogic vocabulary with the new terms borrowed from linguistics and elsewhere, sometimes to convey new concepts, at other times to obfuscate the obvious. The linguists, for example, reaffirmed the alphabetic principle underlying written English but came out strongly against teaching children to articulate the isolated sounds.

A new level of sophistication in whole-word pedagogy was reached in 1967. Prof. Kenneth S. Goodman, the Scott, Foresman editor who inherited William S. Gray's mantle of leadership, published his controversial article, "Reading: A Psycholinguistic Guessing Game," in the May 1967 *Journal of the Reading Specialist*. It was, for all practical purposes, an attempt by a professor-of-education, whole-word author to discredit the new phonics competition from Lippincott. Goodman wrote:

The teacher's manual of the Lippincott *Basic Reading* incorporates a letter by letter variants in the justification of its reading approach: "In short, following this program the

child learns from the beginning to see words as the most skillful reader sees them... as whole images of complete words with all their letters."

In place of this misconception, I offer this: "Reading is a selective process. It involves partial use of available language cues selected from perceptual input on the basis of the reader's expectation. As this partial information is processed, tentative decisions are made to be confirmed, rejected or refined as reading progresses." More simply stated, reading is a psycholinguistic guessing game.

So a whole-word author was willing to proclaim that reading is a guessing game, albeit a "psycholinguistic" one. But is it? The alphabet, in fact, makes guessing in reading unnecessary. Once you are trained in translating written sound symbols into the exact spoken language the symbols represent, precision in reading becomes automatic. You might not understand all the words you read, but that will be the case with all readers throughout their lives. Yet here were children being deliberately taught reading as a *guessing game*.

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## THROWING MONEY AT THE PROBLEM

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Meanwhile, Congress had decided to do something about the reading problem in the only way it knows how: by throwing money at it. It passed the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 with its now-famous Title One compensatory education program. The new Title One bureaucracy began showering the schools of America with billions of dollars in the hope that students who were failing in reading would be safe from future lives as functional illiterates. But what actually happened is that the 17,000 school districts that got the money indulged in an orgy of spending and hiring that caused untold joy among the suppliers and new levels of prosperity for the establishment.

But did the program do any good for the kids? If it did, then we should have seen an improvement in reading scores by 1975. Ten years ought to be enough time in which to test the effectiveness of a federal program. But the results were dismally disappointing. From New York to California came the same disastrous news of declining reading scores. As for SAT scores, they were in an alarming nosedive. The *Boston Globe* of August 29, 1976, described it as "a prolonged and broad-scale decline unequalled in US history. The downward spiral, which affects many other subject areas as well, began abruptly in the mid-1960s and shows no signs of bottoming out." The verbal SAT mean score had gone from 467 in 1966-67 to 424 in 1980.

Anyone intimately acquainted with the reading-instruction scene could have predicted as much, for the federal billions did absolutely nothing to correct the teaching-methods problem. In fact, it aggravated the problem by literally forcing the schools to finance even more educational malpractice than they could have ever afforded on their own.

The failure of Title One to improve reading skills did not go entirely unnoticed. In 1969 the National Academy of Education appointed a blue-ribbon Committee on Reading to study the nation's illiteracy problem and recommend ways to solve it. In its report in 1975, the committee had this to say about Title One:

It is not cynical to suggest that the chief beneficiaries of the Elementary and Secondary Education Acts (ESEA) have been members of school systems – both professional and paraprofessional – for whom new jobs were created. Seven years and as many billion dollars later, the children of the poor have not been "compensated" as clearly as the employees of the school system through this investment.

The committee recommended a rather radical idea, a sort of reading stamps program – the use of vouchers with which students could purchase reading instruction from competent public or nonpublic courses. The committee wrote:

*We believe that an effective national reading effort should bypass the existing education macrostructure. At a minimum, it should provide alternatives to that structure. 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 the committee 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 education in our country, we shall have to circumvent that establishment.

What a staggering indictment! The system had been created to ensure literacy for all. Now we were being told that it was an obstacle. How could you circumvent \$100 billion worth of institutionalized malpractice? It was more easily said than done. Actually, in 1975, there was already in operation a federal program that was making a very discreet effort to circumvent the establishment. It had been launched in 1970 by the U.S. Commissioner of Education, James E. Allen, Jr., as the Right-to-Read program. Its purpose was to mobilize a national commitment to literacy somewhat in the same spirit that the nation had mobilized its talents and technology to put a man on the moon, but with much less money.

That such a program was even needed when Title One was already supplementing the schools with billions of dollars in reading programs merely dramatized the utter failure of Title One. Of course, the International Reading Association was first in line to welcome the new program, which meant more money in the pockets of publishers and reading specialists.

But you can't fool all the people all of the time. Indeed, some bureaucrats are honest individuals trapped in a system they cannot change. I found such a one in Joseph Tremont, director of Right-to-Read in Massachusetts from 1973 to 1980. Tremont had entered the teaching profession in the late '50s with much youthful idealism. He had taught in grade school and at teachers colleges and had worked with Dr. Chall at Harvard on her great research project.

In May 1980, a month before Right-to-Read folded, he told me: "I'm sorry I didn't realize the impossibility of all this fifteen years ago. The irony is that I did everything I wanted to do. I did unbelievable things. But my superiors couldn't care less. They only care about the money from Washington. This is the most heartless bureaucracy I have ever seen in my life."

In 1981 Rudolph Flesch again put the educators on trial in a new book, *Why Johnny Still Can't Read*, an up-to-date report on the literacy scandal. But this time the reading establishment barely took notice. Kenneth S. Goodman, leading apostle for 'psycholinguistics' -- the new code word for "look-say" -- had become president of the IRA in 1981, carrying on the tradition started by William Scott Gray.

If the nation wasn't all that worked up over what Flesch had to say, it was probably because people had already begun to accept declining literacy as part of the way things are. Besides, it was now possible to blame television, the nuclear arms race or the breakdown of the family for the decline. Indeed, the reading problem had defied solution for so long that it now seemed wiser to adjust to illiteracy than to beat one's head against a stone wall.

If Flesch had proven anything, it was that the educational establishment was virtually immovable -- incapable not only of self-correction but even of admitting that there was anything to correct. For parents, it meant that they could not depend on the schools to teach their children to read properly.

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## WHAT IS TO BE DONE?

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It has become obvious to me that what prevents America from seeking a real solution to the reading problem is its mindless adherence to the idea of state-monopoly education with all of its aggrandizement of bureaucrats, its celebration of the mediocre, its oppression of the free spirit, and its strident anti-intellectualism. You cannot achieve high individual literacy in a system that numbs the intellect, stifles intelligence, and reduces learning to the level of Mickey Mouse.

So what is to be done? Since there is no national solution to the literacy problem acceptable to the educators or legislators, parents shall have to deal with the problem themselves. Many parents, in fact, have withdrawn their children from the public schools and put them in private ones where basic academic skills are stressed.

Most private schools, particularly the religious ones, where Biblical literacy is central, teach reading via phonics. But since many private schools recruit their teachers from the same pool of poorly trained professionals and use many of the same textbooks and materials found in the public schools, their academic standards may reflect more of the general culture than one might expect. Look-say, like television, permeates the educational marketplace so thoroughly and in so many guises, and it is so widely and uncritically accepted, that it takes expert knowledge to know the good from the bad, the useful from the harmful. The quality of a private school's reading program therefore really depends on the knowledge its trustees and principal may have of the literacy problem and its causes. It is this knowledge that can make the difference between a mediocre school and a superior one.

And in some cases it is this knowledge that inspires people to start a private school: to prove that the so-called uneducables are indeed quite educable. Such was the genesis of West Side Preparatory, the now-famous school founded by Marva Collins in 1975 in a black neighborhood

in Chicago. A strong advocate of intensive phonics, Mrs. Collins started her school after spending fourteen years in the public system, where she saw children's lives being ruined by the type of noneducation so prevalent throughout the system. "We have an epidemic out there," she told a Reading Reform Foundation audience in 1979, "and millions of children are dying mentally from it. It's not swine flu, it's not learning disabilities, it's not dyslexia -- it's the look-say syndrome. No one has found a cure for the look-say syndrome except the relatively few of us who are trying to spread the truth."

Unfortunately, Marva Collinses are rare, and there are millions of children who need sane, competent reading instruction. Some parents have joined the growing movement for home education and are themselves teaching their children to read or hiring competent tutors. In other words, there are ways to escape the state-supported monopolist, but it takes strong conviction and some know-how to do so.

Meanwhile, the vast majority of American children are trapped within a system that is turning their brains into macaroni. It's a tragedy that this has to occur when there is no lack of knowledge about how to teach children to read well. After all, they did it for at least 3,000 years before the professors of education took over

#### About the Author

Samuel Blumenthal is one of the nation's leading authorities on our educational system. He is the author of numerous articles and studies on the subject. His books include *Is Public Education Necessary?*, *How to Start Your Own Private School – and Why You Need One*, *The New Illiterates*, *How to Tutor*, *Revolution via Education*, and other titles.

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