



WHO KILLED EXCELLENCE?

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Editor's Preview: There has been much talk of a crisis in education and much speculation as to what or who is to blame for the mediocrity in our schools. Professor Samuel Blumenfeld offers a clear and convincing explanation of how the goals of the professional educator have changed and have thus adversely affected the quality and content of education.

Blumenfeld states that James Cattell, John Dewey, and Edward Thorndike virtually rebuilt education on a foundation of science, evolution, humanism, and behaviorism. Their work remains virtually uncontested in many universities today. New theories of learning were developed to accommodate their vision.

In Dewey's words, "learning to read in early school life because of the great importance attached to literature seems to me a great perversion." He argued

that a high literacy rate bred a "destructive" individualism.

Who killed excellence in education? Professor Blumenfeld indicts the behaviorists, and he remarks that the future of American education still rests upon resolving the profoundly philosophical question: What are the proper aims of education?

The history of American education can be roughly divided into three distinct periods, each representing a particular and powerful world view. The first period—from colonial times to the 1840s—saw the dominance of the Calvinist ethic: God's omnipotent sovereignty was the central reality of man's existence. The second period, lasting from the 1840s until about World War I, reflects the Hegelian mindset. The third period, from World War I to the present, I call "Progressive." It came into being mainly as a result of the new behavioral psychology developed in the experimental laboratories of Wilhelm Wundt at the University of Leipzig in Germany. In this scheme, the purpose of man's life was to deny and reject the supernatural and to sacrifice oneself to the collective, often referred to as "humanity." Science and evolution replaced religion as the focus of faith, and dialectical materialism superseded Hegel's dialectical idealism as the process by which man's moral progress was made. The word "progressive," in fact, comes from this dialectical concept of progress.

G. Stanley Hall beat the first path to Wundt's laboratory in Leipzig. Hall returned from his Wundtian experience in

1878 and in 1882 created America's first psychology laboratory at Johns Hopkins University. Two of Hall's students were James Cattell and John Dewey. Cattell's most celebrated pupil was Edward L. Thorndike, who had gotten his master's degree under William James at Harvard, where he had also conducted experiments in animal learning. Under Cattell, Thorndike continued his experiments which were to have a devastating impact on American education. Thorndike reduced psychology to the study of observable, measurable human behavior—with the complexity and mystery of mind and soul left out. In summing up his theory of learning, Thorndike wrote: "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 its own nature to perform it.' "

In 1904, Cattell invited his old friend John Dewey to join the faculty at Columbia. From Johns Hopkins, Dewey had not gone to Leipzig like Cattell and others. Instead he taught philosophy at the University of Michigan for about nine years. In 1894 he became professor of philosophy and education at the University of Chicago where he created his famous Laboratory School.

The purpose of the school was to see what kind of curriculum was needed to produce socialists instead of capitalists, collectivists instead of individualists. Dewey, along with the other adherents of the new psychology, was convinced that socialism was the wave of the future

and that individualism was passé. But the individualist system would not fade away on its own as long as it was sustained by the education American children were getting in their schools. According to Dewey, "... education is growth under favorable conditions; the school is the place where those conditions should be regulated scientifically."

In other words, if we apply psychology to education, which we have done now for over fifty years, then the ideal classroom is a psych lab and the pupils within it are laboratory animals.

Dewey provided the social philosophy of the movement, Thorndike the teaching theories and techniques, and Cattell the organizing energy. There was among all of them, disciples and colleagues, a missionary zeal to rebuild American education on a foundation of science, evolution, humanism, and behaviorism. But it was Dewey who identified high literacy as the culprit in traditional education, the sustaining force behind individualism. He wrote in 1898:

My proposition is, that conditions—social, industrial, and intellectual—have undergone such a radical change, that the time has come for a thorough-going examination of the emphasis put upon linguistic work in elementary instruction. . . .

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.

But in order to reform the system, the mind had to be seen in a different way. Dewey wrote:

The idea of heredity has made familiar the notion that the equipment of the individual, mental as well as physical, is an inheritance from the race: a capital inherited by the individual from the past and held in trust by him for the future. The idea of evolution has made familiar the notion that mind cannot be regarded as an individual, monopolistic possession, but represents the outworkings of the endeavor and thought of humanity.

To Dewey the one part of our identity that is the most private, the mind, is really not the property of the individual at all, but of humanity, which is merely a euphemism for the collective or the state. That concept is at the very heart of the Orwellian nightmare, and yet the same concept is the very basis of our progressive-humanist-behaviorist education system.

Dewey realized that such radical reform was not exactly what the American people wanted. So he wrote:

Change must come gradually. To force it unduly would compromise its final success by favoring a violent reaction.

The most important of the reforms to be instituted was changing the way children were to be taught to read. Since it had been ordained by Dewey and his colleagues that literacy skills were to be drastically de-emphasized in favor of the development of social skills, a new teaching method that deliberately reduced literacy skills was needed.

The traditional school used the phonics or phonetic method. That is, children were first taught the alphabet, then the

sounds the letters stand for, and in a short time they became independent readers. The new method—look-say or the word method—taught children to read English as if it were Chinese or Egyptian hieroglyphics.

The new method had been invented in the 1830s by Rev. Thomas H. Gallaudet, the famous teacher of the deaf and dumb. Since deaf-mutes have no conception of a spoken language, they could not learn a phonetic—or sound-symbol—system of reading. Instead, they were taught to read by a purely sight method consisting of pictures juxtaposed with whole words. Thus, the whole word was seen to represent an idea or image, not the sounds of language. The written word itself was regarded as a little picture, much like a Chinese ideograph. Gallaudet thought that the method could be adapted for use by normal children and he wrote a little primer on that concept.

In 1837 the Boston Primary School Committee decided to adopt the primer. By 1844 the results were so disastrous that a group of Boston schoolmasters published a blistering attack on the whole-word method and it was thrown out of the schools. But look-say was kept alive in the new state normal schools where it was taught as a legitimate alternative to the alphabetic-phonics method.

When the progressives decided to revive look-say, they realized that an authoritative book would be necessary to give the method the seal of approval of the new psychology. In Wundt's labora-

tory, Cattell had observed that adults could read whole words just as fast as they could read individual letters. From that he concluded that a child could be taught to read simply by showing him whole words and telling him what they said.

For some reason Cattell did not want to write a book himself. So he got one of G. Stanley Hall's students, Edmund Burke Huey, to write a book arguing that look-say was the superior way to teach reading. The book, *The Psychology and Pedagogy of Reading*, was published in 1908. What is astounding is that by 1908 Cattell and his colleagues were very well aware that the look-say method produced inaccurate readers. In fact, Huey argued in favor of inaccuracy as a virtue!

The book was immediately adopted by the progressives as the authoritative work on the subject despite the fact that it was written by an obscure student who had had no experience whatever in the teaching of reading, who wrote nothing further on the subject, and about whom virtually nothing is known.

When a nation's leading educational reformers start arguing in favor of illiteracy and inaccurate reading, and condemning early emphasis on learning to read as a perversion, then we can expect some strange results to come from our education process. In fact, by the 1950s, the progressives had done such a good job that Rudolf Flesch could write a book in 1955 entitled *Why Johnny Can't Read*. Why indeed! Flesch minced no words:

The teaching of reading—all over the

United States, in all the schools, in all the textbooks—is totally wrong and flies in the face of all logic and common sense.

How did this happen? Flesch explains:

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.

The educators were furious with Flesch. He had made them appear stupid and incompetent. They knew they were not stupid. They had pulled off the greatest conspiracy against intelligence in history. Although Dewey, Thorndike and Cattell were dead, their disciples, Arthur I. Gates at Columbia and William Scott Gray at the University of Chicago, were determined to carry on the work of their mentors. In 1955, the professors of reading organized the International Reading Association to maintain the dominance of look-say in primary reading instruction. Today, look-say permeates the educational marketplace so thoroughly and in so many guises, and it is so widely and uncritically accepted, that it takes expert knowledge by a teacher or

parent to know the good from the bad, the useful from the harmful.

Even the best students have fallen victim to this "dumbing-down" process. In a speech given to the California Library Association in 1970, Karl Shapiro, the eminent poet-professor who had taught creative writing for over 20 years told his audience:

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.

This literacy breakdown is no accident. It is not the result of ignorance or incompetence. It has been, in fact, deliberately created by our progressive-humanist-behaviorist educators whose social agenda is far more important to them than anything connected with academic excellence. Dr. Flesch wrote another book in 1981 entitled *Why Johnny Still Can't Read*. He wrote with some sadness:

Twenty-five years ago I studied American methods of teaching reading and warned against educational catastrophe. Now it has happened.

At the moment every state legislature in the nation is grappling with an education reform bill. Not one of them has addressed this basic problem of primary reading instruction. The trouble is that most would-be reformers are convinced that merit pay, longer school days, smaller class size, more homework,

career ladders, competency tests, higher pay for teachers, compulsory kindergarten and more preschool facilities will give us excellence. But they won't for one very significant reason. The academic substance of public education today is controlled lock, stock and barrel by behavioral psychologists, and they don't believe in excellence. The American classroom has been transformed into a psych lab and the function of a psych lab is not academic excellence.

Who killed excellence? Behavioral psychology did. Why? Because it is based on a lie: that man is an animal, without mind or soul, and can be taught as an animal. And that concept is based on an even greater lie: that there is no God, no Creator.

And so the future of American education rests on the resolution of profoundly philosophical questions. Apparently no compromise between the ruling behaviorists and the rebellious fundamentalists is possible. As long as the progressive-humanist-behaviorists control the graduate schools of education and psychology, the professional organizations and journals, and the processes whereby curricula are developed and textbooks written and published, there is little possibility that public education can achieve academic excellence.

It is the better part of wisdom to admit that the government schools are the permanent captives of the behaviorists who also seem to control the sources of public and private funding that sustain them. They seem to be impervious to the pressures for excellence.

There is a growing belief that the solution lies in abandoning government education and transferring our energies and resources to the private sector, thereby expanding educational freedom, opportunity and entrepreneurship. The American people want better education. They ought to be able to get it. But to do so they will have to sweep away whatever obstacles to excellence the educators have erected. In fact, that is the problem—how to break down, overcome or circumvent the obstacles to excellence.

The exodus of children from the public schools is an indication that this is already happening. But the millions of children who remain in the government schools are at risk, in danger of becoming the functional illiterates, the underclass of tomorrow. Can we save them? We have the knowledge to do so. But do we have the will? The next few years will provide the answer.

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