

UNNATURAL READING

Editor Popular Science Monthly:

SIR: In your issue of November appears a letter from A. C. Ray calling attention to the method of teaching reading in vogue in our public schools. To quote the writer's own language, "Children are taught to read without spelling, recognizing each word by its appearance, and learning it as a detached fact."

Your correspondent then goes on to show the unnaturalness of the "natural method" so called. Permit me to say that I personally thank the writer for having had the courage to bring this matter to the attention of your readers. The present natural method of teaching children to read is indeed an absurdity, and it is difficult to understand the reason and the authority upon which such a system has been adopted.

My little girl is attending a grammar school in Cambridge Mass, which has the reputation of being a very good one. My child is in the fifth class, and I am informed by the teacher that this class offers greater difficulties to the average pupil than any of the higher classes. Night after night I have the pleasure of rehearsing with her the writing-lesson of the day. Now how does the child learn to read! The school uses Swinton's History and Geography. From this book the teacher, no doubt acting under instructions, reads daily with the children and then dictates to them the principal words contained in the paragraphs they have been reading. I beg to be understood that the words are dictated and written by the children *as they are found* in the text-book - i.e., the verbs not in the infinitive mood but in any of the several tenses; nouns either in the singular or plural; all in confusion. I will give here a few of the words found in one of the lessons: Sachem, aurora borealis, Cheyenne City, arctic, eider-down, Phoenix, Indianapolis, Indian dialect, Latin language, French or Indian, Greek language, German language, Latin language, compound English-Greek

It will be observed that these words represent a fine collection taken from several old as well as modern languages. No explanation is given by the teacher concerning the derivation of the words; if she thinks well of it, she will tell the children what the meaning of such a word is, but all the rest is a *tabula rosa* to the pupils.

No doubt some people will not believe me when I assert that though my child has been attending school four years, has been studying writing and reading for the same time, she has never been taught the difference between a vowel and a consonant, and consequently, she is ignorant of the very tools she is called upon to work with.

It seems but too simple a thing to call attention to the numerous recurring unchangeable prefixes, affixes, endings, etc.; such for instance as "ious," "ive," "able," "ation," etc., or to tell them that a certain grouping of characters as a rule produces such and such sounds, all of which would materially assist the pupils and save them hours of laborious work. But no, let them grope in utter darkness and recognize each word by its appearance. If that is a correct way of teaching children reading, why don't you apply the same method to teaching arithmetic? As the English language contains about forty thousand words independently of numerous derivatives, compounds, and grammatical formations, the idea of teaching children reading by recognizing each word its is indeed absurd.

The evil effects of such a system are self-evident, but the means of overcoming in evil are not so apparent, and after a good deal of consideration I have thought best to apply to The Popular Science Monthly for assistance. No doubt many fathers and mothers will take a deep interest in this matter touching the education of their off-spring and as it is useless for an individual to go to the several school boards, laying his or her grievances before them I suggest that through the agency of The Popular Science Monthly an association may be formed of such people as are interested in the education of children; that the aim of such association be united action to bring sufficient pressure to bear upon the several school boards to modify or abolish the method now used in the public schools to teach children reading, and to consider ways and means to best accomplish this purpose.

I shall be glad to hear from other people in this matter. VICTOR M. BERTHOLD

CAMBRIDGEPORT, MASS, *October 27*, 1890

This article was taken from the Goggle Book scanned edition of *The Popular Science Magazine* Vol. XXXVIII, November 1890 to April 1891, page 266.

PUPILS OR MACHINES:

Editor Popular Science Monthly:

THAT the present system of graded schools is far in advance of the old un-graded one, where the same teacher instructed Johnny in his A, B, C, and Johnny's older brother in geometry is an undeniable fact. But to the non-professional observer, who merely looks at the effect on the children, it is by no means evident that the reaction against the schools of fifty years ago has not gone too far. By the present mode of specialization, many individual teachers have worked out their own hobbies and presented their arguments so plausibly, that they have gained general acceptance. Each succeeding year shows a so-called advance in these "natural" methods, and they are all united in a system so unnatural that a course of it kills out all individuality in the child mind and life, and leaves us with a set of little machines all stamped out from the original metal with the same die

Look, for a moment at some of the methods employed in our schools, examples taken at random, and that ought to speak for themselves. First comes a city grammar-school, where the pupils average thirteen years of age. To save herself the trouble of speaking the names of her children, the enterprising teacher has arranged these names in alphabetical order, numbered them according to this order, and addresses the pupils as "Number Two," "Number Twenty-eight," "Number Forty-three." Slight as this fact may seem, it is not without its influence. From ceasing to have any names of their own, as far as their teacher is concerned, the children cease to have any personality, in her eyes and the pupil becomes a mere hollow block, labeled with a certain number into, which daily portions of arithmetic, geography, and grammar are to be poured, regardless of the capacity of the block and the strength of its walls to resist overpressure. The child keenly feels such loss of individuality, and by this loss, much of the incentive to work is withdrawn.

As for the lessons themselves, much fault lies at the foundation of all learning to read. While our parents were forced to spell columns of words, real or imaginary, like *am*, *bam*, *cam*, *dam*, and so on to *zam*, and, by perusing such cheerful sentences "as the lamb is on the tomb," to discover that in some words the final letter *b* is superfluous, as an improvement on that the children of to-day are taught to read without spelling, recognizing each word by its appearance, and learning it as a detached fact. The time spent in gaining a vocabulary in this way would surely be more than sufficient to teach the child the separate letters and their usual combinations, and his reasoning powers would be quite as rapidly developed in the latter case.

A lesson in writing was recently witnessed with some amusement and perplexity. One of the pupils took her place at the piano, while the teacher gave these brief orders. "Attention; sit erect; feet together; lean forward; elbows on desks; curve two fingers; hold pen; describe letters in the air." And while the piano rattled out a gay march or a lively waltz, fifty arms were waved in mid-air vaguely outlining a string of letters. Again the voice was heard: "Stop; dip pens; write on paper; begin." And then capital I's were scratched off by the score, while the waltz sounded its accompaniment. Then came the command "Wipe pens." Alas for the luckless child whose pen was not dipped deeply enough, or caught a thread on its tip! On, on he must go, until the order "Dip pens" or "Wipe pens" gave him a chance to repair his accident. The avowed object of all this is to

teach the rapid writers, to take more time, while those who are slower with their pens must learn to hurry. Why is this necessary? And if the lessons of school are to prepare one for the every-day needs of life, it would be the natural conclusion from this that our business men have grand pianos and church organs in their offices and counting-rooms, and that the clerks take turns in playing appropriate selections from the old masters.

But two more strange rules can be glanced at. By the first, each child in a certain public school must take home one book every night, no matter whether the lessons are all prepared or not. The other, which like the first comes to us from Massachusetts, is still more absurd. In this case the text-books are free, and each book has a string securely tying down the leaves not yet studied. On no account may a child slip out a leaf and look ahead. The object of this last regulation is still unknown; but for most teachers it is safe to assume that when a child wishes to learn a fact, then is the best time to teach him regarding it. Is not the present craze for carrying "methods" to extremes worthy of some consideration?

ANNA CHAPIN RAY

WEST HAVEN, CONNETICUT, November 1890

This article was taken from the Goggle Book scanned edition of *The Popular Science Magazine* Vol. XXXVIII, November 1890 to April 1891, page 119.

Note from Internet Publisher: Donald L. Potter

May 29, 2008

These articles were taken from the Goggle Book scanned edition of *The Popular Science Magazine* Vol. XXXVIII, November 1890 to April 1891, pages 116 and 266.

It is terribly disconcerting to find that the “psycholinguistic guessing” method of learning to read, which was announced to the world by Ken Goodman in the early 1970s, should have its **exact** counterpart in the 1890s. Goodman and his friend Frank Smith postulated that students exposed to literature would naturally learn to read without any need for specific phonics instruction, even claiming that direct phonics instruction would be counterproductive to good reading. The arduous research of Miss Geraldine Rodgers has amply documented the lamentable fact that the “natural method” for teaching beginning reading is not of recent vintage. It has been recycled under different names, at different times, by different people, being disproved each time around. What a wonderful marvel it would have been if this concerned father’s plea had been heeded. I highly recommend Miss Geraldine Rodgers’ three volume *The History of Reading from Teaching by “Sounds” to Teaching by Meaning* as the most comprehensive, accurate, and insightful study of the history of reading available today.

The second article, “Pupils or Machines,” is equally relevant in our day when students have become mere data in a numbers’ game. Notice that spelling had been displaced by look-and-say as the proper way to teach reading way back in 1890.

For in-depth information on how to teach reading with phonics and spelling visit the Education Page of my website: www.donpotter.net

www.blendphonics.org

www.wordmastery.org

This document was last edited on 3/12/16.