

Who Killed Excellence?

Samuel L. Blumenfeld

Editor's Preview: There has been much talk of a crisis in education and much speculation as to what or who is to blame for the mediocrity in our schools. Professor Samuel Blumenfeld offers a clear and convincing explanation of how the goals of the professional educator have changed and have thus adversely affected the quality and content of education.

He focuses particularly on the Progressive theorists James McKeen Cattell, John Dewey, and Edward Thorndike, who, around the turn of the century, were heavily influenced by the new behavioral psychology of Wilhelm Wundt at the University of Leipzig in Germany. His American converts proposed that the proper aims of education were not ethical, as Plato and Aristotle suggested, or meant to encourage what Cardinal Newman called "a philosophical habit of mind," but to teach "social skills," and to ensure that students will "fit" into society. As pioneers in psychology and educational philosophy, Blumenfeld states that these men virtually rebuilt education on a foundation of science, evolution, humanism, and behaviorism. Their work remains virtually uncontested in many universities today.

New theories of learning were developed to accommodate their vision. Children, they claimed, are ideally taught by the method of stimulus and response. The attainment of literacy was deliberately de-emphasized in favor of acquiring social skills. In Dewey's words, "learning to read in early school life because of the great importance attached to literature seems to me a great perversion." He argued that a high literacy rate bred a "destructive" individualism.

Who killed excellence in education? Professor Blumenfeld indicts the behaviorists, and he remarks that the future of American education still rests upon resolving the profoundly philosophical question: What are the proper aims of education?

The history of American education can be roughly divided into three distinct periods, each representing a particular and powerful worldview. The first period—from colonial times to the 1840s—saw the dominance of the Calvinist ethic: God's omnipotent sovereignty was the central reality of man's existence.

In the Calvinist scheme the purpose of man's life was to glorify God, and the attainment of Biblical literacy was considered the overriding spiritual and moral function of education. Latin, Greek and Hebrew were studied because they were the original languages of the Bible and of theological literature. Thus, this period in American education is characterized by a very high standard of literacy.

The second period, lasting from the 1840s until about World War I, reflects the Hegelian mindset. G. F. Hegel's statist-idealist philosophy spread throughout the Western world like a malignant spiritual disease, destroying Calvinism. In this pantheistic scheme the purpose of life was to glorify man and the instrument through which man's collective power could be exercised—the state. Hegel dethroned the Jehovah of the Old Testament and the Christ of the New Testament, and offered a pantheistic view of the universe where everything was a somewhat formless "God" in the process of perfecting himself through a dynamic, endless struggle called the dialectic. Yet even the Hegelian period was one of high literacy, for Hegel had stressed intellectual development, since he considered man's mind to be the highest manifestation of God in the universe. Latin and Greek were studied because they were the languages of the pagan classics. During this Hegelian period the public school movement developed, promoting a secular form of education which gradually eliminated the Bible from the classrooms of America. Discipline, punctuality, high academic standards and achievement were the hallmarks of the public schools.

The third period, from World War I to the present, I call “Progressive.” It came into being mainly as a result of the new behavioral psychology developed in the experimental laboratories of Wilhelm Wundt at the University of Leipzig in Germany. The major American figures who studied under Wundt—James McKeen Cattell, G. Stanley Hall, Charles H. Judd and James Earl Russell—came back to the United States to revolutionize American education.

In this scheme, the purpose of man’s life was to deny and reject the supernatural and to sacrifice oneself to the collective, often referred to as “humanity.” Science and evolution replaced religion as the focus of faith, and dialectical materialism superseded Hegel’s dialectical idealism as the process by which man’s moral progress was made. The word “progressive,” in fact, comes from this dialectical concept of progress.

G. Stanley Hall beat the first path to Wundt’s laboratory in Leipzig. Hall had already spent the years 1868-70 studying in Germany and had returned home seething with hatred for his Puritan New England heritage. He wrote in his autobiography:

I fairly loathed and hated so much that I saw about me that I now realize more clearly than ever how possible it would have been for me to have drifted into some, perhaps almost any, camp of radicals and to have come into such open rupture with the scheme of things as they were that I should have been stigmatized as dangerous, at least for any academic career, where the motto was Safety First. And as this was the only way left open, the alternative being the dread one of going back to the farm, it was most fortunate that these deeply stirred instincts of revolt were never openly expressed and my rank heresies and socialistic leanings unknown.

Hall returned from his Wundtian experience in 1878 and in 1882 created America’s first psychology laboratory at Johns Hopkins University. Two of Hall’s students were James McKeen Cattell and John Dewey. Cattell journeyed to Leipzig in 1884 where he spent two years studying under Professor Wundt. He returned to the U.S. and created the world’s first psychology department at the University of Pennsylvania in 1887.

One biographical account of Cattell’s life states:

Cattell’s student years in Baltimore, Germany and England—the period of his greatest originality and productivity in psychology—were laced with inner complaint. Cattell confided only in his private journal his recurrent feelings of depression, his frequent need of hallucinogenic drugs, and his underlying philosophic stance as a “skeptic and mystic.”

Is it not interesting that hallucinogenic drugs were already being used by students of psychology as far back as the 1880s? In 1891 Cattell established Columbia University’s department of psychology. During his years at Columbia, Cattell trained more future members of the American Psychological Association than any other institution. Indeed, Cattell was one of the founders of the American Psychological Association and the *Psychological Review*. Under his direction, psychology at Columbia became one of the strongest departments of research and advanced teaching.

No doubt Cattell’s most celebrated pupil was Edward L. Thorndike, who had gotten his master’s degree under William James at Harvard, where he had also conducted experiments in animal learning. Under Cattell, Thorndike continued his experiments which were to have a devastating impact on American education.

Thorndike reduced psychology to the study of observable, measurable human behavior—with the complexity and mystery of mind and soul left out. In summing up his theory of learning, Thorndike wrote: “The best way with children may often be, in the pompous words of an animal trainer, ‘to arrange everything in connection with the trick so that the animal will be compelled by the laws of its own nature to perform it.’ ”

In 1904, Cattell invited his old friend John Dewey to join the faculty at Columbia. From Johns Hopkins, Dewey had not gone to Leipzig like Cattell and others. Instead he taught philosophy at the University of Michigan for about nine years. He had left Johns Hopkins a Hegelian idealist but became a materialist at Michigan. In 1894 he became professor of philosophy and education at the University of Chicago where he created his famous Laboratory School.

The purpose of the school was to see what kind of curriculum was needed to produce socialists instead of capitalists, collectivists instead of individualists. Dewey, along with the other adherents of the new psychology, was convinced that socialism was the wave of the future and that individualism was passé.

But the individualist system would not fade away on its own as long as it was sustained by the education American children were getting in their schools. According to Dewey, “. . . education is growth under favorable conditions; the school is the place where those conditions should be regulated scientifically.”

In other words, if we apply psychology to education, which we have done now for over fifty years, then the ideal classroom is a psych lab and the pupils within it are laboratory animals.

Dewey’s joining Cattell and Thorndike at Columbia brought together the lethal trio who were literally to wipe out traditional education and kill academic excellence in America. It would not be accomplished overnight, for an army of new teachers and superintendents had to be trained and an army of old teachers and superintendents had to retire or die off.

By 1908 the trio had produced three books of paramount importance to the progressive movement. Thorndike published *Animal Intelligence* in 1898; Dewey published *School and Society* in 1899; and in 1908 Cattell produced, through a surrogate by the name of Edmund Burke Huey, *The Psychology and Pedagogy of Reading*.

Dewey provided the social philosophy of the movement, Thorndike the teaching theories and techniques, and Cattell the organizing energy. There was among all of them, disciples and colleagues, a missionary zeal to rebuild American education on a foundation of science, evolution, humanism, and behaviorism. But it was Dewey who identified high literacy as the culprit in traditional education, the sustaining force behind individualism. He wrote in 1898:

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 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.

But in order to reform the system, the mind had to be seen in a different way. Dewey wrote:

The idea of heredity has made familiar the notion that the equipment of the individual, mental as well as physical, is an inheritance from the race: a capital inherited by the individual from the past and held in trust by him for the future. The idea of evolution has made familiar the notion that mind cannot be regarded as an individual, monopolistic possession, but represents the outworkings of the endeavor and thought of humanity.

To Dewey the one part of our identity that is the most private, the mind, is really not the property of the individual at all, but of humanity, which is merely a euphemism for the collective or the state. That concept is at the very heart of the Orwellian nightmare, and yet the same concept is the very basis of our progressive-humanist-behaviorist education system.

Dewey realized that such radical reform was not exactly what the American people wanted. So he wrote: “Change must come gradually. To force it unduly would compromise its final success by favoring a violent reaction.”

The most important of the reforms to be instituted was changing the way children were to be taught to read. Since it had been ordained by Dewey and his colleagues that literacy skills were to be drastically de-emphasized in favor of the development of social skills, a new teaching method that deliberately reduced literacy skills was needed.

The traditional school used the phonics or phonetic method. That is, children were first taught the alphabet, then the sounds the letters stand for, and in a short time they became independent readers. The new method—look-say or the word method—taught children to read English as if it were Chinese or Egyptian hieroglyphics.

The new method had been invented in the 1830s by Rev. Thomas H. Gallaudet, the famous teacher of the deaf and dumb. Since deaf-mutes have no conception of a spoken language, they could not learn a phonetic—or sound-symbol—system of reading. Instead, they were taught to read by a purely sight method consisting of pictures juxtaposed with whole words. Thus, the whole word was seen to represent an idea or image, not the sounds of language. The written word itself was regarded as a little picture, much like a Chinese ideograph. Gallaudet thought that the method could be adapted for use by normal children and he wrote a little primer on that concept.

In 1837 the Boston Primary School Committee decided to adopt the primer. By 1844 the results were so disastrous that a group of Boston schoolmasters published a blistering attack on the whole-word method and it was thrown out of the schools. But look-say was kept alive in the new state normal schools where it was taught as a legitimate alternative to the alphabetic-phonics method.

When the progressives decided to revive look-say, they realized that an authoritative book would be necessary to give the method the seal of approval of the new psychology. In Wundt’s laboratory, Cattell had observed that adults could read whole words just as fast as they could read individual letters. From that he concluded that a child could be taught to read simply by showing him whole words and telling him what they said.

For some reason Cattell did not want to write a book himself. So he got one of G. Stanley Hall’s students, Edmund Burke Huey, to write a book arguing that look-say was the superior way to teach reading. The book, *The Psychology and Pedagogy of Reading*, was published in 1908. What is astounding is that by 1908 Cattell and his colleagues were very well aware that the look-say method produced inaccurate readers. In fact, Huey argued in favor of inaccuracy as a virtue!

The book was immediately adopted by the progressives as the authoritative work on the subject despite the fact that it was written by an obscure student who had had no experience whatever in the teaching of reading, who wrote nothing further on the subject, and about whom virtually nothing is known.

When a nation’s leading educational reformers start arguing in favor of illiteracy and inaccurate reading, and damning early emphasis on learning to read as a perversion, then we can expect some strange results to come from our education process. In fact, by the 1950s, the progressives had done such a good job that

Rudolf Flesch could write a book in 1955 entitled *Why Johnny Can't Read*. Why indeed! Flesch minced no words:

The teaching of reading—all over the United States, in all the schools, in all the textbooks—is totally wrong and flies in the face of all logic and common sense.

How did this happen? Flesch explains:

It's a foolproof system all right. Every grade-school teacher in the country has to go to a teachers' college or school of education; every teachers' college gives at least one course on how to teach reading; every course on how to teach reading is based on a textbook; every one of those textbooks is written by one of the high priests of the word method. In the old days it was impossible to keep a good teacher from following her own common sense and practical knowledge; today the phonetic system of teaching reading is kept out of our schools as effectively as if we had a dictatorship with an all-powerful Ministry of Education.

The educators were furious with Flesch. He had made them appear stupid and incompetent. They knew they were not stupid. They had pulled off the greatest conspiracy against intelligence in history. Although Dewey, Thorndike and Cattell were dead, their disciples, Arthur I. Gates at Columbia and William Scott Gray at the University of Chicago, were determined to carry on the work of their mentors. In 1955, the professors of reading organized the International Reading Association to maintain the dominance of look-say in primary reading instruction. Today, look-say permeates the educational marketplace so thoroughly and in so many guises, and it is so widely and uncritically accepted, that it takes expert knowledge by a teacher or parent to know the good from the bad, the useful from the harmful.

Even the best students have fallen victim to this “dumbing-down” process. In a speech given to the California Library Association in 1970, Karl Shapiro, the eminent poet-professor who had taught creative writing for over 20 years told his audience:

What is really distressing is that this generation cannot and does not read. I am speaking of university students in what are supposed to be our best universities. Their illiteracy is staggering. . . . We are experiencing a literacy breakdown, which is unlike anything I know of in the history of letters.

This literary breakdown is no accident. It is not the result of ignorance or incompetence. It has been, in fact, deliberately created by our progressive-humanist-behaviorist educators whose social agenda is far more important to them than anything connected with academic excellence. Perhaps their mindset was best expressed by psychologist Arthur W. Combs in an essay entitled “Humanistic Goals of Education,” published in 1975.

Dr. Combs writes:

Modern education must produce far more than persons with cognitive skills. It must produce *humane* individuals. . . . The humane qualities are absolutely essential to our way of life—far more important, even, than the learning of reading, for example. We can live with a bad reader; a bigot is a danger to everyone.

The inference, of course, is that you can't have both good readers and humane persons, that one must be sacrificed for the other. Note also the very subtle suggestion that high literacy may even produce bigotry. If this is what the humanists believe, then how can we expect them to promote high literacy?

In 1935 Dewey wrote:

The last stand of oligarchical and anti-social seclusion is perpetuation of this purely individualistic notion of intelligence.

To kill this individualistic intelligence, which is the source of excellence, Dewey and his behaviorist colleagues proceeded to strip education of mind, soul, and literacy. In 1930 the percentage of illiteracy among white persons of native birth was 1.5. Among foreign-born whites it was 9.9 percent, and among Negroes it was 16.3. Among urban blacks the illiteracy rate was 9.2 percent.

In 1935 a survey was made of Civilian Conservation Corp (CCC) enrollees. Of the 375,000 men studied, 7,369, or 1.9 percent, were found to be illiterate, that is, they could not read a newspaper or write a letter.

That's a remarkably low rate of illiteracy considering that most of the men who joined the CCC were in the low socioeconomic group.

Today the illiteracy rate among urban blacks is probably about 40 percent, while the illiteracy rate among whites has been estimated to be from 7 to 30 percent. No one really knows the exact figure, including the Department of Education, which has guessed that there are about 23 million functional illiterates in America.

In fact, Dr. Flesch wrote another book in 1981 entitled *Why Johnny Still Can't Read*. He wrote with some sadness:

Twenty-five years ago I studied American methods of teaching reading and warned against educational catastrophe. Now it has happened.

At the moment every state legislature in the nation is grappling with an education reform bill. Not one of them has addressed this basic problem of primary reading instruction. The trouble is that most would-be reformers are convinced that merit pay, longer school days, smaller class size, more homework, career ladders, competency tests, higher pay for teachers, compulsory kindergarten and more preschool facilities will give us excellence. But they won't for one very significant reason. The academic substance of public education today is controlled lock, stock and barrel by behavioral psychologists, and they don't believe in excellence. The American classroom has been transformed into a psych lab and the function of a psych lab is not academic excellence.

If education consists of the interaction between an effective teacher and a willing learner, then you can't have it in a psych lab, which has neither. In the lab you have the trainer and the trainee, the controller and the controlled, the experimenter and the subject, the therapist and the patient. What should go on in a classroom is teaching and learning. What goes on in the psych lab is stimulus and response, diagnosis and treatment.

Many people think that behaviorism is simply the study of behavior. But, according to B. F. Skinner, behaviorism is a theory of knowledge, in which knowing and thinking are regarded merely as forms of behavior. Although psychology was supposed to be the study of the life of the psyche—the mind—behaviorists, starting with Thorndike, reduced the functions of the mind to where today the mind ceases to be a factor in education. Behavioral objectives are the goals of today's teachers.

Who killed excellence? Behavioral psychology did. Why? Because it is based on a lie: that man is an animal, without mind or soul, and can be taught as an animal. And that concept is based on an even greater lie: that there is no God, no Creator.

And so the future of American education rests on the resolution of profoundly philosophical questions. Apparently no compromise between the ruling behaviorists and the rebellious fundamentalists is possible. As long as the progressive-humanist-behaviorists control the graduate schools of education and psychology, the professional organizations and journals, and the processes whereby curricula are developed and textbooks written and published, there is little possibility that public education can achieve academic excellence.

It is the better part of wisdom to admit that the government schools are the permanent captives of the behaviorists who also seem to control the sources of public and private funding that sustain them. They seem to be impervious to the pressures for excellence.

There is a growing belief that the solution lies in abandoning government education and transferring our energies and resources to the private sector, thereby expanding educational freedom, opportunity and entrepreneurship. The American people want better education. They ought to be able to get it. But to do so they will have to sweep away whatever obstacles to excellence the educators have erected. In fact, that is the problem—how to break down, overcome or circumvent the obstacles to excellence.

The exodus of children from the public schools is an indication that this is already happening. But the millions of children who remain in the government schools are at risk, in danger of becoming the functional illiterates, the underclass of tomorrow. Can we save them? We have the knowledge to do so. But do we have the will? The next few years will provide the answer.

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Bill McNally sent me the link to this article on August 20, 2015. I do not recall reading it before. I did not find it in any of the materials that Mr. Blumenfeld sent me in 2008. It is undoubtedly one of the very best things that Sam ever published.

Practically all the books and articles Sam referred in the article above are now available on the Internet. A few years back, I spent several weeks combing the Internet for the books and articles by the psychologists and educators Sam mentioned. It was shocking to see how these men discounted the supreme importance of high literacy. I was also surprised to learn that there were many excellent, proven phonics program available. I have personally taught Webster's 1824 *American Spelling Book* and his 1908 *Elementary Spelling Book*. In fact I have published the 1908 *Elementary Spelling Book* in a nice big print edition available Amazon and Barnes and Nobles: *Noah Webster's Spelling Book Method for Teaching Reading and Spelling*. I have also published Florence Akin's 1913 *Word Mastery: Phonics for the First Three Grades*. I have taught several students to read with this book, too. Last year three second-grade students copied all the words in a journal as I wrote them on the board. They all made excellent progress

It is very important to understand that Sam was a very practical man. He not only traced the problem back to the original sources, but he wrote a peerless phonics method that has become the acknowledge flagship of the homeschool movement: *Blumenfeld's Alpha-Phonics*, recently republished as *Phonics for Success*. Tens of thousand of parents have successfully taught their children with this method. I have personally taught around 100 students with *Alpha-Phonics* in large classrooms and private tutoring. It may be the most test and trusted phonics method ever published. Although no large scale, formal, scientifically controlled studies have been done on the program, the success of tens of thousands of homeschool parents is a natural experiment of unprecedented proportions - equal in value, I would suggest, to any scientifically controlled study.

Here is a link to the original draft of this article.

<http://blumenfeld.camconstitution.net/Manuscripts/Who%20Killed%20Excellence%20Draft.pdf>

www.donpotter.net

www.blendphonics.org