

PRESS STATEMENT BY SAMUEL L. BLUMENFELD

AUTHOR OF "THE NEW ILLITERATES" AND "HOW TO TUTOR"

APPEARING AS AN EXPERT WITNESS IN BEHALF OF MRS. BARBARA FRANZ, ^{NOV. 19}~~SEPTEMBER 19~~, 1975

The New York City school system is guilty of widespread educational malpractice in the teaching of reading. By using look-say or sight-reading instruction techniques they have insured the creation of thousands of reading disabled students. This is proven by the reading scores of the system's pupils which has been declining steadily for the last ten years. The New York Times of November 19, 1972 reported that only 32 per cent of the city's pupils were reading at or above grade level. On February 15, 1974 the New York Times reported that 33.8 per cent of the pupils were reading at or above grade level. That is, two-thirds of the city's pupils read below grade level, and 24 per cent of the pupils tested were reading a full two years below grade level. On May 7 of this year the Long Island Press reported that 66.2 per cent of the city's pupils were still reading below grade level, with 23.1 per cent actually reading two years below grade level. Nor can we be sure that these official statistics tell the full story of reading failure, since there has been statistical evidence of irregularities in about eight per cent of the classes tested and allegations of widespread cheating.

Whatever the true test scores may be, the evidence is quite clear that two-thirds of the pupils in the city's schools are not being taught to read adequately, and many of them are becoming seriously handicapped functional illiterates who will be deprived throughout their lives of the pleasures and advantages of reading, unable to pursue careers or life styles demanding higher literacy.

All of this is the result of a form of educational malpractice about which

educators have had clear warnings as early as 1929 when Dr. Samuel T. Orton, writing in the Journal of Educational Psychology of February 1929, stated unequivocally that the sight-reading or look-say method of beginning reading instruction could cause serious reading disability. He wrote:

"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 of their emotional life."

That was written forty-six years ago, before the look-say method became the dominant way of teaching children to read in American schools, before we knew that its effects would be disastrous among a much larger proportion of pupils than ever imagined by Dr. Orton. In 1955, when the reading problem had become big enough to become noticed, Dr. Rudolf Flesch wrote his famous book "Why Johnny Can't Read." In it he exposed the look-say method as the root cause of our growing reading problem and he urged immediate educational reform. He made it quite clear that you cannot impose an ideographic or hieroglyphic instruction technique on an alphabetic writing system without causing serious reading disability. In my book, "The New Illiterates," published in 1973, I demonstrated with ample documentation that since 1955 the vast majority of American educators have done virtually nothing

to change their instruction techniques. The schools of New York still use a look-say or sight-reading approach to beginning reading instruction, and that is why the reading scores are at an all-time low. In addition, the entire American educational system has been forced to adjust itself to the lower literacy of its students.

A New York parent who would protect her child against the serious lifelong ravages of educational malpractice has no choice but to withdraw her child from the city's school system and to either send him to a private school that teaches reading via intensive phonics (alphabetically), hire a tutor to do so, or tutor him at home. Mrs. Barbara Franz, a high-school graduate, decided to tutor her six-year-old son at home. By doing so she is avoiding the risk that her son might become one of the academically handicapped functional illiterates of tomorrow. Mrs. Franz's high school education eminently qualifies her to teach the three R's to her six-year-old son, John. She is using sound instruction techniques, including my book, "How to Tutor," which will enable her to give her child the basic, fundamental skills he must have for successful academic work in the future.

The reading instruction program used in the school John Franz attended is the Macmillan Reading Program which I evaluated in my book, "The New Illiterates" (p. 302), as essentially a look-say program. At the conclusion of my evaluation, I wrote: "This is basically a hieroglyphic system of instruction. Imposing a hieroglyphic system of instruction on a sound-symbol writing system can cause associational confusion, dyslexia, strenhosymbolia, and other reading disabilities." This warning is comparable to the one the government insisted be placed on cigarette ads and packages. However, in the case of educational malpractice dispensed in

public schools at public cost, the government has remained astonishingly silent.

Why? Because the teachers' lobbies are too big and too powerful.

There is no reason why any child should be subject to the risks inherent in sight-reading instruction techniques when perfectly good alphabetic methods for reading instruction exist. That the educators refuse to acknowledge the existence of their educational malpractice is what makes it necessary for parents like Mrs. Franz to act in behalf of their own children's future intellectual well-being. It is noteworthy that Mrs. Franz became aware of the faulty teaching methods used on her son on her own, before reading my or Dr. Flesch's book. One does not have to be a teacher to recognize educational malpractice any more than one has to be a doctor to recognize the ill effects of smoking.

In researching the origin of the sight-reading method I discovered that it originated as a means of teaching the deaf to read. Because the deaf could not hear sounds, they could not learn to read by way of learning the letter sounds. They were taught to read whole words in association with pictures. This method was first developed for normal children in 1835 by Thomas H. Gallaudet, director of the Hartford Asylum for the Deaf and Dumb. It did not become widely adopted until the first Dick and Jane readers appeared in the 1930's. Thus, for the last forty years the normal children of America have been subjected to reading instruction developed for a special group of abnormal, handicapped children. The result has been an epidemic of reading disability with the emotional and academic problems that have come with it. On a national scale it has caused what Dr. Karl Shapiro calls "the most inarticulate generation of college students in our history."

Mrs. Franz is to be congratulated, not condemned, for her act. As a highly concerned parent she has written and talked with educators and writers all over

the country in an effort to find out how best to give her child the basic academic foundation he needs. She is anything but a neglectful or negligent parent. She is a concerned, thoughtful parent, responding to her sense of responsibility toward her child. It is to be hoped that other parents will follow her example of courage and intelligence.

Biographical data

Samuel L. Blumenfeld is the author of:

HOW TO START YOUR OWN PRIVATE SCHOOL -- AND WHY YOU NEED ONE (1972)

THE NEW ILLITERATES -- AND HOW TO KEEP YOUR CHILD FROM BECOMING ONE (1973)

HOW TO TUTOR (1973)

THE RETREAT FROM MOTHERHOOD (1975)

Mr. Blumenfeld is a native New Yorker who now makes his home in Boston. Before turning to full time writing, Mr. Blumenfeld was a book and magazine editor. To gain front line experience for his books on education, he served as a substitute teacher in the Quincy, Massachusetts public schools. He is the chairman of the Massachusetts branch of the Reading Reform Foundation.

Mr. Blumenfeld has distinguished himself by his forthright articulation of the problems that face parents in obtaining a sound education for their children in our public schools. He can help many who know that there is something wrong but are understandably confused in trying to focus on the real issues.