

Pedagogical Insanity and Its Consequences

by

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Every September about 4 million six-year-olds enter the public schools of America where they expect to be taught to read. Every child wants to learn to read and these bright-eyed and bushy-tailed youngsters eagerly enter their classrooms with great expectations.

Now these children feel very intelligent. After all, they taught themselves to speak their own language, without going to a school, without the help of a teacher, so that by the time they enter that first-grade classroom, they've developed a speaking vocabulary in the thousands of words. This is not only an extraordinary achievement, it borders on the miraculous.

But, of course, we are all the products of the miraculous. And perhaps the greatest proof of the miracles of creation is the fact that we alone of all the species learn to speak. Why? The Bible makes it very clear. In the Gospel According to St. John we read: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God."

God created language, and the Word is God's power in action. After all, what do we read in Genesis? "And God said, Let there be light: and there was light." It was done by the Word, not by an electrician, not by a physical act.

God gave man the power of speech, because he made us in His image. And speech has given man tremendous power. But what were the first instructions God gave Adam? We read in Genesis: "And the Lord God took the man, and put him into the garden of Eden to dress it and to keep it. And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat: But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die."

Well, we all know the sad story of Adam and Eve's disobedience. They were kicked out of the Garden of Eden into the cold, cruel world to fend for themselves. But God did not take back the gift of speech. He knew they would need it more than anything else if they were to survive as human beings. And that is why every child is born with that gift, to remind us of where we came from and who made us

The tragedy is that the public schools are not permitted to tell the children any of this. And so the children enter their schools with great expectations, hardly suspecting that a group of professors of education have conspired to make it certain that those expectations will be dashed to pieces. But for centuries, those expectations were fulfilled, whether the school was in a log cabin or a red brick building. The children were trained in academic skills that would serve them well for the rest of their lives.

The traditional primary school curriculum, the teaching of the three R's, has a very long, successful history. In fact, we have an excellent record of how primary education was conducted in ancient Rome.

In a little book entitled *The Education of Children at Rome* by George Clarke, published in 1896, we read:

"In the elementary school . . . instruction was confined to reading, writing, and arithmetic. . . . For the methods employed in teaching reading and writing we are dependent chiefly on Quintilian, who treats the subject at considerable length and with his usual good judgment, in the first chapter of his book.

"In teaching to read the first step was to obtain familiarity with the forms and sounds of the letters. . . . Tiles, on which alphabets or verses were scratched before baking, were used in the youngest classes. Horace speaks of children being coaxed to learn their letters by tid-bits of pastry. . . .

"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. . . . 'Much trust must not too readily be placed in the first act of memorizing; constant and long-continued repetition will be necessary. 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."

That's how intensive, systematic phonics was taught in ancient Rome. In fact, it was taught much the same way in the United States until the mid-19th Century when educators began tampering with the basic method that had worked so well for 4,000 years. The way it was done in Rome is still, for all intents and purposes, the proper way to teach children to read an alphabetic writing system.

Nobody knows exactly when or where the alphabet was invented. Scholars think it was invented by the Phoenicians around 2000 B.C. Prior to the invention of the alphabet human beings at first used pictographs which later evolved into ideographs.

A pictograph is a graphic symbol that looks like the thing it represents. You don't have to go to school to learn to read pictographs. We use them today on road signs or in airports. I'm sure you're all familiar with the little figures on rest-room doors. One figure wears a skirt, the other wears pants. But now that so many women wear pants, it can be confusing. In other words, even simple pictographs can be ambiguous if not ambivalent.

As civilization became more complex the scribes had to depict things that did not lend themselves to depiction. It's easy enough to draw a picture of a tree or an animal. But how do you draw pictures of abstract ideas? How do you draw pictures of good and evil, right and wrong, never and forever? You can't. So the scribes drew little symbols that did not look like the ideas they represented. We call these symbols ideographs. And now you did have to go to school to learn what all of these symbols stood for.

Modern Chinese is an ideographic writing system composed of 50,000 of these little symbols, none of which look like the things they represent. It's a terribly complex system to learn, particularly for westerners.

However, somewhere around 4000 B.C. someone made a remarkable discovery. Someone discovered that all of human language is composed of a small number of irreducible speech sounds. And that person decided that instead of using a writing system composed of thousands and thousands of symbols none of which looked like the things they represented, and took years to learn and were easily forgotten, why not create a set of symbols to represent the irreducible speech sounds of the language and we would have a very simple writing system that required memorizing a very small number of symbols that stood for sounds. And so the first alphabet was invented.

As I said, all of human speech is composed of a small number of irreducible speech sounds. How many irreducible speech sounds do you think there are in English? No, not 26. That's the number of letters in our alphabet. The answer is 44. Yes, we have 44 sounds represented by only 26 letters, and that's why some of our letters stand for more than one sound, and some sounds are represented by more than one letter.

For example, the letter "a" stands for at least four sounds. It stands for long "a" as in April or apron; it stands for the short "a" as in cat or bat; it stands for the "ah" sound as in father and car; and it stands for the "au" sound as in all and fall. Our "th" sound is represented by t-h, the "sh" sound is represented by s-h, and the "ch" sound is represented by c-h. And that is why it is so important to teach children our alphabetic system in a logical, systematic way, starting with the simplest regular spelling forms and progressing to the more difficult forms.

The invention of the alphabet was indeed revolutionary. It swept away ideographs from the Western world and sparked the greatest intellectual advance in history. But there is something else that is very important to know about the alphabet. As soon as it was invented, the Scripture began to appear. Why then? Because man had to wait until he had an accurate, precise means of transcribing the spoken word before the word of God could be written down.

Again, the importance of the Word. Alphabetic writing is a direct transcription of the spoken word, and accuracy is the hallmark of alphabetic writing.

The latest fad in reading instruction is something called "whole language." They call it whole language because they believe that children should only be taught to read by using whole texts and whole words. In fact, it is a more virulent form of the whole-word, sight, or look-say method, more popularly known as the Dick-and-Jane method. The whole-language people have replaced the insipid stories about Dick and Jane with what they call "real literature." Immerse children in "real literature," and they will learn to read on their own the way they learned to speak -- naturally. That is the theoretical base of whole language.

The purveyors of whole language are in open rebellion against the concept of the alphabet. Frank Smith, whose book, *Understanding Reading*, is the bible of whole-language educators, writes:

"Written language does not require decoding to sound in order to be comprehended; the manner in which we bring meaning to print is just as direct as the manner in which we understand speech. Language comprehension is the same for all surface structures." (p. 27)

"My present assertion is that any written language is read as Chinese is read, directly for meaning." (p. 153)

Whole language educators do not believe that accuracy is important in reading. In an article entitled "Reading Method Lets Pupils Guess," in the *Washington Post* of Nov. 26, 1986, the reporter wrote:

"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.'"

But even in ancient Rome they knew that accuracy is indeed the name of the game. Whole language teachers make no distinction between an ideographic writing system and an alphabetic one. In a recently published book entitled, *Whole Language: What's the Difference?*, the authors write:

"Oral language, written language, sign language -- each of these is a system of linguistic convention for creating meanings. That means none is 'the basis' for the other; none is a secondary representation of the other." (page 9)

Of course, they are wrong. Alphabetic writing, as distinguished from ideographic writing, is a graphic representation of the spoken language. That's what made it so different from ideographic writing. That's what made it so much easier to learn. Its accuracy was a tremendous enhancement to intellectual development, permitting the unlimited development of new words in every field of human endeavor.

But one can only grasp the true lunacy of whole language theory when we read the book's definition of reading:

"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, 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. This view is in

direct contrast to the model of reading underlying most reading instruction and evaluations." (page 19)

No wonder the kids are confused! Incidentally, I wonder how many writers would concur with this definition of reading. Writers generally take great pains to convey a particular message. The last thing they want is for the reader to “create” a meaning which is not there. The book further elaborates on its definition. The authors write:

“Whole language represents a major shift in thinking about the reading process. Rather than viewing reading as ‘getting the words,’ whole language educators view reading as essentially a process of creating meanings. . . . Meaning is created through a transaction with whole, meaningful texts (i.e., texts of any length that were written with the intent to communicate meaning.) It is a transaction, not an extraction of the meaning from the print, in the sense that the reader-created meanings are a fusion of what the reader brings and what the text offers. . . . In a transactional model, words do not have static meanings. Rather, they have meaning potentials and the capacity to communicate multiple meanings.” (page 32)

If that isn't pedagogical insanity I don't know what is. The insane have a tough time living in the real world. They live in a world of fantasy, much like our whole language educators. They tell us that there is no objective meaning to anything you read. The reader creates the meaning. If that's the case, what's the point in reading what others write? Why not simply stare at the page and say anything you want? Or why stare at the page at all?

And so, what does one do when public school educators have descended to such depths of ignorance? First of all, if you still have children in a public school, you must get them out. There is no reason why any American child should be subjected to this kind of educational lunacy. Children want to be taught to read. They don't want to be turned into learning disabled, intellectual cripples, programmed for a life of academic failure. Nor do they want to become the spiritual and moral cripples the public schools produce. So, get your children out and home-school them, or put them in trustworthy private schools.

But then what do we do about those millions of children who, through no fault of their own, must remain in the public schools? As taxpayers, forced to support public education, we should make our views known to our school boards. The latter have actually been known to occasionally respond to parental pressure. So do all you can to alert and inform parents of what is going on in their children's school.

Also, do what you can to inform the local media about the reading instruction problem. Make copies of this article and send it to them. It should be easy enough to convince the editor of the local newspaper that the future prosperity of his medium depends on schools turning out good readers. If young people can't read, that editor may soon be out of a job.

Are there districts where parents have succeeded in getting phonics into their schools? Yes. In eight elementary schools in Houston, a phonics program, which had been removed to make way for whole language, was reinstated. The schools had been using Chapter 1 funds to pay for a heavily structured phonics program which the children loved. But the Houston school district decided to cut off the funds and force the schools to adopt a whole-language approach. The result was dismal.

However, after much pressure from parents, teachers and principals, the funding for the phonics program was reinstated in the eight schools. Unfortunately, the other 162 elementary schools in the district are continuing to use whole language.

It is also important for the school board to know that there are many serious critics of whole language among professors of education. Professors Pat Groff of San Diego State University and Jeanne Chall of Harvard University easily come to mind. In fact, the January 8, 1992 issue of *Education Week* reports on recent studies that cast doubt on the efficacy of whole language as a reading teaching technique. The studies were made in Australia, New Zealand and the U.S. and published in the December 1991 issue of the *Journal of Educational Psychology*. It may be worth your while to get copies of these studies and hand them to your school board for review and comment.

You would think that it would be easy enough to convince school board members that intensive phonics is preferable to whole language in teaching children to read. After all, intensive phonics has a track record of success going back thousands of years, while whole language is based entirely on theory, not practice.

With the desperate literacy problem this nation now has, it certainly is no time for experiments in a field where we know what works. Children get only one chance to be six years old, one chance to be taught to read in the first grade. They ought not to be experimented on. They ought not to be put at risk. Nor should the school board want the children to be experimented on. But if the school board permits this experimentation to take place, then it should be willing to present to the parents the results of the experiment.

Of course, if the children read inaccurately and make up meanings of their own, the whole language teachers can claim success. And if that is also the school board's idea of success, then you have a pretty good example of what John Calvin meant by man's innate depravity.

In the end, we may not succeed in changing anything in the school, but perhaps we will have alerted enough parents sufficiently so that some children will be saved from the ravages of functional illiteracy. That alone will have made the effort worthwhile.