

How to Raise a Literate Child

by

Samuel L. Blumenfeld

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Is the author of:

How to Start Your Own Private School

The New Illiterates

How to Tutor

Is Public Education Necessary?

Alpha-Phonics: A Primer for Beginning Readers

NEA: Trojan Horse in American Education

He is also editor of

The Blumenfeld Education Letter

Address:

**73 Bishops Forest Drive
Waltham, Massachusetts 02154
617-899-6468**

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(Subject to Revision)

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Introduction

Why This Book?

Back in 1961, when I was a book editor in the wonderfully exciting world of New York publishing, a lawyer friend of mine by the name of Watson Washburn^{a Harvard-trained politician,} asked me to become a member of the National Advisory Council of the Reading Reform Foundation, a new organization which he had just founded. I asked him what the purpose of the new organization was, and he replied that it was to “get phonics back in the schools as the chief means of teaching reading.” My reaction was one of both surprise and puzzlement.

“What do you mean, ‘Get phonics back in the schools’?” I asked. “Since when was it taken out?”

He then explained how in the early 1930s the professors of education threw out the alphabetic phonics method of teaching reading, which is the proper way to teach children to read an alphabetic writing system, and put in a new whole-word, look-say, or sight method that taught children to read English as if it were Chinese, a non-alphabetic, ideographic writing system in which whole words are represented by single characters. My immediate reaction was one of disbelief.

“How can anybody learn to read English that way?” I asked. He then suggested that I read Dr. Rudolf Flesch’s book, *Why Johnny Can’t Read*, which had been published in 1955 and had caused quite a stir at the time. I read the book, and sure enough Flesch explained in great detail what had taken place in the field of reading pedagogy, arguing that it was this radical change in teaching methods that was causing the terrible reading problems then afflicting so many children. Flesch made it clear that when you impose an ideographic teaching technique on an alphabetic writing system, you get reading disability—or what is more fashionably called “dyslexia.”

So I became a member of the Reading Reform Foundation, and that's how I got involved in the literacy problem. In 1970, at the midlife-crisis age of 44, I decided that if I were ever to realize my life-long ambition to become a full-time writer, I'd better get started without any further delay. I approached a publisher friend of mine, the late Neil McCaffrey, then president of Arlington House, and gave him several book proposals, none of which particularly excited him. Instead, he asked if I'd be interested in doing a book on how to start a private school. Apparently, because of the public's growing disenchantment with public education, there was a great deal of interest in starting private alternative schools, and he thought that a good book on the subject would find a ready market. I did some preliminary research and decided that I could do such a book. My research plan included visiting a variety private schools, old and new, and investigating the public ones to see what was going on inside in the system ~~and to~~ find out why so many parents were getting their kids out.

The fastest and easiest way to get into the public schools is to become a substitute teacher. I applied for such a job in a suburb of Boston, and before I knew it I was on call virtually every day. And so I spent the next year and a half substituting in the town's two high schools and several junior high schools, teaching everything from English to Latin to history. I hadn't been in a public high school for twenty-five years, and my first reaction was one of shock. I wasn't prepared for the kind of casual clothes students were now wearing to school: jeans, Mickey Mouse T-shirts, and other getups hardly appropriate for formal academic pursuits. (The public schools I had gone to in New York in the 1930s and '40s had dress codes.) Also, the atmosphere was one of academic slovenliness and disorder, with litter in the hallways and classrooms, textbooks treated like old rags. But what really appalled me was the poor reading skills of so many students. I had assumed that after the commotion caused by Flesch the educators had made some improvement in reading instruction, only to discover that no such improvement had been made. These young Americans were reading as if they were a bunch of immigrants. They fumbled and mumbled as if English were a second language. Something was terribly wrong, I concluded.

And so, after completing the book on private schools, I decided that I would write one on the

literacy problem, bringing the story up to date. I wanted to find out why the perfectly good teaching methods, which had been used when I was going to primary school in the early 1930's, were ^{replaced by} ~~changed to~~ one that was causing so many problems. It seemed so absolutely lacking in common sense to teach children to read English as if it were a nonphonetic writing system like Chinese. Who ^{could have dreamed} ~~had come up with~~ such a preposterous idea? So I spent about a year delving into the history of reading pedagogy and made what was to me a rather startling discovery. Through considerable digging, I discovered that the originator of the look-say, whole-word, or sight method was none other than the Rev. Thomas H. Gallaudet, the founder in 1817 of the Hartford Asylum for the Deaf and Dumb. Suddenly the origin of the method made some sense.

Gallaudet had been teaching the deaf to read by way of a sight method in which he juxtaposed ~~a word with~~ ^{pictures with a word}. He found that the deaf could learn to read simple texts in this way, and he thought that perhaps this sight method could be adapted for use by normal children, thus sparing them the tedious process of learning the letter sounds before learning to read. In 1836 he published a reading primer entitled *The Mother's Primer* based on his deaf-and-dumb, sight-reading methodology. Its first line ^{had a surprisingly familiar ring:} ~~was:~~ "Frank had a dog; his name was Spot."

The Gallaudet primer was adopted by the Boston primary schools in 1837. But it didn't take long before the shortcomings of the new method became apparent. By 1844, this new teaching method had created such academic havoc among the students that the Boston grammar-school masters issued a stinging critique of the whole-word method, explaining in detail why it didn't work. To this day this critique remains one of the clearest and most insightful analyses of that teaching method and its flaws. The Gallaudet method was discarded and the primary schools returned to alphabetic phonics.

Then came another revelation. In writing the book, I did a line-by-line analysis of the Dick-and-Jane basal readers, the most popular of the look-say reading programs used in the schools after 1930, and came to the conclusion that anyone taught to read exclusively by this method would exhibit the symptoms of dyslexia. All of this information was put in my book, *The New Illiterates*, which was published in 1973.

Of course, it is one thing to criticize teaching methods being used in the schools; it's another to provide parents with an alternative means to teach their children at home. And so, I then wrote a book instructing parents on how to teach their children to read in the proper phonetic manner, to write in a good cursive script, and to do basic arithmetic. The book, *How to Tutor*, I am happy to say, has helped thousands of parents teach their children the basic primary subjects at home.

It was in the mid-1970s that I began tutoring children, teenagers, and adults using my own materials. Out of that experience I developed *Alpha-Phonics: A Primer for Beginning Readers*, a large-size book designed to be used in one-~~on~~^{to}-one tutoring. It has proven to be quite an effective means of teaching children to read. In the course of my tutoring, testing, and research, however, I discovered that merely teaching a child how to decode our alphabetically written words is not enough to help a child become truly literate. This primary decoding skill is merely the foundation on which the structure of literacy has to be built. And that structure takes years to build through much reading, writing, vocabulary expansion and the development of an appreciation of good literature. Unfortunately, the time needed to do all of that work must now compete with the time given to television watching, dancing lessons, sports, and other activities.

Literacy is more than merely knowing how to read. It means knowing how to make full use of one's reading, how to make reading an enhancement of life, how to discover all of the pleasures inherent in being able to read. This is what must be understood in trying to raise a literate child, and that is why it seemed so necessary to write this book. I remember, when I spoke about teaching reading at a home-school conference in New Zealand in 1993, how I was confronted by a gentleman who disputed the emphasis I had put on the importance of knowing how to read. He suggested that one could get a job and even get through life quite well with just a cursory ability to read. Apparently, like so many functional illiterates, he felt that my emphasis on developing high literacy made many people like him feel inadequate and inferior.

I understood what he was talking about. I had grown up among illiterate and semi-literate immigrants whose lives were seriously handicapped by their limitations, but who managed to have families and earn modest livings. But I responded that there was more to reading than merely

being able to function at an elementary level in a literate society. I told him that I had not learned to read just to get a job. I had learned to read so that I could become a full human being, able to discover for myself the knowledge and wisdom of all who had come before me. I had learned to read so that I could write about what it meant to be alive. I had learned to read because it opened whole worlds and continents to my insatiable curiosity about the past and the present and the future. I had learned to read because, in the religion of the Word, it was the only way to know God.

To be literate is to possess an easy and welcome entry into the world of the written word, to be able to embark on that exhilarating voyage of discovery to other continents and civilizations and be able to read what human beings have written since the alphabet was invented. Access to the past through the written record is like having a time machine at one's disposal, like having an additional sense. There is so much knowledge, so much wisdom from lives lived before us, so many wonderful stories in that vast storehouse of the written word, and only a literate human being has a key to all of that.

To have gone to school, to have been "educated," and not to have been given that key to the universe of the written word is not only a tragedy but a crime. Yet, millions of American children emerge from our education system without the ability to read well enough to be able to enjoy ownership of their own priceless literary heritage. We call these unfortunate people "functional" illiterates because they are not totally illiterate as those who have never been to school at all. The irony is that you have to go to school to become a functional illiterate.

And that is the reason for this book: to enable parents to do what the schools are no longer willing to do--impart the kind of literacy that enriches life beyond all material measure. When parents accomplish this, they have given their children an enduring legacy of all that is precious in life.

Another impetus for writing this book came from reading Sven Birkerts' *The Gutenberg Elegies: the fate of reading in an electronic culture*. Birkerts is a professor of English who has been teaching college students for years. He had assigned his students to read a short story by Henry James and found that they couldn't do it. Birkerts writes:

These students were entirely defeated by James's prose--the medium of it--as well as the assumptions that underlie it. . . . What they really could not abide was what the vocabulary, the syntax, the ironic indirection, and so forth, were communicating. *They didn't get it*, and their not getting it angered them, and they expressed their anger by drawing around themselves a cowl of ill-tempered apathy. Students whom I knew to be quick and resourceful in other situations suddenly retreated into glum illiteracy.

Odd as it may seem, it was virtually impossible for these students to be at ease with or enjoy the prose of a great 19th century writer. In other words, their education had not prepared their minds to accept the written language and thoughts of another era, which meant in a sense that they were semi-literate. And that's what got me thinking about what literacy really is. Is it merely the ability to read *Time* magazine or the *Wall Street Journal*? Or is it the ability to read good prose of any era and enjoy it? That's when I realized that raising a literate child in this day and age meant more than merely teaching a child to read. It meant teaching that child in such a manner that he or she could, indeed, in the future read and enjoy the prose of Henry James or George Eliot or Thackeray or Dickens or Poe or St. Augustine or Shakespeare--all of whom wrote in long, complex sentences, using a vocabulary rich in subtlety and color, adhering to different social and cultural values, and expressing them with lucid flights of thought rarely to be found in our popular literature. That's what literacy is all about.

Why is that kind of literacy important in the new electronic age? Because the further development of language, which is the primary vehicle of thought, requires higher, not lower, literacy skills. Because the mind still needs that kind of verbal exercise and facility that permits us to analyze the complexities of life and produce new ideas. The mind still needs to blaze new trails if we are to face the future with confidence and make it better than the past. High literacy is important because we must still have easy access to the experiences of the past if we are not to repeat the mistakes of the past. Human nature has not changed since the beginning of recorded history, and it will not change just because we use computers and modems and CD-ROMs instead of books and typewriters or goose quill pens. There is much to be learned and enjoyed from all who have come before us, and there is much to be learned from each other provided we have the

verbal skills to make that possible.

Also, the basic technology of reading and writing still remains the foundation of all the new technology regardless of its electronic wizardry. Word processing still requires that we use the written language as the medium of communication. And since the written word is at the very heart of all of our computer networking which, in fact, is constantly being improved to facilitate and enhance the use of our alphabetic technology, it stands to reason that in the new information age the better we are at mastering the written word, the greater will be the value of our work. Regardless of what the pedagogues say, the future favors high literacy. You can bet on it.

Chapter One:

The Literacy Crisis

As anyone who reads newspapers or watches television knows, America has a reading problem. In fact, we are experiencing an unprecedented literacy crisis. Unprecedented, because never before in history has a nation, in which everyone is forced to be educated, suffered a decline in literacy. Prior to 1930, America's literacy rate was steadily climbing. It was expected that by 1950, virtually everybody in America would be literate. But it hasn't turned out that way.

I have a file of clippings and articles about the reading problem going back at least four decades. The earliest is an article from *Collier's* magazine dated Nov. 26, 1954, entitled, "Why Don't They Teach My Child to Read?" The author writes:

The man next to me in the airport bus entering Pasco, Washington, said, "My six-year-old reads words at school and can't read the same words when I point them out at home in the newspaper. In school today the children aren't taught to read--they're taught to memorize."

A man in the seat ahead chimed in, "Everything is pictures. My youngster is in the sixth grade. He'll still come across a word like *pasture* and he remembers a picture in his early reader and calls it *meadow*."

Neither passenger knew I was making a national study of modern education; they volunteered their remarks, sharing something they were concerned--and troubled--about. . . .

But most of all they are puzzled. Why is reading taught this way? A thousand times one hears the question, "Why don't they teach my child to read?" . . .

Two basic teaching methods are in conflict here. One is the phonetic approach (known as phonics), the old-fashioned way in the view of modern educators. . . . The other method, which the modernists have put into vogue, is

the word-memory plan--also known as "sight reading," "total word configuration" or "word recognition." It has the more friendly nickname of "look and say," since the youngster is supposed simply to look at a word and say it right out. He memorizes the "shape" of the word, the configuration, and identifies it with pictures in his workbook. Often he is taught to recognize phrases or whole sentences in his picture book, or on flash (poster) cards, before he can independently sound out and pronounce such simple words as *cat* or *ball*.

The fundamental difference in the two methods reaches deep into philosophy and scientific theory. Thinkers have wrangled for centuries over which comes first, the whole or its parts The phonics advocates say the parts come first; the word-memory people say we start with the whole and the parts fall into place in due course.

Thus, there was no doubt that it was the new whole-word teaching method that was causing the reading problem. That view was further reinforced one year later by Rudolf Flesch, whose best-selling book, *Why Johnny Can't Read*, has become ^{probably} the most famous book ever published about American education. In it, Dr. Flesch pulled no punches. He wrote:

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

Do you know that the teaching of reading never was a problem anywhere in the world until the United States switched to the present method around about 1925? . . .

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.

That was a pretty strong indictment of the educators. Nevertheless, in spite of the uproar among parents caused by the book, the reading problem continued to get worse because the educators refused to change their teaching methods. Some schools did, indeed, go back to phonics, ^{temporarily} but most schools continued using the methods that were causing the problem.

Then, in 1967, Prof. Jeanne Chall's book, *Learning to Read: The Great Debate*, was published.

Dr. Chall had hoped to put an end to the teaching methods dispute by researching all of the studies done on the subject to determine, once and for all, which method worked best. Her conclusion was that a "code emphasis," meaning the alphabetic-phonics method, used in beginning reading instruction produced better readers than methods which began with a "meaning emphasis," or the whole-word approach. In other words, it was now quite clear that the ever-growing reading problem in America had something to do with the way reading was taught in the schools.

But the educators, for the most part, rejected Dr. Chall's findings and continued doing what they had been doing. The result is that there was ^{no ~~return~~ general} return to the traditional methods that had worked so well in the past. Meanwhile, the literacy crisis continued to worsen. In 1970, Prof. Karl Shapiro, noted poet and critic, spoke about the decline of literacy among the so-called literates at a meeting of the California Library Association. He said:

I wish to report to you my version of the degeneration of the literary intelligence and its attendant confusions everywhere in our lives. . . .

For example, I have been engaged in creative writing programs for 20-odd years, virtually from the beginning of this kind of teaching. These programs have corroded steadily and today have reached the point of futility. . . . Students in similar programs today, according to my experience all over the United States, can no longer spell, can no longer construct a simple English sentence, much less a paragraph, and cannot speak. . . .

But 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. . . .

I use *illiteracy* in the proper sense: the inability to read and write. As this condition becomes endemic in the American educational system, the value and meaning of literature becomes obscured, literature falls into desuetude.

As far as I can tell, the high school has now reached the level of the grade school; the college is at high school level; the graduate school at college level. . . .

? We are experiencing a literary breakdown which is unlike anything I know of in the history of letters. It is something new and something to be reckoned with.

Thus, by 1970, the literacy crisis had become so bad that even the best students were being affected by it. An equally alarming report was published in the *Dallas Morning News* of Aug. 26, 1971. Columnist David Hawkins had interviewed John Gaston, head of the Fort Worth branch of

the Human Engineering Laboratory which specialized in aptitude research by examining hundreds of thousands of tests given in several parts of the country since 1924. Gaston said:

Do you know that the present generation knows less than its parents? All of our laboratories around the country are recording a drop in vocabulary of 1 per cent a year. In all our 50 years of testing it's never happened before. . . .

Young people know fewer words than their fathers. That makes them know less. Can you imagine what a drop in knowledge of 1 per cent a year for 30 years could do to our civilization?

We also believe that the recent rise in violence correlates with the drop in vocabulary. Long testing has convinced us that crime and violence predominate among people who score low in vocabulary. If they can't express themselves with their tongues, they'll use their fists. . . .

We test many gifted people who are low in vocabulary and we tell them all--we tell the world--to learn words. Swallow the dictionary. Brilliant aptitudes aren't worth much without words to give them wings.

Twenty-five years have gone by since that interview, which means that Americans' use of vocabulary has declined 25 per cent since then! Crime has reached such proportions that Americans are arming themselves as never before. Teenagers bring guns to school and kill one another over a pair of sneakers. Does any of this have something to do with the decline of literacy in our society? Something we do know is that 85 per cent of the inmates in our prisons have reading problems.

Meanwhile, what are the educators doing? Have they solved the teaching ^{methods} problem? Not according to *Education Week* of March 21, 1990 which carried a long article on the subject with the headline: "From a 'Great Debate' to a Full-Scale War: Dispute Over Teaching Reading Heats Up." Seems incredible that in 1990 ^{- 35 years after Rudolf Flesch -} the educators still could not decide which was the most effective way to teach children to read. The article states:

In 1967, one of the most prominent researchers in reading instruction, Jeanne S. Chall, analyzed the controversy that was then raging in the field in an influential book called *The Great Debate*,

Today, nearly a quarter of a century later, the Harvard University scholar says the "debate" not only persists, but has, in fact, escalated to a full-scale war.

The battle lines are drawn between advocates of phonics, who stress the importance of teaching the relationships

between letters and sounds, and those of whole-language methodology, who believe children should be taught reading by reading whole texts.

And so fierce have their arguments become that two recent attempts to find a common ground . . . have not only failed to quell the debate, but may have exacerbated it.

"It's always been, in reading, that there was restraint with all our fighting," Ms. Chall says. "Now it's as if all restraints are gone."

If you are a parent learning about this pedagogical confusion for the first time, you must understand that it is your children who will be the casualties in this war among educators, unless you take matters into your own hands. If you don't want your children to be added to the statistics of illiterates in America, then you have no choice but to take matters into your own hands. The educators are too busy fighting each other to be of any help to you.

As for the latest statistics on illiteracy in America, the nation was shocked to read the results of a 14-million-dollar survey made on adult literacy by the U.S. Department of Education. On Sept. 9, 1993, the front page of the *Boston Globe* carried this headline: "90 million US adults called barely literate." The article stated:

Nearly half of all adult Americans read and write so poorly that it is difficult for them to hold a decent job, according to the most comprehensive literacy study done by the US government.

For instance, the most difficult tasks that an estimated 90 million adults can perform include calculating the difference in price of two items and filling out a Social Security form.

These adults cannot write a brief letter explaining an error on a credit-card bill, figure out a Saturday departure on a bus schedule, or use a calculator to determine the difference between a sale price and a regular price, the study said.

The "Adult Literacy in America" study was set in motion by Congress five years ago. The conclusions underscore alarms raised in recent years by business leaders and education specialists alike about the literacy and quality of the American workforce and about millions of high-school students earning diplomas though barely able to read and write.

And how does the government intend to solve this horrendous literacy crisis? Education

Secretary Richard Riley suggested that Americans “consider going back to school and getting a tune-up.” Will a “tune-up” solve a problem that has defied educators since the 1950s? And if the illiterate’s problem was caused by the school, why should one expect the school to solve it since the educators are now involved in a war over teaching methods?

Nor should it be assumed that just because a student has made it to college that he or she is literate in the full sense. Sven Birkerts, in his book, *American Energies*, describes what it is like in today’s college classroom. He writes:

I invite you into a class--any class--of high school or college students. You have only to initiate a discussion about reading (not required reading, but *reading* reading) to locate the source of my apocalyptic forebodings.

I make it a point to have one such discussion every term with my freshmen. Out of thirty students, maybe five or six say that they read for pleasure. That is, that they read anything more taxing or enduring than Stephen King or Sidney Sheldon. The vast majority are just not at ease with the printed word. A strange irritability settles over them when they have to look at a text for more than a few minutes. They are not dull or inarticulate--quite the contrary. But their inner world is constituted from images, sounds, and spoken words. When they use the terms of the world, they are quick and confident. But bring them face-to-face with the demands of cultivated literacy, and they gasp like stranded fish.

Birkerts’ observations of his college students were affirmed by a startling report issued by the Educational Testing Service of Princeton, New Jersey, in December 1994, stating that 50 per cent of college graduates were found to have very low literacy skills. According to tests, half could not read a bus schedule or write to a creditor about a billing error, or use a pamphlet to calculate the yearly amount a couple would receive in supplemental security income. The report said that only 11 per cent of four-year graduates and 4 per cent of two-year graduates reached the highest levels of literacy. An article on the report in the *Boston Globe* of Dec. 12, 1994 provided this grim summing up:

College graduates “are certainly more literate, on average, than those who do not go to college or do not graduate,” the report states, “but their levels of literacy range from a lot less than impressive to mediocre to near-alarming.”

Birkerts estimated that only five or six out of thirty students could be considered literate in the traditional sense. Six out of thirty is exactly 20 per cent. Do you want your child to be among the 20 per cent who are literate or the 80 per cent who gasp like stranded fish when they are confronted with a page of text?

Another indicator of the dumbing down process that has been taking place among the best and brightest of our students are the SAT scores. In 1972, the number of students who achieved the highest verbal score of 750-800 was 2,817. In 1994, that number was down to 1,438. In contrast, in 1973, the number of students who got the lowest score of 200-290 was 71,084. In 1994, that number was up to 136,841. The evidence is beyond dispute: the schools are dumbing down our students to such an extent, that every child is now at risk academically in an American public school.

If the educators have not solved the literacy problem by now, it's apparent that either they don't want to solve it or are incapable of solving it. And that's why it is incumbent upon every concerned parent to find out what it takes to raise a literate child in today's increasingly nonliterate or aliterate society.

Chapter Two:

What is Literacy?

What is literacy? The answer is not as simple as one would think. For example, there are educators who believe that literacy, as we generally think of it, is obsolete. I became aware of this when Charlotte Iserbyt, an old colleague of mine in this long, on-going literacy war, sent me a copy of a lecture given by a Harvard professor to a group of executives in 1981. The professor was Anthony G. Oettinger, then chairman of the Center for Information Policy Research at Harvard University. His audience were executives of the Northern Telecom corporation attending a senior management conference on issues and perspectives for the 1980's. Dr. Oettinger said:

Our idea of literacy, I am afraid, is obsolete because it rests on a frozen and classical definition. Literacy, as we know it today, is the product of the conditions of the industrial revolution, of urbanization, of the need for a work force that could, in effect, "write with a fine round hand." It has to do, in other words, with the Bob Crachits of the world.

Immediately I knew from my own research and knowledge that Professor Oettinger's original premise was wrong. Literacy in early America was part and parcel of the Protestant Reformation's emphasis on Biblical literacy as the primary need of Protestant society. America was founded by religiously motivated colonists who relied on the Bible not only as their guide to salvation, but as their guide to survival as a civilized community in the great wilderness of North America. This was the bedrock foundation of literacy in America, and it produced the most literate society in history. If anything, the industrial revolution and urbanization, lowered standards of literacy as people spent less time reading theological literature and more time reading novels and magazines.

The purpose of education during that early period was to prepare the youngster for adulthood with a general, well-rounded education. The result was not Bob Crachit, but Thomas Jefferson and Abraham Lincoln. Dr. Oettinger continues:

But as much as we might think it is, literacy is not an eternal phenomenon. Today's literacy is a phenomenon (and Dickens satirized it) that has its roots in the nineteenth century, and one does not have to reach much farther back to think of civilizations with different concepts of literacy based, for example, on oral, rather than written, traditions.

Again, the Harvard professor is mistaken. Today's literacy has its roots, as we have already noted, in the Reformation of the sixteenth century, when Biblical literacy was considered to be the imperative of a Christian society. It was that concept that was brought to America by the Puritans and Anglicans and Huguenots. It was also Gutenberg's invention of the printing press in 1450 and the growth of the middle class that made widespread literacy possible. But even in ancient Greece and Rome literacy had reached high levels of practice. So, one wonders about civilizations in which literacy was based on oral traditions. Pray tell, what admirable pre-literate "civilization" should we try to emulate? The word "literate" itself refers to the letters of the alphabet, to written language. And by stating that "literacy is not an eternal phenomenon," does the Professor mean that we are now in a post-literate era? He goes on:

The present "traditional" concept of literacy has to do with the ability to read and write. But the real question that confronts us today is: How do we help citizens function well in their society? How can they acquire the skills necessary to solve their problems?

Do we, for example, really want to teach people to do a lot of sums or write in "a fine round hand" when they have a five-dollar hand-held calculator or a word processor to work with? Or, do we really have to have everybody literate--writing and reading in the traditional sense--when we have the means through our technology to achieve a new flowering of oral communication?

As if handwriting is no longer necessary because we have word processors, and learning arithmetic is no longer necessary because we have cheap calculators! But what Dr. Oettinger is really asserting is that we *don't* have to have everybody literate--writing and reading in the traditional sense. He's not saying that we ought to abolish compulsory school attendance. He's

saying that schools need no longer bother teaching children to become literate in the traditional sense. That a comic-book level of literacy is sufficient. But traditional literacy is what parents want their children to acquire. That's why they send their children to school in the first place. That's why the state compels them to go to school. If traditional literacy is no longer the goal, then what exactly is the purpose of education? Is it merely to achieve a "new flowering of oral communication"? Does a child need schooling for that? Rap artists are doing exactly what Prof. Oettinger suggests without the help of certified teachers.

Also, the professor implies that some children should be taught traditional literacy and others not, since he asks "do we really have to have *everybody* literate" in the traditional sense. Well then who decides who is to become literate "in the traditional sense" and who is not. Where does the selection process take place? If traditional literacy is obsolete, why should anyone be encouraged to acquire it? But Dr. Oettinger knows in his heart of hearts that some people--those in the cognitive elite like himself--will have to know how to read and write in the traditional sense. Otherwise there can be no civilization at all. He goes on:

What is speech recognition and speech synthesis all about if it does not lead to ways of reducing the burden on the individual of the imposed notions of literacy that were a product of nineteenth century economics and technology?

And so teaching traditional literacy skills to the average child is imposing an unnecessary academic burden, the implication being that traditional literacy no longer has any value to the average individual in our twentieth-century civilization. How many parents are willing to buy that ridiculous argument? Dr. Oettinger continues:

Complexity--everybody is moaning about tasks becoming too complex for people to do. A congressman who visited one of my classes recently said, "We have such low-grade soldiers in the U.S. that we have to train them with comic books." And an army captain in my class shot back: "What's wrong with comic books? My people *function.*"

It is the traditional idea that says certain forms of communication, such as comic books, are "bad." But in the modern context of functionalism they may not be all that bad.

There you have Prof. Oettinger's philosophy of education in a nutshell. Train children to be able to "function" at a comic-book level in the new technologically advanced civilization of the 21st century! Is that what parents want the schools to do for their children, train them to be able to read comic books? Is that why taxpayers spend billions on public education? Is comic-book functionalism the new exalted aim of public education? Is it the new definition of literacy as opposed to the old "traditional" model? Prof. Oettinger isn't quite finished. He adds:

We have the potential for using the cathode ray tube to transmit pictorial information and for developing it to a much greater extent than we have as a dynamic form of communication, whose implications for training and schooling and so on are quite different from linear print or "frozen" literacy.

Obviously, we are repelled by Dr. Oettinger and his vision of pictorial literacy and the kind of mindless society it will produce. But this is what we are up against in our struggle to make sure that our children achieve the kind of literacy that enhances life at all levels. Even if we simply wanted our children to be able to "function" well in their society, we would still insist that they be as highly literate as their talents and abilities permit. For literacy and mastery of language go hand in hand. Oral communication unaided by high literacy becomes primitive and degenerative. It does not enhance a culture. It debases and degrades it as we have already seen in the products of rap artists obsessed with sex, violence, and depravity. What do we learn from their "communications"? How to destroy civilization.

And so, there is much more to defining literacy than meets the eye. It comes down to deciding what kind of a civilization we want, what kind of children we want to raise, what kind of values we hold dear. Discarding our traditional view of literacy means opting for a radical change in our way of life, our view of human destiny, our view of human happiness. It means opting for a shrunken, dumbed-down American mind, a reduction in intelligence and intellectual achievement, a diminution of human potential and the means to self-fulfillment.

Unfortunately, Dr. Oettinger's views are probably more prevalent among the so-called cognitive elite than we'd like to believe. We found such views expressed in 1987 at a conference on literacy by two leading literacy experts, David Harmon and Thomas G. Sticht. The *Washington Post* reporter covering the event wrote (8/17/87):

Harmon and Sticht noted that many companies have moved operations to places with cheap, relatively poorly educated labor. What may be crucial, they said, is the dependability of a labor force and how well it can be managed and trained, not its general educational level--although a small cadre of highly educated, creative people is essential to innovation and growth. Sticht said his studies of the U.S. military indicate that many fairly complicated jobs can be done well by people with low reading levels. That improved reading is crucial to raising the status of the "underclass." Both researchers said ending discrimination and changing values are probably more important than reading in moving low-income families into the middle class.

In other words, although improved reading is essential for getting out of the "underclass," low reading levels are good enough for most people and do not necessarily prevent them from performing complicated jobs. Only a small cadre of highly educated people--the cognitive elite--is necessary to maintain our high level of civilization!

Such views would have been anathema to the founding fathers of this country who expected everyone to be able to read the Bible, for every man was a sinner and needed to be saved. Literacy was essential for salvation. That's why it was universal among the colonists. And that's why America became the most literate nation on earth.

If the early Americans were capable of achieving such a high level of literacy with the small primers that were used in the homes and schools of those days, why can't it be done today? It can. But it means using the methodology of that earlier time, which our educators are reluctant to use. Why? Because their view of literacy reflects the new functional view expressed so well by Dr. Oettinger. It would be a mistake to think that Dr. Oettinger is some sort of lone maverick inhabiting an ivory tower. His view is that of the cognitive elite who now control what goes on in America's schools. They decide how reading is to be taught and for what reason. They define reading as "constructing meaning," a rather vague concept that can be applied to reading alphabetic print, Chinese logographs, or pictures at the Museum of Modern Art. The vagueness is deliberate because it reflects their equally vague way of teaching reading.

But when we speak of raising a literate child, we know what we are talking about. We are talking, first of all, about the ability to decode the written word with ease, fluency, and enjoyment. We are talking about the ability to write with equal facility. We are talking about developing a love

of books, of reading as a life-enriching activity, of reading as a means of advancing a career, of gaining control of one's cultural environment, of communicating with children and parents. The simple pleasure of talking with others about the books one has read is a tremendously enjoyable means of ^{exchanging} ~~dispensing~~ knowledge and wisdom and humor. Conversation among literate people, in general, is much more stimulating and interesting than among the non-literates with stunted vocabularies.

Literacy also means being able to curl up on a couch with a book, immerse oneself in another world, transport oneself to another century, travelling through ^{time -} space and time without leaving the safety and comfort of home, yet experiencing adventure and conflict and cataclysmic change, or the depths of love and serenity and fulfillment. Literacy uplifts the soul, because the voice of the writer speaks to us like an intimate friend, confessing sins or weaknesses, eliciting our sympathy or empathy, telling us what it is like to be human--confirming what our innermost thoughts tell us about ourselves. Literacy is intimacy, it is confession, it is pleasure and sorrow, it is yearning, it is disaster and failure, recovery and victory. To be illiterate is to be denied all of that.

For me, literacy has also meant survival. We live in a world full of political dangers. Being able to read what the enemy is planning is one way of preparing oneself for the inevitable. Being able to read the handwriting on the wall may save one's life. The limited, functional form of reading considered appropriate by the Oettingers of our society will deprive millions of Americans of the means of controlling their own futures. It will turn them into victims, into slaves of the cognitive elite, because they will not be able to read what their self-appointed masters are planning for them. They will only know what the cathode ray tube tells them.

To sum it up, there is only one kind of literacy, the kind that permits you to make the written word your life's companion, the kind that permits you to become the perfect receiver and dispenser of the written word, the kind that provides you with the key to your literary inheritance, the kind that makes every library a welcome refuge from the terrors of ignorance.

Chapter Three:

What Is Reading?

The problem with the public schools today is that they can't quite decide what reading is, and as a result they don't know quite how to teach it. That is why so many children are having problems learning to read these days. Noah Webster gives the traditional definition of reading as "to utter or pronounce written or printed words, letters or characters in the proper order; to repeat the names or utter the sounds customarily annexed to words, letters or characters." That's a pretty straightforward description of what a person actually does when he or she reads. It consists of articulating what is written or printed in the proper order. In other words, when someone is reading a letter and we want to know the content, we ask: "What does it say?" Implicit in this question is the knowledge that an alphabetically written message is a direct representation of a spoken equivalent. "What does it say" means "What does the writer say," for the writer is speaking to us and using the medium of alphabetic-phonetic writing to convey the message.

Today, the teachers of whole language have an entirely different view of what reading is, a view that has a profound influence how they teach children to read. Here's a definition of reading as given by three whole language educators in a book entitled *Whole Language: What's the Difference?* published in 1991:

From a whole language perspective, reading (and language use in general) is a process of generating hypotheses in a meaning-making transaction in a sociohistorical context. As a transactional process (Rosenblatt 1978; Goodman 1984), reading is not a matter of "getting the meaning" from text, as if that meaning were *in* the text waiting to be decoded by the reader. Rather, reading is a matter of readers using the cues print provide and the knowledge they bring with them (of language subsystems, of the world) to construct a unique interpretation.

Moreover, that interpretation is situated: readers' *creations* (not retrievals) of meaning with the text vary, depending on their purposes for reading and the expectations of others in the reading event. This view of reading implies that there is no single "correct" meaning for a given text, only plausible meanings. (p. 19)

Obviously, there is a significant difference between the traditional definition of reading and the whole-language definition. The latter implies that it is the reader's subjective interpretation that determines what the author's message is, regardless of what the author intended to convey. Thus, in whole language, the reader, not the author, creates the meaning; the reader, not the author, creates the message.

One can safely assume that there are not too many authors who would agree with that view of reading. Authors take great pains to choose the right words to convey whatever message they wish to convey. They don't want to be misquoted or misunderstood. They prefer to be read accurately and then later interpreted. In other words, there is a difference between what an author says and what an author may mean. But when it comes to children's books in the primary grades, we can be pretty sure that what the author says is what the author means. The child need not "create" meaning nor engage in a "transactional process in a sociohistorical context."

The whole-language view of reading naturally affects how reading is taught in the classroom. In most schools, children are taught to look at printed words as whole configurations, like Chinese characters, rather than as composed of phonetic units. They are taught "strategies" rather than phonetic decoding, although some whole-language teachers will define strategies as a form of decoding, which confuses many parents. The children are taught to rely on configuration cues, picture cues, context cues, syntactic cues, and graphophonemic cues—that is, some letter sounds, or phonemic cues, as one of the strategies to be used in reading. Thus, if you ask a whole-language teacher whether he or she teaches phonics, they will invariably say yes, even though the kind of phonics they teach is fragmentary, incidental and in the context of whole-word strategies.

But this phonetic information becomes largely irrelevant knowledge in the child's head and is rarely if ever used. Why? Because it is discouraged by whole-language teachers who advocate "taking risks," or guessing, and using word substitutions to arrive at meaning. Besides, when a child has developed a holistic reflex, it requires conscious effort to apply phonetic knowledge, effort which is annoying because it slows down the reading process.

It is odd that a reading philosophy that puts so much emphasis on “meaning” should encourage guessing and word substitutions which make a mockery of accurate meaning. Indeed, we read in *Evaluation: Whole Language, Whole Child* by Jane Baskwill and Paulette Whitman (Scholastic, 1988):

The way you interpret what the child does will reflect what you understand reading to be. For instance, if she reads the word *feather* for *father*, a phonics-oriented teacher might be pleased because she’s come close to sounding the word out. However, if you believe reading is a meaning-seeking process, you may be concerned that she’s overly dependent on phonics at the expense of meaning. You’d be happier with a miscue such as *daddy*, even though it doesn’t look or sound anything like the word in the text. At least the meaning would be intact. (p. 19)

Obviously, if you are going to encourage children to substitute words, then whatever phonics they know will be of little use. Note also the authors’ definition of reading as “a meaning-seeking process.” Of course, it is. But there’s a big difference in how you “seek meaning” with an alphabetic writing system and an ideographic one. In order to get accurate meaning in an alphabetic system, you must first convert the written message into its spoken equivalent. It is the spoken equivalent that conveys the meaning. In fact, word substitutions violate the very essence of alphabetic writing because they rely on idea associations rather than letter-sound associations. But you must acquire a phonetic reflex in order to be able to read alphabetically with ease. Also, if the whole-language method encourages a child to substitute words, it’s obvious that the child will learn that accuracy is not important in seeking meaning, that approximations are quite acceptable. In fact, an article about whole language in *The Washington Post* of Nov. 29, 1986, was headlined: “Reading Method Lets Pupils Guess.” It stated:

The most controversial aspect of whole language is the de-emphasis on accuracy.

American Reading Council President Julia Palmer, an advocate of the approach, said it is acceptable if a young child reads the word *house* for *home*, or substitutes the word *pony* for *horse*. “It’s not very serious because she understands the meaning,” said Palmer. “Accuracy is not the name of the game.”

Unfortunately, a young adult entering the working world with that philosophy is apt to have a

rude awakening when he or she discovers that accuracy *is* the name of the game, especially in a high-tech economy. Where do educators get such ridiculous ideas? They get them from their professors of education. In the field of reading, the best known advocate of whole language is Prof. Kenneth S. Goodman of the University of Arizona. An article about Goodman in the *New York Times* of July 9, 1975 revealed the professor's unconventional view of reading:

A student learning to read comes upon the sentence, "The boy jumped on the horse and rode off." But instead of saying "horse," the student substitutes "pony." Should the teacher correct him?

As far as Kenneth S. Goodman is concerned, the answer is a firm 'No.'

"The child clearly understands the meaning," Dr. Goodman said in an interview this week. "This is what reading is all about."

To Dr. Goodman . . . changes such as substituting one word for another with similar meaning are not mistakes at all but perfectly healthy "miscues."

For more than a decade the 47-year-old professor has made "miscues" the focus of his research, and out of it has come a new theory of how children learn to read and new teaching methods that are ^{beginning} ~~beginning~~ to make themselves felt in classrooms across the country. . . .

On the basis of his observations, Dr. Goodman . . . began challenging a number of generally accepted notions about how children learn to read. . . . [H]e argues, reading is a process of taking in data, making informed "predictions" about what will follow, checking these predictions as the reader goes and, if necessary, making revisions. . . . "The difference between a good reader and a poor one is that the good reader makes good predictions and checks them quickly."

[A]ccording to Dr. Goodman, . . . avoid correcting mistakes -- such as the substitution of "pony" for "horse" -- that do not interfere with the conveying of meaning.

"The usual concern for technical accuracy gets teachers up-tight, interferes with the development of good predicting skills and discourages risk taking," he said.

Predicting is merely another word for guessing. In other words, a good reader in Prof. Goodman's eyes, is a good guesser. And this fits in very nicely with his own famous definition of reading conceived in 1967: "Reading is a psycholinguistic guessing game."

To the phonetic reader, reading is not a guessing game. It is an efficient way of converting the

alphabetically written message into its accurate spoken equivalent. What is important for the parent to know is that these two different philosophies of reading produce two different kinds of readers. The phonetic method produces objective readers and the holistic method produces subjective readers. This phenomenon was recognized by educators as early as 1914 when plans were being made to change the way children ~~are~~^{were} taught to read. Educational psychologist Walter Dearborn, in a monograph entitled "Perception and Reading," wrote in 1914:

The chief differences between these types are said to be that the objective readers have a rather narrow span of attention in reading, but see accurately what they do see, and seldom guess or "read into" the material perceived, and that the subjective readers have a wider span, are influenced more by words lying in indirect vision, depend on relatively meager visual cues such as large word wholes, and that they are more likely to misread because of the large apperceptive element which they supply to the reading. (Archives of Psychology, No. 30, 1914, p. 42)

Thus, the educators were quite aware that the new holistic teaching methods they were working on would create inaccurate, subjective readers. Is this what they wanted? Since they are now all dead, we can't say for sure. ^{ask them directly} We can only rely on what they wrote.

The decision to change the way reading is taught--and thereby change the very meaning of reading--was made by progressive educators at the turn of the century. Their reasons for doing so can be found in their strong utopian desire to change America from an individualistic, ~~selfish~~^{self-centered} society into a more cooperative, collectivist one. In short, they were socialists who believed in socialism as the ideal form of society. John Dewey, who was the philosophical leader of the movement, set up a Laboratory School at the University of Chicago in 1896. The purpose of the school was to enable Dewey and his colleagues to test a new curriculum which would emphasize socialization over academic achievement. In order to effectively make this shift, Dewey found that it was necessary to downgrade the strong emphasis that traditional education placed on reading in the primary grades. He wrote in 1896:

It is one of the great mistakes of education to make reading and writing constitute the bulk of the school work in the first two years. The true way is to teach them incidentally as the outgrowth of the social activities at this time. Thus language is not primarily the expression of thought, but the means of social communication. . . . If language

is abstracted from social activity, and made an end in itself, it will not give its whole value as a means of development. . . . It is not claimed that by the method suggested, the child will learn to read as much, nor perhaps as readily in a given period as by the usual method. That he will make more rapid progress later when the true language interest develops . . . can be claimed with confidence.

Unfortunately, Dewey's confidence was misplaced. The simple fact is that many children taught to read by the Dewey-inspired methods become learning disabled for life. They become the functional illiterates of our society. But Dewey was more concerned with socialization than the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake. He wrote in 1899:

[T]he tragic weakness of the present school is that it endeavors to prepare future members of the social order in a medium in which the conditions of the social spirit are eminently wanting. . . .

The mere absorbing of facts and truths is so exclusively individual an affair that it tends very naturally to pass into selfishness. There is no obvious social motive for the acquirement of mere learning, there is no clear social gain in success thereat.

In other words, a purely personal motive for acquiring knowledge is a form of selfishness! But doesn't a learned individual in the long run have potentially more to contribute to society than one who isn't?

On the matter of learning to read, Dewey spelled out his radical views quite vigorously in an essay entitled "The Primary-Education Fetich," published in 1896. He wrote:

There is . . . a false educational god whose idolators are legion, and whose cult influences the entire educational system. This is language study--the study not of foreign language, but of English; not in higher, but in primary education. It is almost an unquestioned assumption, of educational theory and practice both, that the first three years of a child's school-life shall be mainly taken up with learning to read and write his own language. If we add to this the learning of a certain amount of numerical combinations, we have the pivot about which education swings. . . .

It does not follow, however, that because this course was once wise it is so any longer. On the contrary, the fact, that this mode of education was adapted to past conditions, is in itself a reason why it should no longer hold supreme sway. The present has its claims. . . . My proposition is, that conditions--social, industrial, and intellectual--have

undergone such a radical change, that the time has come for a thoroughgoing examination of the emphasis put upon linguistic work in elementary instruction. . . .

Here we have at least a *prima facie* case for a reconsideration of the whole question of the relative importance of learning to read and write in primary education. . . . Is the child of six or seven years ready for symbols to such an extent that the stress of educational life can be thrown upon them? . . . There is every reason to suppose that a premature demand upon the abstract intellectual capacity stands in its own way. It cripples rather than furthers later intellectual development. . . .

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. . . . Every respectable authority insists that the period of childhood, lying between the years four and eight or nine, is the plastic period in sense and emotional life. What are we doing to shape these capacities? What are we doing to feed this hunger? If one compares the powers and needs of the child in these directions with what is actually supplied in the regimen of the three R's, the contrast is pitiful, tragic. . . . No one can clearly set before himself the vivacity and persistency of the child's motor instincts at this period, and then call to mind the continued grind of reading and writing, without feeling that the justification of our present curriculum is psychologically impossible. It is simply superstition: it is the remnant of an outgrown period of history. . . .

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

We certainly know now that Dewey was wrong in his evaluation of the learning ability of children in the primary years. The reason why it is quite appropriate to teach children between the ages of 5 and 7 to read and write is because all children, except the very seriously impaired, develop their innate language faculty extremely rapidly from ages 2 to 6. In fact, by the time they are six they have developed speaking vocabularies in the thousands of words, and can speak with clarity and grammatical correctness without having had a single day of formal education. In other words, children are dynamos of language learning and can easily be taught to read between ages 5 and 7, provided they are taught in the proper alphabetic-phonics way.

Children enjoy learning the alphabet, and they can be taught the letter sounds in any number of delightful ways. Once children grasp the knack of the "code," they take off wonderfully in the world of books. They can do this because they have the foundation of their already learned spoken

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language to build on. Naom Chomsky, the celebrated linguist, points out how children are able to master their own language at so early an age because their complex language faculty is biologically innate. He writes:

The person who has mastered any human language has developed a system of knowledge that is rich and complex. This cognitive system provides specific and precise knowledge of many intricate and surprising facts. It seems that the mind carries out precise computational operations, using mental representations of a specific form, to arrive at precise conclusions about factual matters of no little complexity, without conscious thought or deliberation. The principles that determine the nature of the mental representations and the operations that apply to them form a central part of our biologically determined nature. They constitute the human language faculty, which one might regard as an "organ of the mind/brain." (*Language and Problems of Knowledge*, p. 131)

Thus, learning to speak the language, as complex a process as it may be, requires virtually no conscious effort. But learning to read does require some effort, and by age 5 or 6 most children have more than enough intellectual capability to make and sustain that effort. But it cannot be emphasized enough that the proper teaching methods must be used, otherwise the child will become frustrated by failure and disappointment.

Can the holistic teaching methods presently being used in our schools create that frustration and failure? Yes, according to Dr. Samuel T. Orton who first investigated this problem back in the 1920s when these new teaching methods were first being used. Here's an account of Dr. Orton's research as given in *Collier's* magazine of Nov. 26, 1954:

Extensive reading-method studies were made in Iowa in 1926-'27 by the late neurologist, Dr. Samuel Orton, under a Rockefeller Foundation grant. At that time children who couldn't read were said to have "congenital word blindness"--but Orton wanted proof. What he found was quite different. He reported his findings in a scientific paper entitled, "The 'Sight Reading' Method of Teaching Reading as a Source of Reading Disability."

Dr. Orton barnstormed Iowa from school to school with a mobile mental-hygiene unit. One of his first observations was: "In my original group of reading disability cases I was surprised at the large proportion of these children encountered." He later compared two towns, one of which had twice as many retarded readers as the other. "In the community with the lesser number of cases," he said, "sight-reading methods were employed but when

children did not progress by this method they were also given help by the phonetic method. In the town with the larger number, no child was given any other type of reading training until he or she had learned 90 words by sight . . . this strongly suggests that the sight method not only will not eradicate a reading disability of this type but may actually produce a number of cases."

Dr. Orton's research paper was published in the February 1929 issue of *The Journal of Educational Psychology*. Since the journal was edited by the very professors who were in the process of changing the primary school curriculum, Orton tried to be as tactful as possible. He wrote:

I feel some trepidation in offering criticism in a field somewhat outside of ~~of~~ that of my own endeavor but a very considerable part of my attention for the past four years has been given to the study of reading disability from the standpoint of cerebral physiology. This work has now extended over a comparatively large series of cases from many different schools and both the theory which has directed this work and observations garnered therefrom seem to bear with sufficient directness on certain teaching methods in reading to warrant critical suggestions which otherwise might be considered overbold.

I wish to emphasize at the beginning that the strictures which I have to offer here do not apply to the use of the sight method of teaching reading as a whole but only to its effects on a restricted group of children for whom, as I think we can show, this technique is not only not adapted but often proves an actual obstacle to reading progress, and moreover I believe that this group is one of considerable educational importance both because of its size and because here faulty teaching methods 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. . . .

Our studies of children with reading disabilities has also brought to light certain other aspects of the problem which are of educational importance but which can not be elaborated here. Among these were notably the effect of this unrecognized disability, upon the personality and behavior of the child. Many children were referred to our clinics by their teachers in the belief that they were feeble-minded, others exhibited conduct disorders and undesirable personality reactions which upon analysis appeared to be entirely secondary to the reading defect and which improved markedly when special training was instituted to overcome the reading disability.

One would imagine that after reading Dr. Orton's article, with its ominous warnings about the

dangers of the sight method, the educators would have thought twice about introducing their sight-reading programs in the schools. But, apparently, no such second thoughts were entertained. It has therefore become incumbent upon parents to try to find out as much as possible about the methods with which their children are being taught to read. Their children may be among those who are allergic to the sight method. That is why it is so very important to know the school's philosophy of reading before placing a child in its primary program. In sum, understanding the two conflicting philosophies of reading, which produce two different kinds of readers, is essential if parents are to make the right choice in selecting a proper school for their children.

Chapter Four:

Teaching Your Child to Read

The basic problem in teaching a child -- or anyone else -- to read English, or any other alphabetic system, is really a matter of understanding the basic principles on which such instruction must be organized. Ours is an alphabetic writing system. That is, we use an alphabet. What is an alphabet? It is a set of graphic symbols -- we call them letters -- that stand for the irreducible speech sounds of our language. In other words, our alphabet letters actually mean something, they stand for specific language sounds.

The alphabet's origin is steeped in mystery. It seems to have been invented in the Middle East about 3500 years ago. Prior to the invention of the alphabet, the earliest form of writing consisted of pictographs. That is, the cave men drew pictures on the walls of their caves. A man looked like a man, an animal looked like an animal. In other words, the symbols looked like the things they represented, and therefore you didn't have to go to school to learn how to "read" pictographs.

But as civilization became more complex, the scribes had to begin drawing pictures of things that did not lend themselves to depiction. It was easy enough to draw pictures of human beings and animals, but how did one draw pictures of abstract ideas such as good and evil, right and wrong, system and method, or a concept like determine? And so a scribe drew an arbitrary symbol and said that this symbol stood for determine. It didn't look like determine, but that didn't matter as long as everyone agreed that it stood for determine.

And so the scribes created thousands and thousands of such symbols none of which looked like the things they represented. We call that form of writing ideographs or logographs. An ideograph

stands for an idea. There are many ideographs used today in airports and on road signs. For example, the familiar circle with a cigarette in the middle crossed by a bar means no smoking, smoking forbidden, *defense de fumer, no fumar*. In other words, the ideograph does not stand for any specific words, only an idea which can be stated in any number of ways. A logograph, on the other hand, is a symbol or character which stands for a specific word, such as the dollar sign or the percent sign. Chinese characters are logographs. They stand for specific words.

With the development of ideographs and logographs you obviously had to go to school to learn what all of those symbols and characters stood for, and it wasn't easy memorizing the configurations of so many thousands of symbols and characters. Thus, literacy was restricted to a small group of scribes, priests, and scholars who spent years learning this complex system by way of which they were able to gain enormous influence over the ruling elite and the national culture.

However, somewhere around 3500 years ago someone of obvious high intelligence made a very remarkable discovery. That individual discovered that all of human language is composed of a very small number of irreducible speech sounds. And so, he thought that instead of using this cumbersome ideographic or logographic system composed of thousands of symbols, none of which looked like the things they represented and took years to memorize and were easily forgotten, why not invent a small set of symbols to stand for the irreducible speech sounds of the language and then we would have a very simple means of transcribing the spoken word directly into a phonetically written form, and we would also have an equally simple means of converting the written message back into its original spoken form. And so the first alphabet was invented.

That invention was indeed a revolutionary event. It made it possible for just about anyone to learn to read and thereby expanded literacy beyond a limited ruling or priestly elite, it increased the accuracy and speed of communication, and because it made it so easy to expand vocabulary it led to the tremendous expansion of knowledge and the generation of new ideas. And because it was now possible to do so much more with so much less, it did for the ancient world what the computer is now doing for the modern world.

As we have said, all of human language is composed of a small number of irreducible speech sounds. But how many such irreducible sounds are there in the English language? Most Americans haven't the faintest idea, which is merely an indication of how poorly educated most Americans are. Believe it or not, there are only 44 sounds in the entire English language, a fact

which every American should have been taught in kindergarten or the first grade. This fact is one of the best kept secrets in American education, even though it's an extremely essential bit of information if one intends to teach reading. It's important because we have a 26-letter alphabet which must represent 44 sounds!

How did that happen? Why don't we have a 44-letter alphabet? What happened is that the British islands were conquered by the Romans who imposed their Latin alphabet on the people who lived there. The Latin alphabet very nicely represents the sounds of Latin, but since the early Brits did not speak Latin, their adaptation of the Latin alphabet resulted in some interesting accommodations. Some of the letters were made to represent more than one sound, and some sounds were represented by more than one letter. For example, the typically English "th" sound is represented by *t-h*. The "sh" sound is represented by *s-h*, and the "ch" sound is presented by both *c-h* and *t-c-h*. The letter *a* stands for at least four sounds: the long "a" as in apron or April, the short "a" as in cat or bat, the "ah" sound as in car or father, and the "aw" sound as in tall or fall. How does a child learn which sound to articulate when he or she sees the letter "a"? If the letter sounds are taught in their spelling families, children generally have little or no trouble learning to articulate the proper sound.

And so, while our alphabetic writing and reading system acquired some difficulties from the beginning, it has been learned well and used quite successfully over the centuries. Indeed, the English-speaking peoples have not only attained the highest level of literacy of any language, but have also managed to produce the world's greatest literature, including Shakespeare, Milton, Dickens and the King James Version of the Bible. And so the English alphabetic system, with all of its faults and eccentricities, has served its users amazingly well. It is also a marvelous repository of linguistic history, etymology, and language usage.

Now how do you teach a child to read English? The entire process is composed of three steps. In the first step the child is taught to recognize the letters of the alphabet. This is usually easily done by learning the alphabet song or with an alphabet book, or identifying letters on blocks or on cereal boxes. We are so surrounded by print, that any imaginative means of teaching the alphabet can be used to instruct and entertain the child. In the second step, the child is taught the sounds the letters stand for. This can be done in a variety of ways. The most prevalent method used over the centuries has been to teach the child the sounds of the individual letters and then drill the child in

such consonant-vowel combinations as *ba, be, bi, bo, bu* or *ma, me, mi, mo, mu*, etc., for the long vowels, and such vowel-consonant combinations as *ab, ed, ib, ob, ub* and *am, em, im, om, um*, etc. for the short vowels. The purpose of the drill is to make sure that the child develops an automatic association between letters and sounds in order to develop a phonetic reflex. The third step consists of sounding out and reading words, sentences, and stories.

Some children have initial difficulty learning the letter sounds because the idea that letters stand for sounds is, as yet, too abstract for them to grasp. That is why the traditional method of drilling the child in the consonant-vowel and vowel-consonant syllables was so widely used in primary instruction. It taught the letter sounds in syllabic form and thus at the same time taught the blending process. It also produced the phonetic reflex needed to become a fluent reader. But this sort of repetitious rote learning has fallen into disrepute among our educators, not because the methodology doesn't work, but because it is considered too boring and too dry. In this day and age when education must be fun and entertaining, anything smacking of sheer unadulterated work or requiring conscious effort is considered painful and cruel.

But the alphabetic system is composed of abstract symbols which must be learned either by direct instruction or by the child figuring out the underlying phonetic principle on his or her own. While it is true that some children with high phonological awareness can infer the letter sounds all by themselves, most children require direct instruction. However, the children who have the most difficulty grasping the sound-symbol idea are those who are cognitively immature or deficient. That is why repetition and practice of the consonant-vowel combinations was the most commonly used and effective means of instruction. It worked!

These principles of learning were well known in ancient times. George Clarke, in his book *The Education of Children at Rome* writes:

In teaching to read the first step was to obtain familiarity with the forms and sounds of the letters. . . . The letters having been thoroughly learned, the next step was to master their various combinations into syllables. . . . [I]t would seem that it was usual to give pupils successive combinations such as *ba, be, bi*, etc., *ca, ce, ci*, etc., to spell and repeat until they had memorized them, and then to proceed to more difficult ones. Every possible combination had to be thoroughly mastered . . . before the child was permitted to read words. [Quintilian writes], "In reading there must not be too much haste about connecting syllables into words, or about reading fast, until the pupil can form the combinations of letters in syllables without stumbling or hesitation, or at any rate without

having to stop to think about it. Then he may begin to form words from syllables and continuous sentences from words. It is incredible how much delay is caused in reading by undue haste. It gives rise to hesitation, interruptions, and repetitions when pupils attempt more than they are equal to, and when, going wrong, they lose confidence even in what they already know. Reading should first of all be sure, then continuous; it must for a long time be slow, until by practice speed and accuracy are acquired." (pp. 74-76)

Thus, the problems that the Romans encountered in teaching reading were not too different from the problems we face in our time. However, today, because of the ease with which lavishly illustrated children's books can be printed, there is a new problem that often prevents children from grasping the phonetic principle. This occurs when a preschool child has been "reading" some of the many colorfully illustrated preschool books and has memorized the words by their configurations alone. The child develops a holistic view of the printed word, especially if he or she is being read to by the parent who simply points to the words as they are being read. This tendency to view printed words holistically can be further and more strongly reinforced if the child listens to an audio tape as he or she "reads" the book without assistance and learns to identify the words as distinct configurations, like Chinese logographic characters. Also, preschool word books that associate words with pictures encourage a holistic approach to the reading process. This may seem like a harmless learning process until one discovers that the child has developed a holistic reflex which then creates a block against seeing the words in their phonetic structure. When this happens, the child exhibits the symptoms of dyslexia. This can be avoided by teaching the child the letter sounds as early as possible in order to help the child develop a strong phonological awareness.

Thus, the most important step in teaching a child to read is to help the child develop a phonetic reflex. Once the child has mastered the mechanics of the phonetic alphabetic system, that child will be immune from dyslexia and firmly on the road to literacy. As for dyslexia, we shall deal with that problem in greater detail in a later chapter.

What is the best way to teach the letter sounds apart from the traditional rote method which is now unjustifiedly held in disrepute? When I wrote *The New Illiterates* back in 1973, I decided to include a reading instruction program in the addendum to enable parents to teach their children to read at home. I analyzed the English alphabetic system and came to the not-so-novel approach that we should start with the simplest and most regular aspects of the system and proceed to the more

complex. In my next book, *How to Tutor*, I refined what I had developed in the previous book, and ten years later, in 1983, after a great deal of experience as a one-on-one tutor, produced *Alpha-Phonics*, an instructional manual to be used with the student learning to read.

My approach was to make the teaching of our alphabetic system as logical as possible so that it would appeal to the child's own innate logic. Some might claim that our alphabetic system is illogical. This is not true. There are plausible explanations for all of the irregularities and eccentricities of the system. In addition, all children, except the very seriously impaired, are born with an innate language faculty which permits them to master the spoken language completely on their own. Not only do they master the language at this early age, but they instinctively learn to speak grammatically as if programmed to do so. Noam Chomsky, the noted linguist, describes the complexity of this innate language system thusly:

The human mind appears to consist of different systems, each intricate and highly specialized, with interactions of a kind that are largely fixed by our biological endowment; in these respects it is like all other known biological systems, the physical organs of the body below the neck, for example. One of these systems is the human language faculty. It is particularly interesting because it is a common property of humans, with little if any variation apart from quite serious impairment, and it appears to be unique to the human species; contrary to much mythology, other organisms appear to lack even the most rudimentary features of the human language faculty, a fact that has been shown quite dramatically in recent studies of apes. Thus human language appears to be a true "species property," and one that enters in a central way into our thought and understanding.

Thus, human beings are born with a language logic, and by matching the logic of the instruction with the logic of the child's brain, I believe I succeeded in producing a very effective way of teaching reading. Reports from scores of parents who have used this system successfully over the last ten years have confirmed my contention that a logical approach appeals to the child's basic cognitive sense when he or she can clearly see the logical structure behind the entire alphabetic system. This understanding will enhance the child's ability to master other subjects which require an analytical approach. This is how it works:

We start by teaching the child the short *a* plus five consonant letters, *m, n, s, t, x*. We articulate the sounds so that the child understands that these letters stand for specific sounds. Then we join the short *a* with the consonants to form these five two-letter, one-syllable words: *am, an, as, at,*

ax. This demonstrates how the letters are blended to form a seamless one-syllable word. In the next lesson we put the *s* before *am* and *at* and get the three-letter, one-syllable words *Sam* and *sat*. We put the *t* before *ax* and get *tax*. Then we introduce the letter *h*, articulate its sound, and put it before *as* to make *has*. That gives us enough three-letter words to begin building spelling families and enable us to compose two sentences: *Sam sat.* and *Sam has an ax.*

Thus, by lesson three the child can read two simple sentences, all based on a knowledge of letter sounds (phonics) and the blending of those sounds into words. We also suggest that the parent or tutor teach vocabulary whenever an unfamiliar word is introduced, such as the word *tax*. Explain what a tax is since the child will be paying it for the rest of his or her life.

Let me point out that virtually every child between the ages 4 and 5 can iterate the two-letter consonant-vowel or vowel-consonant combinations simply by being asked to repeat them after you. If, however, your child is one of those who will not sit still or treats your teaching as some sort of silly game and will deliberately thwart your attempts to get the message through, do not despair. Children seem to learn despite themselves. Use flash cards at opportune moments, or glue them to the bathroom mirror so that the child can see them as he or she brushes his or her teeth. Or make up stories in which a mama bear teaches a baby bear the letter sounds. Also, between ages 4 and 5, some children can master two-letter combinations but have a difficult time mastering three-letter combinations. Simply be patient and work slowly and diligently until the child can read the three-letter combinations. Asking the child to spell the word helps to focus his attention on the sequence of letters and the corresponding sequence of the letter sounds.

By age 5 and a half, the child will usually want to learn to read and gladly accept your instruction. But don't worry if this doesn't happen. By age 6 the vast majority of children are quite ready to learn to read. Some children, of course, take to reading like ducks to water. They have keen minds that grasp the alphabetic principle quite readily. Other children take longer, require a lot more practice before the association of letters and sounds becomes automatic. And so the first rule of reading instruction is to be patient. The second rule is to be gently persistent, that is, not to give up despite difficulty and some opposition. Simply make sure that what you are doing is right, and that nothing you are doing can possibly harm the child.

After those first three lessons, we then teach the child the rest of the consonant letters with the short *a*. We then teach the rest of the short vowels by way of contrasting spelling families, such

as: *bad, bed, bid, bod, bud, etc.*

In the next series of lessons, we teach the final consonant blends, such as: *nt, nd, nk, nch, ct, ft, pt, xt, sk, st, lb, lf, lk, lm, lp, lt, etc.*, and then the initial consonant blends, such as: *bl, br, cl, cr, dr, dw, fl, fr, gl, gr, pl, sl, shr, sm, sn, sp, etc.* And finally we teach the long vowels. We save them for last because, unlike the short vowels, the long vowels have many different spelling forms. For example, long *a* can be spelled *a-consonant-e*, as in such words as *age, ate, game, etc.* It can be spelled *a-i* as in *mail, rain, maid, bait, etc.* or spelled *a-y* as in *day, say, or e-y* as in *obey, or e-i* as in *veil, rein, vein, or e-i-g-h* as in *eight, weight*. Each of these spelling forms have *had* to be learned if the child is to become a good speller.

We also teach the other vowel sounds as represented by such spelling forms as *ow, ou, oi, oy, oo, etc.* There are actually twenty vowel sounds in the English language but we only have five vowel letters in our alphabet -- six, if you include *y*. No doubt, it is the variety of spelling forms of our vowels that make English spelling as difficult as it is. Which simply means that you don't solve the spelling problem by running away from it. You deal with it by simply spending the amount of time and effort needed to learn spelling well. Let's face it, spelling is important in our society if a vice-president can be seriously ridiculed for misspelling the word *potato*. The vice-president added an *e*, which is added only in the plural *potatoes*.

Once the child has mastered the basic alphabetic system, reading is then improved and vocabulary expanded by much additional enjoyable reading. Which brings us to the subject of writing. Reading and writing, of course, go together, since literacy requires proficiency in both. In reading you receive a message. In writing you send one. And so the formal teaching of writing should generally start concurrently with the teaching of reading.

It is the general practice these days to have the children learn manuscript -- or print script -- at this primary stage in learning to write. They are taught ball and stick and are required to use this form of print-script right up to the third grade after which they are usually expected to write in the cursive style. However, this sequence of learning has some very serious flaws. Spending the first two years or so developing print-script skills generally makes it difficult for many children to switch to cursive. In fact, some children simply refuse to learn cursive and go on printing for the rest of their lives, others develop a peculiar hybrid writing style consisting of part manuscript, part cursive, while the rest, a minority, go on to develop an excellent cursive style. The latter usually

do so because they've always wanted to write in the cursive style and had been practicing it secretly on their own without their parents' or teachers' knowledge or permission. It is also obvious that writing has something to do with spelling. However, we shall go into more detail about writing and spelling in another chapter.

In sum, it is my conviction, based not only on my own years of experience as a tutor but also on the experiences of countless others, that a logical, intensive phonetic approach to reading instruction produces the best results. Does this method conflict with what is being taught in the public schools? Absolutely. The schools, in general, use the holistic approach known as Whole Language or the Literacy Model. As we pointed out, when a child develops a holistic reflex, he or she will also develop a block against seeing the phonetic structure of our alphabetic words. It is that block that creates the reading problem. We shall provide more in-depth information about this in our chapter ^{on} dyslexia.