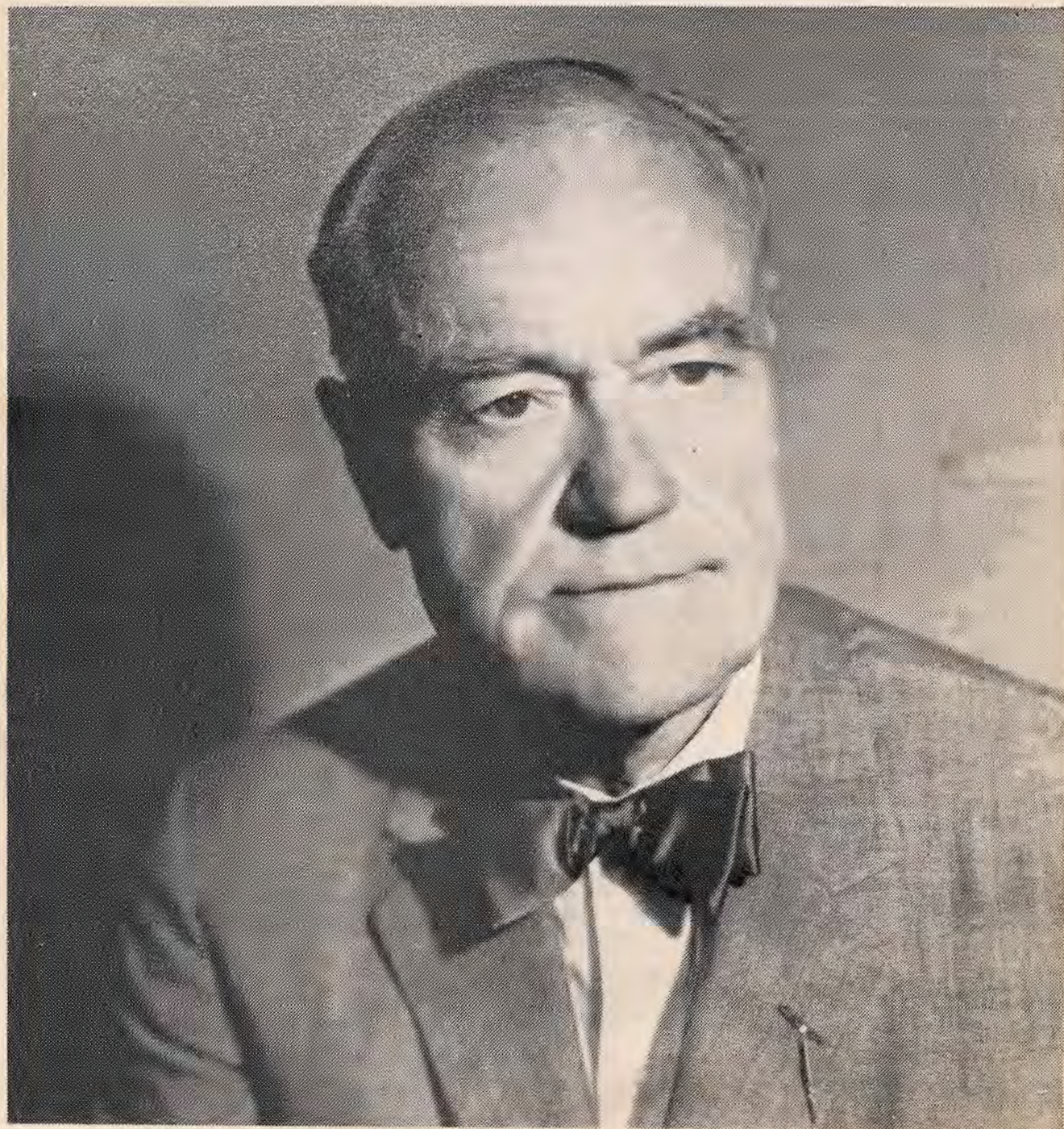


THE

READING

INFORMER

Published by the Reading Reform Foundation
Volume 1, Number 4 January 1974



Watson Washburn 1894 - 1973

HOD'S PODGE



Book Review

THE NEW ILLITERATES
— And How to Keep Your
Child from Becoming One.
By Samuel L. Blumenfeld
(Arlington House 358 pp \$9.95)

With chaos in reading in most American schools today, the author's purpose is to turn parents into "reading experts." If you read his incisive, no-jargon information, you will be one.

Blumenfeld tells you why a normal child becomes a crippled reader: sight-word method "thalidomide" in his first year of school.

He explains clearly how it is taught, and why it prevents a majority of children from learning to read well, no matter how much teachers try to help them in later grades.

This book tells you why this mental thalidomide is still used in three-quarters of the nation's schools, creating millions of functional illiterates. (If they live in good neighborhoods, educators call them "dyslexics" or "learning disabled.") Bluntly, the sight-word method is very profitable to a few, and you will learn how they maintain control of most basic reading instruction.

Ask the brand name of the primary-grade basal reading program in your schools. Then look it up in the appendix of "The New Illiterates," where the author has provided brief discussions of the most-used programs. You will know in minutes whether your child's program is good or poor.

It is easy to see how the near-total monopoly has been maintained. But how did these blatantly bad sight-word programs gain that first firm foothold 40-odd years ago, back in an era when the experienced teacher knew children needed the phonetic approach instead? By long research the author has found some glimmers of light in this mystery, in old library files.

And in rare-book archives he has uncovered a treasure. In education journals of the 1800s he found the true original source of the sight-word method, a history never told in modern texts.

Blumenfeld discovered that a dedicated man, the Rev. Thomas Gallaudet, invented the whole-word, no-phonics (i.e. no "sounds"), sight method to try to teach reading to non-hearing, non-speaking children at his Asylum for the Deaf and Dumb.

Horace Mann, then top school administrator for Massachusetts, endorsed the adoption of this new "deaf and dumb" sight-word primer for all the speaking, hearing, normal children in Boston's public schools.

The method was a failure. Within a few years Boston teachers succeeded in forcing

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the Gallaudet books out of the schools, after a rousing year-long battle with Mann.

Author Blumenfeld tried many avenues to try to find one copy of the thousands that once existed of this first pure sight-word reader — but they seem to have vanished from old library collections. (And in a 1930s bibliography he found a provocatively strong clue that any remaining copies may well have disappeared by theft, at the same time all copies of some other much newer reading textbooks did, apparently sometime in the 1920s.)

Reviewed by Kathryn Diehl
Research Director,
Reading Reform Foundation

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Bookmark

Bring the books, but especially the parchments. II Timothy 4:13

SAMUEL BLUMENFELD'S THE NEW ILLITERATES

The latest phonics reading program promises to make a reader out of your child. All you need is the program (\$199 plus tax plus shipping and handling), various manuals and workbooks, a blackboard, flashcards, a record player, a cassette player, a VCR, a computer, and a nuclear reactor. Well, okay, so I exaggerate a bit--but we do have a tendency to make simple things rather difficult.

A good antidote to this irksome tendency is The New Illiterates, first issued in 1973, and every bit as relevant in this 1988 edition [The Paradigm Company, Box 45161, Boise, Idaho 83711]. No one knows as much about America's reading problems, or the solution, as Sam Blumenfeld. With skill and erudition, he has devastated the "look-say" reading establishment. And he has produced a true phonics program without all the distractions and frivolities which characterize some of the products on the market. (I have taught, and am teaching, my children to read using Mr. Blumenfeld's Alpha-Phonics, so I am not exactly an unbiased observer when it comes to praising his works.)

There are some 25 or 30 million functional illiterates in our fair land, and, as Mr. Blumenfeld notes, "no professional educator has stepped forward to accept responsibility for having helped create this state of affairs. It is assumed by virtually everyone that all of this 'just happened' and that no one's to blame. Certainly none of the educational leaders of the last fifty years is to blame. After all, no one's been fired." (preface) The powers that be among the educrats would like us to believe that these folks are illiterate because they have minimal brain damage, perceptual retardation, and a host of various and sundry learning disabilities. Rather than attributing illiteracy to genetic deficiency in the learner, Mr. Blumenfeld identifies it as "the inability of about half the children taught to read via Dick and Jane to acquire an adequate sight vocabulary that can take them beyond the controlled reading materials of the third or fourth grades." (pg. 72) Even the dread "dyslexia" is simply "a fancy medical term coined especially to describe the perfectly normal, intelligent youngster who can't learn how to read by the whole-word method." (pg. 108)

One of the strengths of Mr. Blumenfeld's book is that he does not just describe the current situation, but he places it in its historical context. Present problems are traced back to such scoundrels as Horace Mann in the 19th century and John Dewey in the 20th. We learn that in the 1830's in Boston was a major philosophical battle concerning the nature and methods of teaching. Mann and his disciples opposed the traditional and conservative educational practices of the Boston schoolmasters. Mann is quoted as saying, "I am satisfied that our greatest error in teaching children to read, lies in beginning with the

alphabet." (pg. 147) Thus, Mann declared that the alphabetic method, which had been used for thousands of years in cultures which had an alphabetic language, was in error, and English, an alphabetic language, should be taught as if it were an hieroglyphic language. This ranks as one of the worst educational decisions ever made in America. Mr. Blumenfeld comments that in Mann's time, there "was a climate of revolt against traditional academic discipline, and for many reformers the alphabet seemed to symbolize that discipline." (pgs. 142-143)

Despite the labors of Mann and his cronies, most American children were taught to read via McGuffey's readers and Webster's spellers. Thus, throughout the 19th century, most American children were not intellectually crippled by the "look-say, whole-word" method. It was not until the 20th century that the "second wave" of proponents made this method virtually universal, led by the terrible trio of Francis Parker, G. Stanley Hall and Dewey. For these champions of progressive education, the look-say method was perfect. It kept the students sufficiently passive so that they could work toward their real goal, a new social order. "The theory behind progressive education was that life adjustment, or the development of the proper social spirit, was really the primary purpose of education and that the traditional academic approach in which the tools of learning were first mastered was not appropriate for the new age of social consciousness." (pg. 156)

Thus, a foreign method of the teaching of reading was thrust upon the children of America--"we have forced millions of children to read as if the alphabet had never been invented. And we have seen an entire educational system perverted to accommodate the illogic and confusion of a defective teaching method." (pg. 214) The second half of this book is a phonics primer, so that parents can teach their children how to read. It's short, it's simple, and it works.

A final word from Mr. Blumenfeld. "When one begins to think of the incalculable damage done to the young minds of America through defective teaching techniques, one can scarcely contain one's anger. (Rudolph) Flesch was accused of writing in anger by his critics, as if anger were an inappropriate reaction to gross pedagogical malpractice which has had a ruinous effect on the literacy of millions of children. . . If it bothers you to see children suffering and failing needlessly because of defective teaching methods obstinately adhered to against all criticism, you will become angry. . . While researching this book I have been amazed at the coolness of the leading members of the sight-vocabulary establishment, the detached way in which they have been able to catalog and discuss all of the things that were wrong with normal children who couldn't learn to read by way of an outmoded method discarded by the deaf. If there is one thing these teachers have lacked it is humility, and a teacher without humility is no teacher at all. Their stupidity has only been excelled by their pride and their greed." (pg. 219)