

# The Blumenfeld Education Letter

"My People Are Destroyed For Lack Of Knowledge" HOSEA 4:6

Vol. 10, No. 7 (Letter # 106)

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July 1995

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."

## John Dewey and the Decline of Literacy in America

I am often asked to name those educators responsible for the change in primary reading instruction which has led to the decline of literacy in America. People ask this because by the time they understand the history of the reading problem and of the dumbing down process that has been going on in our public schools for the last forty years, they recognize that all of this is not the result of a series of accidents but of conscious, deliberate decisions made by our educational leaders.

After twenty-five years of research, I can state with complete confidence that the prime mover in all of this was none other than John Dewey who is usually characterized as the father of progressive education. We all know that he was the philosophical leader of the movement, but few know that he attended to such details as to how children should be taught to read. Yet, the change in the teaching of reading is probably Dewey's greatest contribution to the transformation of American education from an academically oriented process to a social one.

The progressives were a new breed of educator that came on the scene around the

turn of the century. They were members of the Protestant academic elite who no longer believed in the religion of their fathers even though many of them came from good Christian families. Some of them even had fathers who were ministers and missionaries. These sons rejected the religion of the Bible and placed their new faith in science, evolution and psychology. Indeed, men like G. Stanley Hall, James McKeen Cattell, Charles Judd, James Earl Russell traveled to Germany to study the new psychology under Prof. Wilhelm Wundt at the University of Leipzig. It was these men who later imposed the new psychology on American education and transformed it permanently from its academic function to one dedicated to behavioral change.

John Dewey got his education in the new psychology under G. Stanley Hall at Johns Hopkins University. In 1887, at the tender age of 28, Dewey felt that he knew enough about psychology to be able to write a textbook on the subject, entitled fittingly *Psychology*. In 1894, Dewey was appointed head of the department of philosophy, psychology and education at the University of Chicago which had been established two years earlier by a gift from John D. Rockefeller.

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In 1896, Dewey created his famous experimental Laboratory School where he could test the effects of the new psychology on real live children.

Dewey's philosophy had evolved from Hegelian idealism to socialist materialism, and the purpose of the school was to show how education could be changed to produce little socialists and collectivists instead of little capitalists and individualists. It was expected that these little socialists, when they became voting adults, would dutifully change the American economic system into a socialist one.

## Looking Backward

Dewey and his colleagues did not, for the most part, get their socialism from Karl Marx. They got it from an American by the name of Edward Bellamy who wrote a book in 1884 entitled *Looking Backward*, a fantasy of a socialist America in the year 2000. The book describes a totally transformed America in which the egalitarian ideal has been achieved and is working with marvelous efficiency. It was this vision of a socialist future that drove the progressives in their messianic crusade to use education as the means of changing America into a socialist society.

In creating his Laboratory School, Dewey had to devise a curriculum that would produce little socialists and collectivists, and in order to do so he analyzed the traditional curriculum that sustained the capitalist, individualistic system and found what he believed was the sustaining linchpin—that is, the key element that held the entire system together: high literacy. To Dewey, the greatest obstacle to socialism was the private mind that seeks knowledge in order to exercise its own private judgment and intellectual authority. High literacy gave the individual the means to seek knowledge inde-

pendently. It gave individuals the means to stand on their own two feet and think for themselves. This was detrimental to the "social spirit" needed to bring about a collectivist society. Dewey wrote in *Democracy and Education*, published in 1916:

[W]hen knowledge is regarded as originating and developing within an individual, the ties which bind the mental life of one to that of his fellows are ignored and denied.

When the social quality of individualized mental operations is denied, it becomes a problem to find connections which will unite an individual with his fellows. Moral individualism is set up by the conscious separation of different centers of life. It has its roots in the notion that the consciousness of each person is wholly private, a self-inclosed continent, intrinsically independent of the ideas, wishes, purposes of everybody else. (p. 297)

And he wrote in *School and Society* 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 merely learning, there is no clear social gain in success thereat.

It seems incredible that a man of Dewey's intelligence could state that the sort of traditional education that produced our founding fathers and the wonderful inventors of the 19th century lacked "social spirit" when it was these very individuals who created the freest, happiest, and most prosperous nation in all of human history. It was the progressives' rejection of God which made them yearn for a utopia created in their own depraved human image. And so, high literacy had to go. Dewey wrote in 1896, after the Laboratory School had been in operation for nine months:

It is one of the great mistakes of education to make reading and writing constitute the bulk of the school work 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.

Blinded by his vision of socialism, Dewey was incapable of seeing what was truly happening in the mind of a child and why the teaching of reading and writing was quite appropriate for children between ages 5 and 7. 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. Also, Dewey's notion that the primary function of language is social communication is debatable. If we accept the Bible as our source of information, it becomes obvious that the primary purpose of language—which was God's gift to Adam—was to permit Adam to converse with God and know God. The second purpose of language was to permit Adam to know objective reality and exercise thought. The third purpose of language was to permit Adam to know Eve, the social function of language. The fourth purpose of language was to permit Adam to know himself through introspection and inner dialogue. For Dewey and his

colleagues, only the social function of language was paramount, and therefore children would be instructed in reading and language in a manner that emphasized its social function. Today, whole language carries out the Dewey dictum par excellence.

### Dewey's Key Essay

In May 1898, Dewey published his seminal essay, "The Primary-Education Fetish," which was to guide the progressives in their long-range crusade to remake American education as an instrument to bring about socialism. He wrote:

It is some years since the educational world was more or less agitated by an attack upon the place occupied by Greek in the educational scheme. If, however, Greek occupies the place of a fetish, its worshipers are comparatively few in number, and its influence is relatively slight. There is, however, a false educational god whose idolaters 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 primary 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. . . .

. . . The significance attaching to reading and writing, as primary and fundamental instruments of culture, has shrunk proportionately as the immanent intellectual life of society has quickened and multiplied. The result is that these studies lose their motive and motor force. . . .

. . . The complaint made by some, that the school curriculum of to-day does not have the disciplinary

value of the old-fashioned three R's, has a certain validity. But this is not because the old ideal has been abandoned. It is because it has been retained in spite of the change of conditions. . . .

. . . [T]he significant thing is that it is possible for the child at an early day to become acquainted with, and to use, in a personal and yet relatively controlled fashion, the methods by which truth is discovered and communicated, and to make his own speech a channel for the expression and communication of truth; thus putting the linguistic side where it belongs—subordinate to the appropriation and conveyance of what is genuinely and personally experienced. . . .

. . . While need of the more formal intellectual training in the school has decreased, there arises an urgent demand for the introduction of methods of manual and industrial discipline which shall give the child what he formerly obtained in his home and social life.

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. . . . In the first place, physiologists are coming to believe that the sense organs and connected nerve and motor apparatus of the child are not at this period best adapted to the confining and analytic work of learning to read and write. . . .

. . . 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? If we were to look at the question . . . in the light of the child's natural needs and interests at this period, I doubt if there could be found anyone who would say that the urgent call of the child of six and seven is for this sort of nutriment, instead of for more direct introduction into the wealth of natural and social forms that surrounds him. . . .

. . . To require a child to turn away from the rich material which is all about him, to which he spontaneously attends, and which is his natural, unconscious food, is to compel the premature use of analytic and abstract powers. It is wilfully to deprive the child of that synthetic life, that unconscious union with his environment, which is his birthright and privilege. 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. . . . We must trust to the development of physiology and psychology to make these matters so clear that school authorities and the public opinion which controls them shall have no option. . . .

Methods of learning to read come and go across the educational arena, like the march of supernumer-

aries upon the stage. Each is heralded as the final solution of the problem of learning to read; but each in turn gives way to some later discovery. The simple fact is, that they all lack the essential of any well-grounded method, namely, relevancy to the child's mental needs. No scheme for learning to read can supply this want. Only a new motive—putting the child into a vital relation to the materials to be read—can be of service here. . . .

. . . 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 of 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. What is needed in the first place is, that there should be a full and frank statement of conviction with regard to the matter from physiologists and psychologists and from those school administrators who are conscious of the evils of the present *régime*. Educators should also frankly face the fact that the New Education, as it exists to-day, is a compromise and a transition: it employs new methods; but its controlling ideals are virtually of the Old Education. Wherever movements looking to a solution of the problem are intelligently undertaken, they should receive encouragement, moral and financial, from the intellectual leaders of the community. There are already in existence a considerable number of educational "experiment stations," which represent the outposts of educational progress. If these schools can be adequately supported for a number of years they will perform a great vicarious service. After such schools have worked out carefully and definitely the subject-matter of the new curriculum,—finding the right place for language-studies and placing them in their right perspective,—the problem of the more general educational reform will be immensely simplified.

And so, the plan for educational reform was quite clear: first find the "right place" for reading instruction in the primary grades and "the problem of the more general educational reform will be immensely simplified." Note Dewey's suggestion that what was needed first was a "full and frank statement of conviction . . . from physiologists and psychologists" that could be used to convince teachers of the need to downgrade literacy in the primary grades. This need was actually met by one Edmund Burke Huey, a professor of psychology who had studied under G. Stanley Hall at Clark University and did his Ph.D. dissertation on the psychology and physiology of reading.

Huey's book, *The Psychology and Pedagogy of Reading*, published in 1908, became the bible of look-say instructors. Huey wrote:

[A]s child nature is being systematically studied, the feeling grows that these golden years of childhood, like the Golden Age of our race, belong naturally to quite other subjects and performances than reading, and to quite other objects than books; and that reading is a "Fetich of Primary Education" which only holds its place by the power of tradition and the stifling of questions asked concerning it. . . .

In an article on "The Primary Education Fetich" in *Forum*, Vol. XXV, [Dewey] gives his reasons for such a conclusion. While the fetich of Greek is passing, there remains, he says, the fetich of English, that the first three years of school are to be given largely to reading and a little number work. . . . Reading has maintained this traditional place in the face of changed social, industrial, and intellectual conditions which make the problem wholly different. . . .

Against using the period from six to eight years for learning to read and write, Professor Dewey accepts the opinion of physiologists that the sense-organs and nervous system are not adapted then to such confining work, that such work violates the principle of exercising the fundamental before the accessory, that the cramped positions leave their mark, that writing to ruled line forms is wrong, etc. Besides, he finds that a certain mental enfeeblement comes from too early an appeal to interest in the abstractions of reading.

Huey then suggested that children be taught to read through the same sort of stages that the human race went through before the alphabet was invented. He writes:

The history of languages in which picture-writing was long the main means of written communication has here a wealth of suggestion for the framers of the new primary course. . . .

It is not indeed necessary that the child should be able to pronounce correctly or pronounce at all, at first, the new words that appear in his reading, any more than that he should spell or write all the new words that he hears spoken. If he grasps, approximately, the total meaning of the sentence in which the new word stands, he has read the sentence. Usually this total meaning will suggest what to call the new word, and the word's current articulation will usually have been learned in conversation, if the proper amount of oral practice shall have preceded reading. And even if the child substitutes words of his own for some that are on the page, provided that these express the meaning, it is an encouraging sign that the reading has been real, and recognition of details will come as it is needed. The shock that such a statement will give to many a practical teacher of reading is but an accurate measure of the hold that a false ideal has taken of us, viz., that to read is to say just what is upon the page, instead of to *think*, each in his own way, the meaning that the page suggests. . . .

Until the insidious thought of reading as word-pronouncing is well worked out of our heads, it is well to place the emphasis strongly where it belongs, on reading as *thought-getting* independently of expression.

There you have the look-say, whole-language philosophy of reading summed up very neatly in 1908 by Professor Huey, whose book is still considered the authority on reading instruction. It is not known whether Dewey or Huey had ever taught a child to read. They certainly made no references to such experiences in their writings. But their views have dominated reading pedagogy in the teachers colleges since then.

Naturally it took some time before the new philosophy of reading could be translated into textbooks for the schools.

## Enter Dick & Jane

The development of these textbooks took place mainly at the University of Chicago and at Teachers College, Columbia University, in New York. In Chicago it was William Scott Gray, protégé of Wundtian Charles H. Judd, dean of the school of education, who produced the Dick and Jane reading program. And at Teachers College, it was Arthur I. Gates, protégé of Edward L. Thorndike, father of behaviorist educational psychology, who produced the Macmillan reading program. These books were ready for the schools by 1930, and were widely promoted throughout the education system by articles in the National Education Association's *Journal*, a virtual mouthpiece for the progressives who had taken control of the NEA earlier in the century.

That the new teaching methods caused reading problems was already known by 1930. In fact, it was known as early as 1914 that the sight method and the phonics method produced two different types of readers: subjective and objective.

Educational psychologist Walter Dearborn, in his monograph, "Perception and Reading," states:

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)

That was written in 1914. Today, we recognize the subjective reader as one who has been taught by the whole-language method and has developed a holistic reflex, while the objective reader, taught by inten-

sive, systematic phonics, has developed a phonetic reflex. A child with a holistic reflex has acquired a built-in obstacle to seeing our alphabetically written words in their phonetic structure and thus is technically "dyslexic." The only cure for that school-induced dyslexia is the replacement of the holistic reflex by a phonetic reflex which requires intensive remediation. As Pavlovian psychologists know, it is impossible to have two conflicting, mutually incompatible reflexes at the same time.

## Systematic Change

A full account of how the educators systematically went about changing the entire public school curriculum to serve progressive goals can be found in the yearbooks of the National Society for the Study of Education. The Society's Committee on Curriculum-Making was headed by socialist Harold Rugg. Other members included such progressives as Stuart A. Curtis (U. of Michigan), Ernest Horn (U. of Iowa), Charles H. Judd (U. of Chicago), George S. Counts (U. of Chicago), William H. Kilpatrick (Teachers College, New York).

In other words, what we have today in our public schools has come out of the education schools of our universities. That is the source of the pestilence, and the professors in the universities who continue the Dewey program and write the textbooks are completely insulated from parental protest. When parents confront their local school superintendents, principals, and teachers, they are simply talking to the foot-soldiers who are carrying out the policies of the university professors. And when conservatives get elected to school boards, they simply engage in endless skirmishes with these subordinates whose careers depend on pleasing the powerful establishment who gave them their jobs.

By 1929 there was already considerable convincing evidence that the look-say, sight method of teaching reading was causing reading problems. *Collier's* magazine of Nov. 26, 1954 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."

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*. The chairman of the journal's Board of Editors was Harold Rugg and among its members were Arthur I. Gates and Edward L. Thorndike. Gates, of course, was in the process of writing a sight-reading program for Macmillan. And so Orton tried to be as tactful as possible. He wrote:

I feel some trepidation in offering criticism in a field somewhat outside 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 the 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.

What was the reaction of the professors to Orton's very serious criticism of the sight-method? Apparently none that was published. In any case, with more than enough evidence in hand that the sight method caused reading disability as well as emotional problems among a large number of children, the professors went right ahead to publish their new sight-method textbooks and impose them on the schools of America. The Great Depression slowed down the process of change in the schools because of the lack of money to buy the new books, but once the economy recovered, the process of change was greatly accelerated.

Today, the entire Dewey program, finely honed by his disciples, is being imposed on American public schools through whole language and Outcome-Based Education.

What Huey wrote about reading back in 1908 is exactly what the advocates of whole language believe today. And what Dewey said about "the mere absorbing of facts and truths" being such a selfish, anti-social activity, no doubt, is behind OBE's emphasis on cooperative learning and group problem solving and the de-emphasis on accumulating knowledge for its own sake.

### The Virtues of Illiteracy

That the new teaching methods would decrease literacy was well known by its proponents. In fact, G. Stanley Hall went so far as to extol the virtues of illiteracy. After reading Huey's book, he wrote in 1911:

Very many men have lived and died and been great, even the leaders of their age, without any acquaintance with letters. The knowledge which illiterates acquire is probably on the whole more personal, direct, environmental and probably a much larger proportion of it practical. Moreover, they escape much eyestrain and mental excitement, and, other things being equal, are probably more active and less sedentary. It is possible, despite the stigma our bepedagogued age puts upon this disability, for those who are under it not only to lead a useful, happy, virtuous life, but to be really well educated in many other ways. Illiterates escape certain temptations, such as vacuous and vicious reading. Perhaps we are prone to put too high a value both upon the ability required to attain this art and the discipline involved in doing so, as well as the culture value that comes to the citizen with his average of only six grades of schooling by the acquisition of this art.

With such views being expressed by the leading educators of the nation, no wonder literacy has declined to its present deplorable state. And these views are still being expressed today in variant forms by the educational elite. For example, Prof. Anthony G. Oettinger, chairman of the Center for Information Policy Research at Harvard University, told an audience of communications executives in 1981:

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 . . . .

But as much as we might think it is, literacy is not an eternal phenomenon. Today's literacy is a phenomenon 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.

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? . . .

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.

We have the potential for using the cathode ray tube [TV] 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.

And so, the ideas of John Dewey are alive and well among educators at the close of the 20th Century. And obviously, true reading reform in the public schools will be impossible as long as the educational elite are committed to the Dewey, progressive view of reading. That is why intensive, systematic phonics is making much more headway among parents and private schools, than in the public schools. Meanwhile, millions of children will be at serious risk as long as Dewey-inspired whole language is the prevalent philosophy of reading instruction in American public schools.