

Can Dyslexia Be Artificially Induced in School? Yes, Says Researcher Edward Miller

by Samuel L. Blumenfeld
March 1992

Ever since *The New Illiterates* was published back in 1973, we have known that the chief, and perhaps only cause of dyslexia among school children has been and still is the look-say, whole-word, or sight method of teaching reading. In that book I revealed the fact that the sight method was invented back in the 1830s by the Rev. Thomas H. Gallaudet, the director of the American Asylum at Hartford for the Education of the Deaf and Dumb. He had been using a sight, or whole-word method in teaching the deaf to read, by juxtaposing a word, such as *cat*, with the picture of a cat. And because the deaf were able to identify many simple words in this way, Gallaudet thought that the method could be adapted for use by normal children.

Gallaudet, who believed that education was a science and could be improved by scientific experimentation, gave a detailed description of his new method in the *American Annals of Education* of August 1830. It consisted of teaching the child to recognize a total of 50 sight words written on cards “without any reference to the individual letters which composed the word.” After the child had memorized the words on the basis of their configurations alone, the letters of each word were taught. The final step was to teach the letters in alphabetical order.

In 1836 Gallaudet published *The Mother's Primer* based on his look-say methodology. Its first line was: “Frank had a dog; his name was Spot.” In 1837 the primer was adopted by the Boston Primary School Committee. Horace Mann was then Secretary of the Board of Education of Massachusetts, and he favored the method. The educational reformers of the time were against anything that smacked of old orthodox practices, and they considered intensive, systematic phonics to be one of them. The *American Annals of Education*, representing the progressive views of the time, provided a ready platform for the critics of the alphabetic-phonics method. One could find such opinions as the following in its pages:

He [the child] should read his lessons as if the words were Chinese symbols, without paying any attention to the individual letters, but with special regard to the meaning... This method needs neither recommendation nor defense, with those who have tried it: and were it adopted, we should soon get rid of the stupid and uninteresting mode now prevalent. (Oct. 1832, p. 479)

If it is true, that so long as we cling with intense fondness to the deformities of our orthography with a fondness like the mother's love to her offspring, enhanced by deformity — much time is, and must be, wasted over the elementary books of reading and spelling. It becomes the friends of education to examine the facts, and act with energy, as men living in an age of reform. (Apr. 1832, p. 173)

The ABC is our initiative tormentor, requiring much time and Herculean effort, altogether thrown away. (Nov. 1833, p. 512)

Boston Schoolmasters React

Such was the climate of the time. Gallaudet's primer was imitated by other textbook writers, and the children of Massachusetts were taught to read by this new sight method. By 1844 the defects of the new method were so apparent to the Boston schoolmasters, that they issued a blistering attack against it, and urged a return to intensive, systematic phonics. I reprinted the full text of that historic critique in *The New Illiterates*, in order to demonstrate how early the defects of the look-say, whole-word method were recognized by educators who were not seduced by the siren songs of the reformers.

In that book, I also did a line-by-line analysis of the Dick-and-Jane reading program and came to the conclusion that any child taught to read solely by that method would exhibit the symptoms of dyslexia. The cause was obvious: when you impose an ideographic teaching technique on an alphabetic writing system, you get reading disability. By eliminating the sense of sound from the reading process, one is breaking the crucial link between the alphabetically written word and its spoken equivalent. Also, by using sound symbols as ideographic symbols, one creates symbolic confusion.

The schoolmasters of Boston had recognized this phenomenon in 1844, and it was also recognized in 1929 by Dr. Samuel T. Orton, a neuropathologist in Iowa who was seeking the cause of children's reading problems. After considerable research, he came to the conclusion that their problems were being caused by the new sight method of teaching reading. The results of his research were published in the February 1929 issue of the *Journal of Educational Psychology* with the title, "The Sight Reading Method of Teaching Reading as a Source of Reading Disability." Dr. Orton wrote:

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.

And so, there has been no doubt in my mind as to the cause of dyslexia among perfectly healthy, normal school children. However, in recent years I have heard stories of children entering the first grade already exhibiting the symptoms of dyslexia, before they have had any formal reading instruction. It was said that these children, who had never been to school, were having a terribly difficult time learning to read by phonics. The phenomenon was somewhat inexplicable, until sometime in 1988 when I received a phone call from a man in North Wilkesboro, North Carolina, by the name of Edward Miller. It turned out that he had the key to the mystery.

Miller had called to tell me of his theory of "educational dyslexia," that is, how dyslexia could be artificially induced. I was delighted to know that there was someone else in America who agreed with me. He had seen me on a television interview in 1984 and was so astounded by my assertions about dyslexia that he decided to get my book on the NEA, What I had said on TV sounded crazy to him, but he said I looked too sane to be crazy.

Overcoming a Handicap

Miller was particularly interested in this subject because he himself was dyslexic and had been so since the first grade. He had been taught to read in a rural school in North Carolina by a young teacher fresh out of college who used the sight method. At first Miller thought it was his stupidity that was causing his reading problem. But in the fourth grade he proved that he was not stupid by memorizing the multiplication table and winning a prize in class. From then on he simply saw his reading problem as a handicap that had to be compensated for by all sorts of tricks. For example, he found that he could pass many essay tests by writing short, simple sentences in which all of the words were spelled correctly. He might earn a C for his efforts, but C's were better than F's.

Eventually, Miller made it through North Carolina State College. In fact, despite his reading disability, he was able to become a mathematics teacher and finally an assistant administrator in a high school in Hollywood, Florida. It was by reading an excerpt from Rudolf Flesch's book, *Why Johnny Can't Read*, in a newspaper in 1956 that Miller had become aware of the two ways of teaching children to read: the phonetic method and the sight or look-say method. He realized that he had been taught by the sight method.

But it wasn't until 1986, when his young grandson, Kyle, then in the first grade, developed a reading problem, that Miller was motivated to investigate the matter in greater depth. In the suffering and pain of his grandson he saw a repeat of himself. He knew that Kyle had learned to read by look-say, and that was easy to prove because Kyle could read his little sight-vocabulary books rapidly, without error. But when faced with reading matter not in the controlled vocabulary, he had extreme difficulty. Miller could see that Kyle was trying to guess the words. The boy found the process of sounding out words irritating and painful.

Miller recalled what he had read in my NEA book about the Russian psychologists, Luna and Pavlov, and of how they had devised an artificial way of including behavioral disorganization by introducing two conflicting stimuli to the organism. Miller believed that he was seeing the same process at work in Kyle. He was sure that Kyle had learned something at an early age that was interfering with his attempt to decode the little phonetic books which Miller had bought for him. "I knew about the two methods of teaching reading," relates Miller, "and suspected that he had learned a non-phonetic method of looking at words. I tried to help him sound out the words in the little books, but the books seemed to be hurting him."

A Cognitive Conflict

It was obvious to Miller that his grandson had learned a method of reading that conflicted with the phonetic method, and that it was causing what is commonly known as "dyslexia." Miller thought that he could demonstrate how this cognitive conflict could be artificially induced by way of a very simple experiment. Drawing on his extensive knowledge of mathematics, he devised an experimental problem whereby an individual trained in the base-ten arithmetic system would be required to do his calculations in a base-twelve system. The individual would experience great difficulty, confusion and frustration trying to suppress his automatic base-ten responses as he attempted to do simple arithmetic in a base-twelve system. This was what the sight reader experienced in trying to apply a phonetic method of looking at words when the automatic tendency was "spatial-holistic" in orientation. The key to the problem, Miller believed,

was in the automaticity involved in each method. If a child's first-learned way of reading was configurational and not phonetic, and if the child could read this sight vocabulary in an out-of-context word list at more than 30 words per minute, that child would develop educational, or artificially induced, dyslexia. However, if the child's first-learned way of identifying words was phonetic, and if that ability had become automatic, that child would never become dyslexic. But Miller wondered how Kyle could have developed such a strong automatic configurational way of identifying words without any formal reading instruction. He had noticed that Kyle had in his room many children's books, including many of the Dr. Seuss books which children often learn to read by memorizing the words. If Kyle had developed an automatic configurational way of identifying words by having memorized the Dr. Seuss books, then he could have entered the first grade with an already learned way of reading that would conflict with the phonetic approach.

Dr. Seuss's 223 Words

Most people are not aware that the Dr. Seuss books were created to supplement the whole word reading programs in the schools. Most people assume that Dr. Seuss made up his stories using his own words. The truth is that the publisher supplied Dr. Seuss with a sight vocabulary of 223 words which he was to use in writing the books, a sight vocabulary in harmony with the sight words the child would be learning in school. Thus, the children would enter the first grade having already mastered a sight vocabulary of several hundred words, thereby making first-grade reading a breeze. Because the Dr. Seuss books are so, simple, many people assume that they were easy to write. But Dr. Seuss debunked that idea in an interview he gave *Arizona* magazine in June 1981. He said:

They think I did it in twenty minutes. That damned *Cat in the Hat* took nine months until I was satisfied. I did it for a textbook house and they sent me a word list. That was due to the Dewey revolt in the Twenties, in which they threw out phonic reading and went to word recognition, as if you're reading a Chinese pictograph instead of blending sounds of different letters. I think killing phonics was one of the greatest causes of illiteracy in the country. Anyway, they had it all worked out that a healthy child at the age of four can learn so many words in a week and that's all. So there were two hundred and twenty-three words to use in this book. I read the list three times and I almost went out of my head. I said, I'll read it once more and if I can find two words that rhyme that'll be the title of my book. (That's genius at work.) I found 'cat' and 'hat' and I said, 'The title will be *The Cat in the Hat*.'

And that is how the Dr. Seuss pre-school sight-word books were born. The publishers believed that if the children could memorize the words in the books, they would be better prepared for the sight-reading instruction they would get in the first grade. An ad for The Beginning Readers' Program states:

The words are just right for young readers, too. They're in large, clear type. They often tell the story in rhyme. And they're so closely related to the pictures that, with a little help from Mom and Dad, even preschoolers can start reading all by themselves. And when a pre-schooler is turned on to reading by Dr. Seuss and his friends he generally stays turned on to reading for life.

What the ad didn't tell parents is that if the child was permitted to develop an automatic configurational, spatial-holistic way of identifying words, then that child would be dyslexic when dealing with the much larger reading vocabulary beyond the few hundred words he or she had memorized. And with the advent of audiocassettes, the child could learn to memorize the words even without the help of Mom or Dad. But if the child had been taught to read phonetically from the very beginning, he or she would never become dyslexic.

Miller had, indeed, made a very significant discovery, one that could save millions of children from falling into the dyslexia trap caused by memorizing the sight vocabularies in their preschool readers. But the problem now was how to make this discovery public?

The publishers of the Beginner Books were making millions of dollars, and the books themselves were extremely popular with parents and children alike. Some children are taught to sound out words by their parents, and these children, of course, are not harmed by these little books since they look at all words phonetically. But since most pre-schoolers are not taught to read phonetically at home before they go to school, they are in great danger of becoming dyslexic. And the better they get at memorizing the words, the greater the danger, for it is when the child develops an automatic ability to identify words configurationally, he or she develops the cognitive block that produces dyslexia.

The publishers of the Beginner Books have also produced a picture dictionary. The purpose of the dictionary is to make the child “recognize, remember, and really enjoy a basic elementary vocabulary of 1,350 words.” We wonder how many hundreds of thousands of children have become dyslexic by memorizing the sight words in this picture dictionary.

Getting to the Public

But how was Miller going to get this information to the public? He decided to contact some of the educational officials in the Florida public school system. Having retired from the system in 1982, he was acquainted with many of them. They listened politely and seemed to understand what he was talking about. But he could arouse no real interest or enthusiasm about his discovery.

He then went to IBM, which had developed a costly computer reading-instruction program called Writing to Read which teaches children a modified phonetic writing system. After many phone conversations, they referred him to Dr. Larry Silver, director of the National Institute of Dyslexia in Bethesda, Maryland. Miller called Silver who said he would like to see Miller’s materials on the artificial induction of dyslexia. Several days after sending the materials, Miller called Silver’s office. The secretary said that the materials had arrived, that a complete copy of them had been made, and that they were being returned to Miller with a letter from Dr. Silver. Silver’s letter was quite perfunctory. He offered no evaluation of Miller’s theory on the artificial induction of dyslexia, but advised Miller to team up with someone at a university working in special education. Apparently, Miller’s lack of academic “credentials” was the new handicap he had to deal with.

But Miller had already contacted someone at Appalachian State University for help. He had spoken with the dean of the school of education who recommended that he contact Dr. Gerald Parker, professor of special education. In August 1988 Miller made a presentation of his theory to Dr. Parker’s graduate students. But he soon realized, by the questions they asked, that they were all committed to the whole-language approach. In fact, Parker expressed the opinion that the best way to avoid creating the cognitive conflict was to teach the child only one way of looking at words: the holistic, configurational way! In other words, the child should only read words that he had memorized as sight words. If he did that, he would never exhibit the symptoms in his sight vocabulary? Parker told Miller that Frank Smith provided the answer to that question in his book, *Understanding Reading*, the bible of whole-language educators. Miller got a copy of the book, read it slowly but thoroughly and came to the conclusion that Frank Smith was responsible for the misconception of the century.

Frank Smith Was Wrong

Miller's theory was that the two ways of looking at words — the configurational and the phonetic — were mutually exclusive, and that once a child achieved an automatic ability to look at words in a spatial-holistic fashion, it created a cognitive conflict with the phonetic method. Frank Smith, however, insisted that none of these methods were mutually exclusive. But if this were so, then why didn't those who were trained to read phonetically ever become dyslexic, and those who were taught to read ideographically did?

Dr. Parker had also told Miller about Dr. Frank Wood, director of the Bowman Gray Learning Disability Project at the Bowman Gray School of Medicine in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. Wood was conducting research on learning disabilities under a \$3-million grant from the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD). The goal of the project, according to a brochure, was “to understand the causes of learning disability and the methods by which we might forestall or prevent some of the worst consequences in underachievement.” Obviously, if there were anyone who would be interested in Miller's theory about the cause of dyslexia, it would have to be Dr. Wood.

Wood did, in fact, show interest in Miller's theory, and after several visits and phone conversations over a period of about four months, he sent Miller a four-page review of the theory in August, 1988. In essence, Wood agreed that dyslexia was generally characterized by a deficit in decoding skills. But he believed that this deficit was probably due to some children being “genetically predisposed against phonetic processes” rather than their having become phonetically impaired by their pre-school learning of a sight vocabulary. Wood wrote:

There is no evidence of which I am aware that would relate the kinds of early pre-reading experiences you describe to dyslexia in the school years. Perhaps it is fair to say that there has been little attempt to gather such evidence, so that the issue remains unexplored. There is, however, a major series of investigations that establishes the role of genetic factors in dyslexia. To the extent that genetic factors control the dyslexic outcome, preschool experience would be eliminated as any substantial cause of the problem.

In other words, the federal government has spent and is still spending millions of dollars looking for the genetic causes of dyslexia. This line of investigation is the official line of the Interagency Committee on Learning Disabilities which defined “Learning Disabilities” as follows in its 1987 report to the Congress:

Learning disabilities is a generic term that refers to a heterogeneous group of disorders manifested by significant difficulties in the acquisition and use of listening, speaking, reading, writing, reasoning, or mathematical abilities, or of social skills. These disorders are intrinsic to the individual and presumed to be due to central nervous system dysfunction. Even though a learning disability may occur concomitantly with other handicapping conditions (e.g., sensory impairment, mental retardation, social and emotional disturbance), with socioenvironmental influences (e.g., cultural differences, insufficient or inappropriate instruction, psychogenic factors), and especially with attention deficit disorder, all of which may cause learning problems, a learning disability is not the direct result of those conditions or influences.

In other words, instruction methods are largely irrelevant! Also, note that you can also be learning disabled in social skills, which opens a vast new field of investigation for psychologists seeking government research grants. Wood also wrote:

The only part of your theory that is undeveloped in research is that having to do with the role of preschool experience in strengthening a natural spatial holistic viewing tendency, to the subsequent detriment of phonemically based reading. That is an interesting research question, and it has not yet been subjected to careful scientific methodology. It seems to me that there would be two separable issues: (1) whether any substantial numbers of dyslexic children owe their dyslexia to the preemption by a spatial strategy that was learned or strengthened in the preschool years; and (2) whether this preemption by a spatial strategy is even possible (notwithstanding the question of whether it accounts for a substantial number of dyslexic children's problems).

Devising a Suitable Test

What this meant was that Miller had to prove, in a manner acceptable to the scientific community, that his theory was correct. Miller believed that he could do so by means of a simple test that anyone could duplicate and verify. He had already seen how dyslexic children could read their controlled vocabulary books with great speed but were stymied when faced with simple newspaper stories. The question was, at what point did the child become a committed sight reader and develop a block against learning phonics? It took about ten months of experimentation before Miller finally came up with a testing instrument that would indicate clearly whether a child was a sight reader or a phonetic reader and at what point the child's reading mode became permanent. The test would scientifically measure the child's word identification strategies and accurately measure the severity of the child's dyslexic condition.

The test was composed of two sets of words: the first set consisted of 260 sight words drawn from two Dr. Seuss books, *Green Eggs and Ham* and *The Cat in the Hat*, The second set consisted of 260 equally simple words drawn from Rudolf Flesch's word lists in *Why Johnny Can't Read*, The sight words were arranged in alphabetical order across the page. They included such multi-syllabic words as *about, another, mother, playthings, something, yellow*, while the words from Flesch's book were all at first-grade level, one syllable and phonetically regular. In other words, for a child who knew his or her phonics neither set of words posed any problem. The purpose of the test was to measure the speed at which the child read both sets of words and to count the errors, or miscues, made in reading the two sets of words.

What the Tests Revealed

The first children Miller tested were the five children of the Norman family, a black family Miller had known for many years. He discovered that the two oldest boys, Deidric and Cameron, could read both sets of words with no difficulty, indicating normal, phonetic reading ability. However, their brothers Travis, 11, and Jason, 7, were a different story. Travis read the sight words at 51 words per minute with no errors, but read the phonetic words at 17 words per minute with 91 errors. Jason read the sight words at a speed of 44 words per minute with no errors, but read the phonetic words at 24 words per minute with 47 errors.

Obviously, both youngsters had become dyslexic. The fact that they could read the sight words at over 30 words per minute meant that their word-identification mode was automatic and, therefore, permanently fixed. Their cognitive block against phonics had been established by the way they had learned to read. Unless the blockage was undone through intensive remedial intervention, it would remain a major lifelong handicap, preventing them from pursuing careers that required accurate reading skills.

The youngest child, Nickayla, 6, given a shorter test, read the sight words at 21 words per minute with 8 errors and read the phonetic words at 10 words per minute with 16 errors. She had not yet developed that degree of automaticity with the sight words that would have prevented her from becoming a phonetic reader. But Nickayla was tested nine months later, and the results indicated that she had developed the needed automaticity. She could now read the sight words at 39 words per minute with 11 errors, and read the phonetic words at 21 words per minute with 50 errors. In other words, she had become educationally dyslexic in a matter of nine months. This outcome could have been prevented had she been taught intensive, systematic phonics at a time when her word-identification mode was still indeterminate.

The test had clearly shown its value as an indicator of a child's way of identifying words: phonetically or holistically. It also indicated the degree of dyslexia, or symbolic confusion, the child was suffering from. It could also identify those children who had not yet made a cognitive commitment to either word-identification mode and could still be saved from becoming educationally dyslexic with the proper intervention.

Alarming Results

In January 1990 Miller obtained permission to administer his test to 68 students at the Ronda-Clingman Elementary School, a rural school with an enrollment of about 600 near the town of Ronda in Wilkes County, North Carolina. Of the 68 students, 25 were 4th-graders, 26 were 2nd graders, and 17 students were from different grades in Title 1. The results were alarming. Of the 26 second-graders, 5 were phonetic readers, 11 were permanent holistic readers (with a sight reading speed of over 30 words per minute) and therefore already educationally dyslexic, and 10 were in a state of reading limbo, that is, they hadn't yet developed automaticity in either word identification mode and could either become fluent phonetic readers or educationally dyslexic. The outcome would depend on how they were taught to read in the next few months.

Of the 25 fourth-graders, 14 were phonetic readers and 11 were holistic, that is, educationally dyslexic. None were in an indeterminate state. In other words, they had all developed the degree of automaticity in their word-identification mode which made their reading mode permanent. If this fourth-grade class was typical of fourth-grade classes throughout North Carolina, this meant that 44% of all students in the public schools of that state would emerge at the end of their school careers educationally dyslexic, that is, functionally illiterate.

Of the 17 students in Title 1, 6 were phonetic readers, 6 were holistic (educationally dyslexic), and 5 were in limbo. Of the latter, 4 were in first grade, indicating that their reading instruction was leading them into educational dyslexia.

What was happening at the Ronda-Clingman school was going on in every elementary school in North Carolina. Were the authorities concerned? Miller had actually gone to the state education authorities in September of 1989 and demonstrated to them his theory on the artificial induction of dyslexia. Two months later he received a letter from Betty Jean Foust, the state's Consultant for Reading Communication Skills. She wrote:

This letter is in response to your request that I review your materials and comment upon your theory of dyslexia. Members of the Department of Public Instruction believe in a multiple approach to teaching reading. We believe that phonics may help the beginning reader if it is done early and kept simple. We do not feel phonics are useful with older students. In my teaching experience, I have encountered several students who could not hear sounds; therefore, we used other methods for learning to read. In my opinion, all students do not need a phonics assessment. We have never promoted reading words out of context as your assessment does. Time is precious in our schools, and we need activities which promote achievement.

Secondly, I believe all students can be taught to read. Some can read better than others, but all students can learn something. We need to guard against the use of dyslexia as a term for “catch all reading problems.”

Thus spake the State Reading Authority.

Comparing Schools

In January 1991, Miller gained permission to test 62 students at Dade Christian School, a private school in Miami, Florida. The school, with an enrollment of about 1,000 students, is racially mixed, with many children from Spanish-speaking families.

Of the 62 students tested, 26 were in fourth grade, 19 in second grade and 17 in a special group selected from second and third grades because of the difficulties they were having in reading. Of the 19 second-graders, 14 were established phonetic readers, 4 were holistic, and 1 was indeterminate, that is, in the limbo state. All of the 16 children in the special group were educationally dyslexic. Of the 26 fourth-graders, 24 were phonetic readers, and only 2 were educationally dyslexic.

In other words, while in the public schools of North Carolina 44 out of 100 students were becoming educationally dyslexic because of their reading-instruction methods, only 8 out of 100 were becoming educationally dyslexic at the private school in Florida. But even that rate was too high. In any case, Miller had not ascertained how those 2 dyslexic students in the fourth grade had become that way, nor was he given the academic histories of the 17 children in the special group.

The implications to be drawn from Edward Miller’s theory on the artificial induction of dyslexia are most significant. In the first place, they infer that dyslexia is being caused by the reading-instruction methods presently being used in most American public schools, and that educational dyslexia can be prevented by the teaching of intensive, systematic phonics so that the children will become phonetic readers. As Miller has pointed out, a phonetic reader cannot become dyslexic.

If what Miller has discovered is true, then the millions of dollars the federal government is spending on finding the genetic causes of dyslexia is a total waste. In addition, the billions of Chapter One dollars the U. S. Dept. of Education has spent in support of reading programs that are causing educational dyslexia are more than a waste. They are being used to commit a horrible crime against the children of this country.

For years, now, we have been telling the public that the dyslexia that afflicts millions of perfectly normal, healthy children is being caused by the reading-instruction methods used in our schools. Whole language, which is presently sweeping through the primary schools of America like a plague, is the latest manifestation of this insane addiction to defective teaching methods. It is sad to know that millions of innocent children will be permanently damaged by these methods, used by teachers who believe they are doing the right thing.

Establishment Not Interested

Edward Miller has gone to great lengths to bring his findings to the attention of the government education and research establishment. His letters and phone calls to top officials have been to no avail. What he has found out is what we have known for a long time: they are not interested. They have their own agenda, and it has nothing to do with educational excellence.

At this point, our only hope is to reach enough parents so that as many children as possible can be saved from the fate of functional illiteracy the public schools have in store for them. We are advising all American parents to teach their children the three R's at home or have them taught at a trustworthy private school until at least the fourth grade. The most severe, permanent damage is done to the children in the first three grades of public school. We believe that homeschooling is the best educational alternative for all children. However, we realize that homeschooling is not a viable alternative for many parents. In addition, many parents cannot afford private education. But they must find some way to educate their children correctly in those first crucial three years. Parents must also be made aware that permitting their pre-school children to memorize a battery of sight words will cause reading problems later on. They should teach their children to read by intensive, systematic phonics before giving them little preschool books to read. This will "immunize" the children against dyslexia. And lastly, pray for those children whose parents, or teachers, do not have this knowledge — and then. . . pray for America.

Notes by Internet Publisher: Donald L. Potter:

May 9, 2004

1. Thanks to Mr. Samuel L. Blumenfeld for giving me permission to publish his groundbreaking article on Edward Miller's penetrating research into the educational causes of whole-word dyslexia. The article was first published in *The Blumenfeld Education Letter*. Vol, No. 3 (Letter #67), March 1992.
2. I taught Mr. Blumenfeld's excellent phonics-first program, *Alpha-Phonics*, for seven years in public school classrooms and in private tutoring. Several teachers that I trained are still using the method and consistently report success. *Lesson Plans* for teaching the program in a classroom are available on my website. Since first publishing this article, I have five more years experience teaching *Alpha-Phonics*.
3. I have given over one hundred (now over 350 as of 12/13/10) of the *Miller Word Identification Assessments* (MWIA) mentioned in the article. This assessment is a very accurate means for detecting and measuring whole-word dyslexia. The MWIA is available for FREE download on the www.donpotter.net website. In March 2003, Mr. Miller told me that he used the phonics *Exercises* in Rudolf Flesch's 1955 *Why Johnny Can't Read and what you can do about it*. He also recommended *Blumenfeld's Alpha-Phonics*.
4. Valuable, hard-to-find phonics materials are available (much of it FREE) for download on my website: www.donpotter.net.
5. We are saddened to report that Mr. Miller passed away in June of 2009.

Corrections, revisions, additions to his document were made on December 12, 2010.

Historical Note on Dr. Seuss' Sight-Vocabulary Readers

by Donald L. Potter

Dear Sam (Blumenfeld), [10/2/2010]

William Spalding of Macmillan publishing was the son of Frank E. Spaulding, author of the popular 1907 Aldine reading series and the Yale Dean of Education! Frank E. Spaulding studied under Wilhelm Wundt in Germany. William Spalding was "zealous in his conviction that a new lively kind of primer could arrest the growing illiteracy among children." I guess, Sam, since look-and-say wasn't working, they thought they would figure out a better way to do look-and say: Pour more gas on the fire to put it out.

This is from *Dr. Seuss & Mr. Geisel: A Biography* by Judith Morgan and Neil Morgan.

We know why Spalding was noticing "growing illiteracy."

Let me quote some more, "Phyllis Cerf had been researching every primer in print, cross-matching word lists until she came up with 379 words from which their contract authors could chose 200, plus twenty easy-to-pronounce "emergency words" for each book. ... For Beginner Books, these were the honeymoon months. The new company borrowed two hundred thousand dollars from Random House and began to sign contract authors and artists. Ted and Phyllis agreed to undertake printing of about sixty thousand copies of each Beginner Book. The management was cozy, absorbed and united in creating an innovative way of blending words and illustrations to teach reading. But everyone involved tended to explain the adventure from a different perspective. For the instigator William Spalding who remained an outsider, it was an assault on illiteracy. For his office downstairs, Bennett Cerf looked with awe on the casual launching of this series of children's readers, soon calling it the "most profitable single publishing entity ever created." Phyllis talked of merging Ted's "happy genius" with the prosaic but precise science vocabulary word lists. Helen remembered the astonishing journeymen writers who discovered that simply could not create a book using only two or three hundred words. ... Random House soon estimated that it had become the largest publisher of children's books in America. ... Though *The Cat in the Hat* occupied a triumphant niche in juvenile publishing, William Spalding, the man who had suggested the venture, receded into the background. As Houghton Mifflin's Richard Gladstone, assigned to market *The Cat* to schools, recalls: "The reader was essentially a Houghton Mifflin project, but we never knew how many we sold. Thousands (of Random's trade edition) went into schools through jobbers ... Random was making more money from this than we were. [and] very rarely in reports of Beginner Books was there any mention of Houghton Mifflin or of Bill Spalding." Bennet Cerf had lent his author to Houghton Mifflin and then run away with the book. The bizarre agreement between the two publishers to share Ted continued through *The Cat in the Hat Comes Back* and an educational edition of *Yertle the Turtle*, until finally Houghton Mifflin sold its rights to Random House. Then Ceft made an even bigger move. He had marveled at the spiraling profits of the Beginner Books and finally could no longer endure being merely lender and distributor. He had begun to have dreams of empire, he was readying Random House for a merger with some major communications company, and he wanted Beginner Books and its top line tucked neatly inside. In the fiscal year ending April 30, 1960 Beginner Books had a sales volume far exceeding a million dollars. By the end of the year eighteen titles were in bookstores, including a new group of Beginning Reader Books to supplement the earliest school readers. Eventually more than a hundred books were published.

Here is a quote from the book concerning how Geisel wrote *Green Eggs and Ham*, “Ted had met Cerf’s challenge by writing *Green Eggs and Ham* with a vocabulary of precisely 50 words. His work sheets were evidence of his marathon wordplay; charts, lists, number counts - mundane bookkeeping that were words removed from its results, the exquisite nonsense of Sam-I-am. The statistics of Ted’s ordeal were ground into his memory. The words he had used most were “not” (eighty-two times) and “I” (eighty-one times). Each word was monosyllabic except “anywhere” (eight times). Ted made obsessive demands on himself that they exceeded any quality control ever demanded on any editor. But with the dare that led to *Green Eggs*, Cerf had proven himself the idea publisher for Ted. He as an unabashed, beguiled fan who revered his author and his work almost without reservation. Of Ted he said, “You don’t tell Joe DiMaggio hot to hit the ball.” He liked to astonish audiences by naming distinguished authors of Random House - Eugene O’Neill, William Faulkner and John O’Hara - and to conclude that Ted, alone among them, was a genius.”

Well, Sam, there you have all the information I can squeeze out the Google preview of this biography of Dr. Seuss. I pride myself in having heard hundreds of children zip right down the *Green Egg and Ham* vocabulary on Ed Miller’s Holistic List and then come to a screeching halt when they attempted to read the phonetically easy words from Flesch’s Exercises on the Phonetic List. For many it is like hitting a brick wall. I distinctly recall one first grader at the end of first grade who only missed three Dr. Seuss words but 26 of Flesch’s Phonics words. Just last week one lad went from 21 errors on *The Cat in the Hat* to a whopping 67 on Flesch’s list, and I have seen worse than that! It is terribly frustrating to be privy to this undeniable proof of artificially induced whole-word dyslexia without being able to convince the educational world that something as seemingly harmless as a sight-word children’s book can produce dyslexia. It is more convenient to think that the kids inherited dyslexia from their parents than acquired it from the look-and-say method hidden in children’s books highly contaminated with sight-words. With the schools practicing Dolch List words with flash-cards and games, and the Beginning Reader books in every children’s room in America, it is amazing that anyone learns to read objectively from the sounds the letters represent.

Don Potter

Note the remarkable percentages of the total text which are Dolch Words in some other favorite children’s books from the “*I Can Read It All By Myself*” Random House group of Beginner Books:

- 87% - ***Green Eggs and Ham*** by Dr. Seuss
- 78% - ***Go, Dog. Go!*** by P.D. Eastman
- 78% - ***Are You My Mother?*** by P.D. Eastman
- 82% - ***I Want to Be Somebody New!*** by Robert Lopshire
- 83% - ***A Fly Went By!*** by Mike McClintock
- 78% - ***The Cat in the Hat*** by Dr. Seuss
- 81% - ***The Cat in the Hat Comes Back*** by Dr. Seuss
- 75% - ***One fish two fish red fish blue fish*** by Dr. Seuss