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The Disintegration of Our School System, by Watson Washburn.

The author is a distinguished New York attorney who was graduated summa cum laude from Harvard in 1914. He was a member of the victorious U.S. Davis Cup tennis teams of 1920-21.

Much has been said lately about integration in our schools. There is no doubt that this has become a major problem since the revolutionary decision of the United States Supreme Court in *Brown v. Board of Education* on May 17, 1954, which reversed the contrary rule of *Plessy v. Ferguson*, upon which since 1896 the segregated school systems of our Southern states had been developed with ever-increasing improvement, until they were suddenly confronted with the shocking impact of the Supreme Court's about-face.

However, while "integration" has become an explosive and dangerous problem in the South, it does not compare in evil consequences with the countrywide "disintegration" of our educational system which has been going on largely unnoticed for the past 30 years, until its awful results have finally attracted public attention - let us hope, before it is too late.

The most striking example of this disintegration, as well as the simplest and easiest to understand, is in the teaching of reading - the very first of the Three Rs. Catastrophe here followed slowly but sorely *the abandonment of the alphabet* as the foundation of reading instruction, and the substitution of configuration. This method, called "look and say", requires children to memorize the appearance of whole words, regardless of the individual letters which compose them, whereas the alphabetic method requires only the memorization of the 26 letters of our alphabet in their conventional order, plus the learning of the sounds which these letters represent — considerably more than 26 sounds — for some letters, particularly the vowels, represent more than one sound, but of course infinitely less than the number of separate words. The alphabetical method of relating the alphabet to sounds is often referred to as "phonics."

The advantages of the alphabetical over the whole word system are so overwhelming that it is incredible that the latter should have been imposed upon most of the country's public schools, and adopted by many private or independent ones; but this is obviously another case where we took things for granted for so long that we forgot how important they were and that they must be fought for to be preserved.

The alphabet was invented over 3000 years ago, and in due course adopted by all the leading nations of Western civilization, beginning with Greece. In the intellectual field, the discovery was universally considered as a milestone, like that of fire in anthropology, or the wheel in mechanics.

The addition which the alphabet brought to the human mind was not limited to the simplification of reading, enormous as this contribution was. The intellectual stimulation and training involved in building single-syllable words from the letters and then polysyllables, gave children a fine start toward mathematics and logic. Also, complete familiarity with the order of the letters (which can be memorized by the ordinary child of four in a few hours) permitted children to use freely and efficiently for the rest of their lives indexes, catalogs and works of reference of all kinds (including in this age the telephone book) which are very slow and frustrating implements to employ for those who have been denied this fundamental training. Further, since the alphabet is the same in English, as in other Western languages, the study of these languages is greatly helped by a thorough grounding in our own alphabet.

After this marvelous invention was adapted by the Greeks to enlarge so magnificently their linguistic and intellectual horizons, it became a common place attitude to look down on the benighted savages who resorted to picture-writing of one land or another, and also to pity the nations whose considerable progress in civilization had been stunted by the lack of an alphabet, such as the Egyptians with their hieroglyphics, and the Chinese with their tens of thousands of separate characters which called for the ability and patience of a Mandarin to assimilate. But *even the primitive picture writing of the American Indians, or other native tribes, or the much more intricate and sophisticated Chinese characters, are vastly superior pedagogically to the configurationism of our top professional educationists.* For the picture-writings used by these people have *some resemblance* to the meanings signified; among the primitives the likeness may be obvious, like the figure of a cat or a boat; in Chinese, the conventionalized character may be much more obscure, but to the expert scholar it has a number of stimulating associations. In vivid contrast, the shape of our alphabetized words has no relevance whatever to the meaning. Even the most avant-garde painter would hardly use the configuration of letters “cat” to depict a cat, just as conversely, unfortunate children who have been subjected to this modern perversity are likely to read “boat” as “ship”.

This educationist madness therefore is much more of a backward step than merely to the year of 1500 B.C., before the alphabet. It is more irrational than the caveman or ape-man who never would have imagined such a self-defeating attempt to try to teach a child to run before he has learned to walk. In fact, it has no point of reference in the whole of normal history, and seems suitable only for psychiatry study.

Some conturists advance as an excuse for their peculiar theory, the fact that a mature reader can devour pages of print at a speed incompatible with the “sounding out” of each letter in every word. From this simple truism they solemnly draw the illogical conclusion that such a reader must be identifying the words only by their outlines, and farther that if this is true (a false assumption) the way to become a fast reader is to begin by memorizing the outlines. It is hard to take such a suggestion seriously.

The fact is that the alphabetically trained reader has always readily acquired the facility of fast reading; this is so because with constant practice the marvelous brain mechanism steadily speeds up until soon reading becomes automatic and subconscious. The brain reads each letter far faster than conscious thought could imagine. This is a common phenomenon with all skills. In fact, it is essential to be an expert in any activity. The golfer who thought about every little motion while hitting the ball would never break a hundred. But the champion's brain does all this work for him automatically.

This crazy scheme (the whole word method) was introduced with such little fanfare into our educational system that it largely escaped public notice until its baneful effects finally forced the issue into the open. *The increasing number of unfortunate pupils who had later to take special remedial training courses attracted the attention of their parents.* So did the fact that the usual reading defects disclosed were evidently connected with the configurational method of instruction, and that the standard remedy was the alphabet.

Cure was much slower than prevention, for these older children had to unlearn all their bad reading habits at an age when their minds had lost some of the elasticity of childhood. The question naturally arose why, if the alphabet (or "phonics") was the best or only way to teach these retarded children to read, it was not also the rational way to teach all children in the first place, thus avoiding altogether the painful expedient of the "remedial", classes.

One of the by-products of contour-reading is the disappearance of good handwriting and correct spelling. The accuracy required to write the letters clearly and to spell properly is wholly foreign to configurationism.

Another unwholesome excretion of configurationism is the reading matter which the unfortunate pupils are forced to swallow. Since the number of word shapes which primary children can memorize in a year is limited to two or three hundred and since without knowledge of the alphabet they are helpless if confronted with a new word, the texts given them for intellectual fodder have to be tailored to this Procrustean measure. The result resembles the repetitious drooling of hopeless senility. Naturally, no one with an ounce of literary ability or creative imagination would dream of writing such inhibited nonsense. It is no wonder that many young pupils are nauseated, and never recover the taste for reading which familiarity with Lewis Carroll or Hans Christian Andersen might have developed in them.

When the awful truth dawned on the American people and Rudolph Flesch's *Why Johnny Can't Read* became a best seller in 1955, the reaction of the angry educationists was twofold.

First, they made bitter personal attacks on the author, and any others who had the temerity to support his views, as "enemies of public schools", "reactionary ignoramuses", — in fact, the usual complimentary epithets bestowed by the apostles of academic freedom on those whose views on any subject differ from theirs. This was similar to the attempts they

made more recently to endorse a school boycott against the largest national weeklies for publishing criticisms of so-called progressive education.

But the case for picture-reading was so pitifully weak that even the well-entrenched bureaucrats of the National Education Association felt it wise to establish a second line of defense by their "Committee for the Defense of Democracy Through Education". This was to deny that the alphabet had been relegated to obscurity, and to assert on the contrary that the New Teaching had merely embellished the old-fashioned A-B-C system with some modern improvements, of which picture reading was only one. The whole was thus described in "Phonics and the ABC's - 1956", an official publication, of the New York State Education Department: "*accurate and careful listening, correct and clear pronunciation, a constantly increasing sight -word vocabulary, picture and context clues, general configuration of-words, and the composition of the word. These skills should be used along with phonics, sometimes one, sometimes another, being the best aid to the recognition of a particular word*".

This secondary defense was just as absurd as the direct counter-offensive. For it should be obvious even to a mind of the elementary grade that the alphabetic mode of expression is wholly incompatible with primitive pictography. This is like harnessing a horse to a jet plane. The Teachers' College men were as far off base with this alleged eclecticism or middle-of-the-road theory as an arithmetic instructor caught teaching that two and two make five, who offered to compromise on four and a half. Actually, the established hierarchy never gave the alphabet a chance, in the *first years of school when the pupils' minds are malleable*.

We may thank our lucky stars that our educationists have so far allowed children to learn to talk, in the old-fashioned way, at home with their families. Learning to talk from a scratch start, as babies must, is obviously far more difficult than learning to read after mastering oral communication. Just what particular form of new nonsense our configurationists would invent to bedevil the babies with, is hard to imagine, but the wrecks they have left behind in the reading field justifies the most pessimistic prophecies. For one thing, we may be reasonably sure that they would apply the concept of "reading readiness" to speaking.

If a boy of five is slow in reading, common sense would seem to recommend special effort and longer hours to bring him up to average but the current dogma calls for abandonment of all reading instruction for an indefinite period, until "readiness" mysteriously arrives. By analogy, babies backward in conversation would be discouraged from further babbling till their teacher could discern the necessary growth of the requisite 'skill' in their little brains. This might prolong the period of dumbness for a good many years, but children so early grounded by their own experience in "progressive" technique would probably still be dumb enough when grown up to get a diploma from Teachers' College and carry on the good work from generation to generation.

The inertia of the bureaucrats in charge of the public school system of most states, and the intolerance of the despots of the National Education Association, make the task of abolishing from the top even such an absurdity as configurationism almost insurmount-

able. These people doubtless fear that *confession of such a gross error would hamper their master plan for securing control of billions of dollars of new Federal money for spreading their peculiar pedagogical theories.*

It may seem strange, in view of the shocking perversions of proper methods of instruction so consistently practiced by the highest educationist authorities for more than a score of years, how so many American youths are still able to read tolerably well. The great majority have mastered this accomplishment by the time they enter college, and only a small percentage then require remedial tutoring.

The reason for this is that numbers of parents, defying the warnings of the educationists, have taught their children to read in the normal way; and so have countless teachers, who from the practical experience with youngsters which the Teachers' College pundits lack, have learned picture-reading leads to a comic-strip mentality and either a remedial reading class or a reformatory.

Contour-reading alone has set back the education of American children in public schools by at least two years on the average, according to the experienced authors - one a remedial reading teacher and the other a professor of English - of the recent book: *Reading: Chaos and Cure*. It has permanently crippled the minds of millions. But while this is the clearest and most demonstrable mis-step of so-called "progressive" education, it also typifies similar perversions in almost every branch of public education, the poisonous effects of which have seeped into many college programs as well. The over-all picture is one of reducing the American people to a dull uniform of ignorant conformity, instead of educating them to be intelligent, independent-thinking, freedom-loving individuals.

The apparent impossibility of persuading the educationist bosses to correct their contour-reading aberration highlights the folly of trying to change their other more complex educational fallacies. The reform of these pernicious practices must evidently begin at grass-roots level. Fortunately, the public schools are still largely controlled locally, and a few active and well-informed crusaders in a community can soon accomplish wonders. The rank and file of teachers, who are a fine group of citizens, will often be found sympathetic with reform, tho afraid to express their feelings openly for fear of reprisals by their intolerant superiors.

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Reading Reformers Organize

Another indication that the reading controversy is not going to subside is the announcement that a nationwide campaign to replace the widely used “whole-word” method with a phonics approach has been inaugurated by the Reading Reform Foundation, New York City. Says Watson Washburn, speaking for the trustees of the new non-profit organization: “All American parents who have been frustrated by the inability of their youngsters to sound out words phonetically and have seen their children referred year after year to remedial classless recognize that something is wrong with the present method of instruction.” The Foundation has laid plans to establish state and local affiliates throughout the country.

Serving on the Advisory Council of the Foundation are many educators and writers, including Arthur Bestor, Van Wyck Brooks, Douglas Bush, John Dos Passos, Rudolf Flesch, Edith Hamilton, William Ernest Hocking, Joseph Wood Krutch, Helen R. Lowe, Samuel Eliot Morison, Mortimer Smith, Edward Streeter, Josephine B. Timberlake Arther S. Trace, Jr., and Charles Child Walcutt.

Note from Donald Potter: Materials on reading from Charles Child Walcutt, Arther S. Trace, Jr., Rudolf Flesch, and Helen R. Lowe can be found on my web site. Josephine B. Timberlake was one of the authors of the 1942 Phonovisual Visual Chart Method, which is still in print. I have published a detailed analysis and review of the Phonovisual Method, which I used every day in my classroom. 10/23/09.

Note from Internet Publisher: Donald L. Potter
November 29, 2008

I have been interested in the work of the *Reading Reform Foundation* ever since I learned about the organization several years ago. I appreciate Kathryn Diehl for sending me a box of *Reading Informers*. I published *The Summarization of the Afternoon Session of the First Annual Conference, Reading Reform Foundation*, Aug 1, 1962. I also have published articles by Sam Blumenfeld and others from the *Reading Informers*. I found this article by Washburn today on the Internet and decided it should be published because of its historical value and continued relevance.

I consider my family a direct beneficiary of great work of the RRF since my own children learned to read from two of the great phonics programs they recommended: the old *Open Court* (not the new and fundamentally different program bearing the same name) and Economy's *Phonetic Key's to Reading*. To my knowledge, there is no commercial basal phonics program available that can compare with the quality and effectiveness of those two programs.

Effective phonics programs of the type recommended by Mr. Washburn can be found on my web site, www.donpotter.net. Most of the programs on my web site are in free pdf, e-book format. I want to be sure that good phonics materials are available to all teachers and parents regardless to their financial resources. In particular, I recommend Hazel Loring's 1980 *Reading Made Easy with Blend Phonics for First Grade*. Loring was honored with the *Watson Washburn Award for Excellence in Education* in 1982. I have extensive experience with the program and recommend it without reservation for students of all ages.

Presently the *National Right to Read Foundation* is leading the struggle to assure that all the boy and girls in America develop good reading skills through phonics. Their web site is www.nrrf.org.

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