

The Blumenfeld Education Letter

"My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge." HOSEA 4:6

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The purpose of this newsletter is to provide knowledge for parents and educators who want to save the children of America from the destructive forces that endanger them. Our children in the public schools are at grave risk in 4 ways: academically, spiritually, morally, and physically — and only a well-informed public will be able to reduce these risks.

"Without vision, the people perish."

What's Wrong With Whole Language?

The fundamental flaw in whole language instruction philosophy is that it teaches children to read English as if it were an ideographic writing system like Chinese instead of an alphabetic sound-symbol system. We know now from years of experience and observation that imposing an ideographic teaching technique on an alphabetic writing system can cause reading disability through symbolic confusion. In fact, it can cause the symptoms of dyslexia.

It is for this reason that the debate over the implementation of the whole-language philosophy in reading instruction is so very important. The future intellectual development and emotional health of millions of children are at stake. If, as we believe, that a child's normal language development can be seriously harmed and retarded by whole-language teaching techniques, it is imperative that parents and teachers become aware of this.

It should be the aim of every school, of every educator, to make sure that what is done in the classroom does not inadvertently harm the child. There is such a thing as "educational malpractice." And because

reading is taught to children at such an early, impressionable age, the permanent harmful effects of a teaching method should be thoroughly considered and explored. Our responsibility to the children dictates that we use proven methods of instruction, tested over the centuries, judged and verified by their results.

Although its practitioners insist that whole language is a philosophy and not a specific instructional technique, there is no doubt that the philosophy implies a methodology. In fact, at closer inspection we discover that whole-language methodology is not so very different from the look-say, whole-word teaching methods that have been in use since the early 1930s when look-say was first introduced in the schools.

No More Dick and Jane

The major difference between the old look-say and the new look-say is that the basal reading programs with their insipid and inane little stories about Dick and Jane, Tom and Betty, and Janet and Mark have been replaced with what the educators call

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"real literature." The theory is that if you immerse first-graders in high-interest real literature, read aloud to them by the teacher, the children will want to learn to read these wonderful stories all by themselves. But the kind of reading instruction that is then given the children is the same kind of sight vocabulary, look-and-guess, meaning-emphasis instruction, with some incidental phonics, that has brought America to its present literacy crisis.

In other words, replacing the basal readers with "real literature" has not really resolved the great debate between intensive, systematic phonics and look-say. It has only intensified it. To illustrate this, let me quote from an article by Howard Whitman entitled, "Why Don't They Teach My Child to Read?" published in *Collier's* magazine of November 26, 1954, about 37 years ago:

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. Like them, thousands of other American parents with first-grade children who are not catching on to reading as taught by the modernists, and those with upper-grade children handicapped by lack of a solid reading foundation, are concerned and troubled.

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?" How can schools tolerate a method which turns out many children of eight, nine and older who stare helplessly at a word (not on their memory list) and cannot make a stab at reading it? What has happened to the method of teaching reading sound by sound, syllable by syllable, so that a child can at least make a reasonable attempt at reading any word?

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. They are likely to call it the "spit and spatter" or "grunt and groan" method, satirizing the way youngsters try to sound out letters and syllables.

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 approach 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 (an argument perhaps as endless as that over the priority of the "chicken or the egg"). 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.

Does any of the preceding sound familiar? One year after that article was published, Rudolf Flesch came out with his best-seller, *Why Johnny Can't Read*, and the battle between parents and educators was joined and is still going on today. Flesch was denounced by the professors of reading who then proceeded to organize the International Reading Association in order to protect their vested professional interests. The result, of course, was the perpetuation of the reading problem and its growth into our national literacy crisis.

In 1967, Dr. Jeanne Chall, in an attempt to settle, once and for all, the great conflict over teaching methods, published her well-researched book, *Learning to Read: The Great Debate*, in which she asserted that intensive phonics instruction produced better readers than look-say. Because of that conclusion, the book was royally criticized by most of the top leaders in the reading establishment.

The Debate Goes On

But that was 24 years ago. And now that the literacy crisis is far worse than it was then, have the educators had any second thoughts? Are they willing to admit that they may have been wrong? The overwhelming evidence indicates that our literacy crisis is the result of faulty teaching methods and not any inherent flaw in the capacity of American children to learn. Yet, despite the urgency of the situation, the educators are still debating! *Education Week* of March 21, 1990, carried a front-page story with the headline, "From a 'Great Debate' to a Full-Scale War: Dispute Over Teaching Reading Heats Up." 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 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 — a federally funded study and a proposal for the 1992 national assessment — 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."

And so, 36 years after the *Collier's* article on the debate over reading instruction methods, that debate is not only still going on, but has developed into a full-scale war. Mind you, all of this has been going on while the government has poured billions of dollars into the public education system, apparently content to let the educators fight their war regardless of the casualties inflicted among

the students. One would have thought that somewhere along the line the "government" would have put its foot down and decided through its own means which was the best way to teach reading.

A Political Dimension

But what is now likely is that the war will go on indefinitely for the simple reason that it has become sharply political. In an article entitled, "Political Philosophy and Reading Make a Dangerous Mix," published in *Education Week*, Feb. 27, 1985, the authors wrote:

After spending six years observing the efforts of the self-styled "New Right" to influence education throughout the country, we have found a pattern of activities that could, if some members of the New Right are successful, cause a very limited model for teaching reading to prevail in both public and private schools. The model is based on the belief that literal comprehension is the only goal of reading instruction. Because it trains children to reason in a very limited manner, it is a model that we believe could have serious political consequences in a country where the ability of the citizenry to read and think critically is an essential determinant of democratic governance. . . .

The accumulating evidence clearly indicates that a New Right philosophy of education has emerged in this country. . . . By attempting to control the kinds of materials and questions teachers and students may use; by limiting reading instruction to systematic phonics instruction, sound-symbol decoding, and literal comprehension; and by aiming its criticism at reading books' story lines in an effort to influence content, the New Right's philosophy runs counter to the research findings and theoretical perspectives of most noted reading authorities.

If this limited view of reading (and, implicitly, of thinking) continues to gain in influence, America's schoolchildren may be destined to become, as Barry Goldwater warned about the New Right itself, ". . . easy prey to manipulation and misjudgment," and the New Right will have successfully impeded the progress of democratic governance founded on the ideal of an educated — and critically thinking — electorate.

In other words, the kind of reading instruction that Thomas Jefferson, George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, and James Madison got will impede "the progress of democratic governance." Obviously, the authors of the article, two professors of education, are totally unaware that the primers and spellers that taught millions of Americans to read during the first 150 years of this nation's existence were all based on the methods they now disparage as "limited."

A Socialist Agenda

It is interesting that the educators now view the debate between systematic phonics and whole language in political terms. Obviously they have a political agenda to defend. But this is really not new. It was known back in the 1930s that the progressive educators, led by John Dewey, were behind the change from phonics to look-say in reading instruction and that it was part and parcel of their radical revision of the public school curriculum. Their political agenda was no secret: the transformation of America into a collectivist, socialist society.

Rudolf Flesch, himself a socialist, tried to steer clear of the political potholes in the debate. He wrote in *Why Johnny Can't Read*:

Throughout this book, as you may have noticed, I have carefully refrained from the kind of attacks on progressive education that are now so fashionable in certain quarters. The fact is, I am on the whole on the side of progressive education. I have a Ph.D. degree from Teachers College, Columbia, and I am a sincere admirer of John Dewey. I think education should be democratic, free of senseless formalism and drill, based on interest and meaningful experience, and inseparably joined to the real life that goes on around the child. I have four published books to testify to the fact that I am not a reactionary but a liberal.

But where does all that come into the question of teaching reading? Who says a progressive, liberal-minded teacher must not tell her pupils anything about sounds and letters, but must do nothing but

condition them to the sight of certain words? Why is the word method always labeled modern and phonics always branded as reactionary? There is no earthly reason for pigeonholing them this way. Phonics is one way of teaching reading based on certain psychological and linguistic principles, and the word method is another way — based on certain other, inferior psychological principles and no linguistic principles whatever. . . .

Mind you, I am not accusing the reading "experts" of wickedness or malice. I am not one of those people who call them un-American or left-wingers or Communist fellow travelers. All I am saying is that their theories are wrong and that the application of those theories has done untold harm to our younger generation.

What is so ironic is that Dr. Flesch was castigated by his progressive colleagues for exposing their imbecility, but hailed as a true hero by the conservatives, many of whom became his most loyal friends.

That whole language is an important component in the left's social agenda is quite readily acknowledged by its advocates. In an article entitled, "Whole Language: What's new?" (*The Reading Teacher*, Nov. 1987), we read:

Whole Language views the learner as profoundly social. Thus practice congruent with Whole Language includes participating in a community of readers during small group literature study, peer writing workshops, group social studies projects with built-in plans for collaborative learning. . . .

Whole Language . . . is gaining momentum at a time when the homeless are increasing, when government social programs have suffered many cuts, when freedom to criticize is threatened by right wing groups such as Accuracy in Media and Accuracy in Academia.

The political vision woven through Whole Language beliefs grows out of this context. Its goal is empowerment of learners and teachers, in part through demystification (demystifying everything from what proficient readers actually do to how city water rates are actually determined.) The Whole Language framework recognizes that large exploitive contexts have an impact on individual classrooms and relations within them; that increased democracy within individual classrooms must accompany work on understanding and changing larger contexts.

Obviously, whole language is a lot more than just a new way to teach reading. It embodies a leftist messianic vision, which may account for the fanaticism found among whole-language visionaries.

Meanwhile, the advocates of whole language insist that their methodology differs significantly from the look-say or sight-word method. Connie Weaver, author of *Understanding Whole Language*, writes in *Education Week* of Mar. 28, 1990:

In a sight-word approach, children read stilted primerese — “stories” with new vocabulary words repeated at least five times in a selection — and they may be drilled with flash cards containing frequently used, “basic” words. In whole-language classrooms, children read and reread favorite rhymes, songs, and patterned stories with repeated phrases, sentences, and stanzas — not single words repeated in unnatural contexts, and gradually — but with teacher assistance — they develop the phonics knowledge they need to read.

A sight-word approach uses a part-to-whole strategy, and in this respect, it resembles phonics. By contrast, whole-language instruction moves from wholes toward parts, often in a single day’s activities.

Ms. Weaver’s explanation still doesn’t tell us how whole language works, and it doesn’t address the crucial question of whether the children are expected to look at our written words as ideographs — that is, units of meaning as in written Chinese — or symbols of sound — that is, direct transcriptions of speech. But here and there we find clues. For example, in a book entitled *Evaluation: Whole Language, Whole Child* by Jane Baskwill and Paulette Whitman, we read on page 19:

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.

On page 16 of the same book, we read:

At some point you may want to determine what basic sight words the children know. In *Independence in Reading*, Don Holdaway includes a list of such words and a means of determining whether the children know them outright (that is, out of context), or if not, if they can determine them within context. A totally different picture of basic sight word recognition is presented when contextual use is included.

The Holdaway list is also the basis of a computer-assisted drill of basic sight words developed by Steve Baskwill. Once the teacher has chosen the words to be presented, the program allows the child, or a teacher aide, to call up the word in context. The program can be used by the teacher to administer a basic sight words test or by the children as a drill of the words they don’t know or know only within context.

The teaching of “sight words,” of course, is a clear indication that the children are being taught to look at written English words as Chinese ideographs. The child is expected to memorize the word on the basis of its configuration alone before he knows anything about the alphabet and the fact that letters stand for sounds. And so what he sees before him is a jumble of letters arranged in a totally random, arbitrary way. How he memorizes the sight word is entirely up to him. But he must look at the word as a little picture, and he must find something in the picture that will remind him what the word means. That is why, in learning to read ideographically, children will often substitute words. For example, the child may substitute the word *pony* for *horse* or *daddy* for *father*. And that’s considered okay in whole language because it indicates that the child is getting the meaning.

Symbolic Confusion

But what it really does is confuse the

child about the nature of our writing system and the symbols we use. Ours is an alphabetic writing system, not an ideographic one. Alphabetic writing is an accurate transcription of spoken words. It has great advantages over ideographic writing in that it requires mastering fewer symbols — 26 letters that stand for 44 sounds — permits a greater expansion of vocabulary, aids in the development of good pronunciation, and provides important keys to spelling. It also makes reading easier, more fluent, more precise, and more enjoyable. That our educators would deliberately deprive our children of all the advantages of alphabetic writing indicates not only a lack of understanding and basic knowledge on the part of the educators but an inability to see the obvious faults in their methodology. They seem to write about teaching reading as if three thousand years of experience were totally irrelevant. They write as if they've discovered some new, wonderful principles of learning that have hitherto eluded the notice of everyone but themselves.

But what is even more reprehensible is that whole-language advocates have completely ignored the considerable evidence indicating that the teaching of a sight vocabulary can produce severe reading disability and the symptoms of dyslexia. This phenomenon was first written about by Dr. Samuel T. Orton in 1929. The *Collier's* article (11/26/54) reported:

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 (Journal of Educational Psychology, Feb. 1929)*.

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 read-

ing 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."

Since 1929, Dr. Orton's findings have been confirmed by the millions of reading-disabled functional illiterates emerging from our schools. Can the advocates of whole language guarantee that they will end this tragic waste of human potential?

In 1986 (Nov. 29), the *Washington Post* published an article on whole language with the headline: "Reading Method Lets Pupils Guess." The reporter wrote:

The whole-language approach immerses children in literature in the belief that they naturally will acquire basic reading skills by developing an enthusiasm for and understanding of written language.

Teachers read aloud to children, have them dictate their own stories and practice reading them. In its pure practice, teachers of whole language do not correct children who mispronounce a word or mistake one word for another, as long as they understand the meaning. . . .

Jeanne S. Chall, a professor in the Harvard University Graduate School of Education, calls the move toward whole language "shocking" and says there has been little research to document the method's success in this country. . . .

"I see the failures from it already," said Chall, who heads the university's remedial reading laboratory. "Children are coming into the lab who were in whole language classes." . . .

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."

If accuracy is not the name of the game, what is? Guessing?

Recently, our friend Charlotte Iserbyt sent us a copy of the "Early Literacy Language Arts Evaluation Record" for an elementary school in Rockport, Maine, where they are using whole language.

The evaluation covers five different areas: Interest, Book Knowledge and Library Skills, Comprehension, Reading Strategies, and Concepts About Print and Development of Writing Strategies. In all, the teacher is required to evaluate 58 different "achievements" of the student, of which only two have anything to do with learning that letters stand for sounds. Since this evaluation list gives about as clear a picture of how reading is taught in a whole-language program, we reproduce below the list of achievements under Reading Strategies:

1. Can relate reading material to personal experience.
2. Can reproduce from memory short sentences or parts of stories familiar to him or her.
3. Uses directionality when sequencing pictures.
4. Uses directionality when following print.
5. Can discriminate between a long and short word, orally and visually.
6. Can discriminate between letters and numerals.
7. Recreates a story line from meaning, occasionally attending to print. With subsequent story readings and reconstruction, the story line more closely approximates the printed story.
8. Can word-eye-finger match: a. Can point to each word as it is spoken and/or b. matches word or phrases on a chart story.
9. When reading new or unknown words in a story may: a. predict what the word will be, b. check the prediction by using knowledge of letter sounds.
10. Begins to predict unknown words in verse through meaning, grammar, and identifying rhyming words.
11. Uses context or meaning of what is being read to predict and/or identify new words.
12. Acquires sight words by reading those words often within complete language (e.g., story or experience story) or within supportive context (e.g., picture dictionaries or environmental signs).
13. Will skip a word if unable to read it and read on.
14. Knows how to substitute a word that makes sense for an unknown word and reads on (e.g. reading house for home or rug for mat.) Substitute a word that fits with context and/or grammatical function of unknown word.
15. When reading and coming to something he/she does not know, will return to beginning of sentence or phrase and try again.
16. Understands reading is a predictive process by making predictions about meaning and grammatical acceptability while monitoring the print and self correcting when something does not make sense.
17. Will self correct when something does not sound like language, by using knowledge of grammatical patterns of language; when something does not make sense, by using previous knowledge about content; when something does not look right, by using knowledge of graphic patterns and grapho-phonetics; when the number of words does not match number of printed words.
18. Is developing the ability to recognize sound-symbol correspondence and uses sound-symbol correspondence to identify new words.
19. When reading and coming to something he/she does not know, will look up to pictures in story, picture dictionaries, or other support clues to help understand the words.

It would be difficult to find a more complicated and frustrating way to learn to read than the method portrayed above. Obviously, whole language, with its tortuous reading strategies, is not going to solve America's literacy crisis. It is going to make it worse.

To date, whole-language advocates have provided little evidence that their methods are producing good readers. In fact, the fourth-graders tested in the Rockport Elementary School, from which the evaluation record came, did very poorly indeed. *The Camden Herald* of June 8, 1989 reported:

Rockport Elementary School principal Marvin Higgins said Tuesday that he was "disappointed"

with the recently released Maine Educational Assessment scores for the fourth grade. Higgins said that while the class's performance on earlier standardized tests had indicated that the MEA scores would be low, they were in fact lower than had been expected.

"The writing was where I thought it would be," Higgins said, "but the reading score was considerably lower than we'd like to see." The class had a score of 250 in writing, compared with a state average of 250 and a comparison band (of schools with similar background characteristics) of 240-295. The reading score was 215, compared with a state average of 250 and a comparison band of 250-305.

Higgins added that he was sure "the scores would be an issue of concern, as they should be," but cautioned against laying blame for the poor performance on school programs. . . .

Higgins attributed the low scores to a combination of factors, including large class size. . . . Furthermore, the proportion of special-education students in the fourth grade, some 13 percent is three to four times previous ratios of 3 or 4 percent, Higgins said.

"This was the first class to be taught whole language," Higgins said, adding that the class began the program in the second grade, and that the class's second- and third-grade teachers were working with the program for the first time as well.

Obviously, the tests showed up whole language for what it is: an ineffective, dismally poor way to teach reading. To which whole-language advocates have responded as expected. "Whole-Language Advocate Says New Tests Are Needed" reads the headline in the *American Journal* of Portland, Maine, of Oct. 12, 1988. The article states:

If students taught to read by the new "whole language" methods don't do well in reading tests, the fault is with the tests, not the teaching methods, Dr. Marie Carbo, a leading whole-language teacher, told the New England Reading Association Saturday in Portland.

Reading comprehension is what matters, and any other tests of reading skills are of little consequence, she said.

New tests better suited to whole-language teaching methods are being introduced into the National Assessment of Educational Progress, Princeton, N.J., she said in printed material distributed with her talk.

State tests in Michigan and Illinois also will be adapted to whole-language, she said.

Where will it end? The whole-language fad will run its course, leaving in its wake millions of disabled readers. And who will be blamed? Why, the children, of course.

Nearly Half of Texas Students Fail New Achievement Test

A tougher statewide achievement test adopted by Texas officials proved true to its billing, as about half of the state's 5th-, 7th-, and 9th-graders failed the test, according to preliminary results. Students in 3rd grade fared better, with 67% passing, as did high-school juniors, 68% of whom passed the state's high-school graduation exam.

Taken by about 1.4 million children, the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills required students to demonstrate critical-thinking and problem-solving abilities not included in its predecessor, the Texas Educational Assessment of Minimum Skills. The earlier TEAMS test also did not include an essay assignment for high-school juniors. That portion of the TAAS is still being scored.

The passing criteria for this year's test was 60 percent. The criteria will be raised to 70 percent in the 1991-92 school year. (*Educ. Wk.* 1/9/91)

Vital Quote

"A good education is the apprenticeship of life; in its widest sense it includes everything that exerts a beneficial influence on a young person and prepares him or her for a virtuous and fruitful living. There are four tests of a good education — correctness and precision in the use of language; gentle manners which give form and color to our lives; sound standards of morality and a character based on those standards; the power and habit of reflection and the ability to work. In short, a good education develops the ability to speak and write and imparts a sense of right, duty, and honor."

— Prof. Hans Sennholz, Grove City College