

McMahon's Syndrome

by Professor William C. McMahon, of Danbury State College

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All across this nation today school districts large and small employ a variety of so-called reading specialists. These reading specialists are primarily remedial teachers who are charged with the responsibility of diagnosing reading difficulties, prescribing instructional programs for retarded readers and instructing the students. One would expect these specialists to have acquired training in two distinct areas. Because almost all students who fail in reading suffer an emotional reaction, the reading specialist should have some training in psychology. Practically all reading specialists have adequate training in child psychology. I do not know of a program for the training of reading specialists in this country which is not psychologically oriented.

Because all students who fail in reading show a lack of mastery of the English language, the reading specialist should have some training in English. In this regard the conditions in the profession are scandalous. Very few remedial reading teachers possess what you and I would consider a minimum amount of training in the English language. This is due primarily to these two causes: (1) the states do not make adequate training in English a requirement for reading specialists (check your state certification requirements in this regard), and (2) the training of reading specialists is almost universally the province of the psychology departments in colleges and universities which train teachers.

The result of this situation can be observed in almost any remedial reading class in this country. When you visit a remedial class you will almost certainly find the students playing games. The remedial teacher, an amateur psychologist, will explain that the children all have emotional blocks, which must be removed before they will be able to learn to read. The game therapy will be designed to help the students adjust to the fact that they are failures. How often have you read a report from a reading teacher which said, "Sam does not read any better than he did at the beginning of the term, but he is better adjusted and gets into fewer fights in the classroom?" I have read hundreds of reports like that. If the teacher is actually trying to teach some basic reading skills, the content will be hidden in a game of some sort. Should you find a teacher who is teaching reading without games, you will probably hear her distorting the sounds of English consonants.

I have been speaking in generalizations, but I speak from experience. I have been training teachers of reading for six years. I find teachers in graduate courses who do not know what the schwa is when it is the most common pronunciation symbol in the dictionary they are supposed to be teaching. Many teachers do not know the meanings of terms such as digraph, diphthong and syllabication. One teacher who had just graduated and was about to start teaching in the primary grades in September, asked me what a 'primer' was.

I do not blame the teachers for the situation I describe. If our purpose here is to assign blame, then the onus must fall squarely on the teacher training institutions. The colleges need not wait for the state certification bureaus to dictate changes in teacher training. Dr.

Conant has suggested that the colleges should assume a larger role in teacher certification. But before they can make any significant improvement in the training of reading specialists, they must make one important change in organization. The responsibility for the training of reading specialists must be taken from the psychology departments and placed with the English departments in our colleges and universities.

In addition to the above recommendation, state certification bureaus must revise the requirements for reading specialists to include such areas as the history of the English language, phonetics, advanced English grammar and composition, semantics and logic.

My second topic concerns the identification of the retarded reader and the determination of the causes of reading disability. Whenever serious scholars attempt to list the characteristics of the seriously retarded reader they arrive at surprisingly similar profiles of this unfortunate child. I have assembled a description of the seriously retarded reader which I call McMahon's Syndrome. In some instances I have used the words of respected scholars in place of my own. McMahon's Syndrome is composed of the following set of symptoms:

1. The child will identify a word in one context and fail to identify it the next time it appears.
2. The child will guess at words on the basis of initial letter, length and a few other insufficient clues.¹
3. The child is especially confused by vowels in words.
4. The child appears to have a poor memory, but only in learning that involves reading.
5. The child exhibits "poor perception of details within a complex and abstract visual gestalt (like a word)."²
6. The child "has difficulty in applying generalizations like those that allow the normal child to improve his basic skills in reading on his own."³
7. The child exhibits left-right confusion when dealing with words. He confuses words like was and saw, on, and no, etc.
8. The child confuses words like up and down, now and later, seldom and often, etc.
9. The child usually does well in arithmetic and any subject not requiring reading.

The following item is not a symptom of retardation) but it helps to validate the previous items:

10. The child possesses average or slightly better I.Q.

These symptoms have been ascribed to a variety of causes, although no positive diagnosis as to causation has been made to date.⁴ Some investigators attribute the symptoms listed above to brain damage,⁵ and others attribute them to a lack of cortical hemispheric dominance.² One team of investigators blames chemical imbalance.⁷ The great majority of reading experts would give emotional disturbance as the primary cause. It is my conviction that none of these causes are primary, although any one of them might be present in a retarded reader and serve to aggravate an already bad situation. McMahon's Syndrome is actually the basal reader disease. I make this statement in all seriousness, because for each of the symptoms I have listed above, a specific instructional procedure can be found in the basal program which creates the symptom in the child.

It is not feasible at this time to discuss in detail every facet of basal reader methodology. One or two examples will make my point. The guessing at words mentioned in Symptom No. 2 is cultivated by basal reader methodology to an unbelievable degree. The first word guessing skill taught is configuration, of course. I am not revealing any secrets with that statement. But few people realize the extent to which this outlandish practice has been carried. One basic reader manual advises the teacher to have the child who confuses words draw the customary outlines around the two confused words and then, for reinforcement, the child is instructed to color in the resulting boxes with crayon. I still have trouble believing that this is anything but a cruel farce. Remember that this procedure is recommended as a corrective exercise for a child who has already begun to miscall words.

Another guessing skill taught is the picture clue. Again, I realize that this is not news to you, but you may not realize the extent to which guessing from picture clues has been refined. One teacher's manual states that before a child is ready to read at the first reader level he must have mastered a list of sixteen basic skills and abilities, among which are the following:

4. the ability to interpret the content of a single picture – noting particularly the main idea and the supporting details
5. the ability to interpret a picture story in sequence
6. the ability to make inferences about what has gone before, what will happen next, and how a story will end
7. the ability to infer from illustrations the conversation of the characters as it appears in the printed text

The foregoing item seven will bear very careful study. Thru this intensive instruction in picture reading the basal publishers claim to insure success in reading for meaning, but it is clear that the child's need to actually read the printed word is obviated. The tragedy here is that bright little children master this skill with the result that a year or two may pass before they realize that the clue to the pronunciation of a word lies in the sequence of the letters in the word.

For my final point please listen to symptom No. 2 again. “The child will guess at words on the basis of initial letter, length and a few other insufficient clues.” This observation was made by Dr. N. Dale Bryant of Albany Medical College and the Albany Study Center for Learning Disabilities. Dr. Bryant lists this symptom as indicative of severe reading disability, and the good Doctor tells us that the child is probably suffering from a basic neurological disorganization. The least that can be said is that Dr. Bryant does not consider guessing at a word on the basis of the initial letter to be an efficient reading habit. Now, how do you suppose a child would ever develop such an inefficient habit? Let us look into a basal reader teacher’s manual where we read the following:

At all grade levels, the pupil learns to use the context and word analysis always in conjunction with one another in word identification, and he is encouraged to use only that amount of word analysis which is necessary to complete his identification of those words. This is basic principle in the Reading for Meaning series.⁹

This is stressed in another passage:

You should, however, at all times encourage pupils to pay particular attention to the context and to do only that amount of word analysis that they need to do in order to identify a word that is new to them in its printed form. If the context and the beginning sound of a word are in themselves sufficient, pupils should not engage in further analysis of the word.¹⁰

Please note that these are STRANGE, NEW words that the child is trying to decode, not familiar words. This is symptom No. 2 in the making. Having established the habit of guessing a word on the basis of the initial consonant, the student is ready to develop symptom No. 1. “The child will identify a word in one context and fail to recognize it the next time it appears.” If a child looks only at the first consonant of a strange word, how can he be expected to recognize it when he sees it in a different context? Perhaps a different word would make more sense in the new context.

I can continue to connect each symptom to its cause in basal reader methodology, but the examples I have given will suffice. My point is this: The fact of the matter is that the child who is suffering from “severe reading disability” has not failed to learn. On the contrary, he has learned exactly what he has been taught and he has become a reading cripple as a consequence.

The basal reader will not be supplanted in the next year or the next five years, but the most harmful aspects of basal reader methodology can be eliminated thru the retraining of teachers. I find teachers most anxious to improve their reading instruction. I hope the *Reading Reform Foundation* will lend its tremendous influence to the task of retraining teachers of reading. I firmly believe that we will save more children more quickly thru teacher training than by attempting to eliminate the basal reader as the medium of instruction.

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Professor McMahon's speech reminds me of Samuel Blumenfeld's 1973 *The New Illiterates*. Sam demonstrated by going through the Dick and Jane Teacher Manuals that any student who went through the programs exactly as it was to be taught without any supplemental phonics would develop some degree of whole-word dyslexia. Professor McMahon's speech presents the same basic position.

I would have thought that that the indisputable logic of this little 1965 speech would have been enough to convince anyone of the peril of the whole-word method. And it is beyond incredible to ponder the inexplicable fact that ten short years later (Frank Smith's *Understanding Reading* was published in 1971.) whole-language swept through the profession with an even more virulent form of the whole-word method which dispensed with practically all directly taught skills. I should know since I was personally instructed in whole-language at workshop after workshop through my entire career in elementary education.

Mary Johnson of Canada and later Edward Miller developed assessments specifically designed to assess the damage done to students reading abilities by the whole-word method. It was my experience testing several hundred students with these assessments that convinced me that the whole-word/whole-language methodology was the **cause** of the reading disability that parents were paying me to remediate.

I would like to key in on the last sentence of Professor McMahon's speech". "I firmly believe that we will save more children more quickly thru **teacher training** than by attempting to eliminate the basal reader as the medium of instruction." It is for this very reason that I started my Education Page at www.donpotter.net. I felt that the only way to improve reading education was to provide teachers with the information they need to teach beginning and remedial reading in the most effective manner possible. I especially recommend Hazel Loring's 1980 *Reading Made Easy with Blend Phonics for First Grade* and Florence Akin's 1913 *Word Mastery*, both of which are available for free download from my web site. No matter what basal program (phonics, whole-language, or a mix of the two) that teachers are required to teach, they can always squeeze in ten to twenty minutes of supplemental phonics right along with the regular adoption and thereby assure that 100% of their students will become strong readers, free of whole-word guessing. .

I would like to thank Kathy Diehl for sending me a couple boxes of *Reading Reform Foundation Conference Reports* and *Reading Informers*. For more articles published by the *Reading Reform Foundation* visit the Education Page of my web site: www.donpotter.net.

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