



Readingate: The 100-Year Coverup of Educational Malpractice

Back in the days of the Soviet Union, an American collegiate debating team toured communist Russia for two weeks, engaging their Soviet counterparts in a series of spirited debates which were later shown on PBS. During one debate, a Russian in the audience asked the Americans a very embarrassing question. He said:

Recently I came across some statistics which shocked me. Your journal, *U.S. News and World Report*, wrote that 23 million Americans, that is to say one out of every five Americans, does not know how to read and write well enough to cope with the demands of everyday life. What can you say in regards to this? Can it really be that this is possible in such a developed country as the USA?



The American at the podium, Bill Skundrich, a bright, articulate young man from the University of Pittsburgh, replied in fluent Russian: “Well, what can I say? I can simply say that it is not true. I mean, look at how many Americans we have with us here today. According to these figures one of us would have to be illiterate. Perhaps you’re saying that I’m the one.”

The well-informed Soviet questioner had indeed embarrassed the Americans, and Bill Skundrich had tried to get out of it by denying the veracity of a respected American magazine and joking about his own possible illiteracy. Indeed, I have a copy of *U.S. News & World Report* of April 1, 1996, with the cover story “Dumb and Dumber” about the need to raise school standards. It’s all about American school children unable to learn the basics. The solution? Impose higher standards. But we’ve been doing that for the last 30 years, and it hasn’t worked.

If university-educated Bill Skundrich couldn’t really answer the question, it is because very few Americans can, even though the answer does exist. The trouble is that the answer is actually far more embarrassing than the question, for it strikes at the very integrity of our venerable education system.

By the way, Bill Skundrich went on to become one of the most popular radio journalists for *Voice of America*. In May 2009, he left *Voice of America* after 25 years for a new job at the Department of Homeland Security. We don’t know if he ever boned up on his knowledge of American illiteracy.

The simple truth is that we are living through the greatest coverup of educational malpractice by professional educators this nation has ever known. And we will not be able to correct the situation until enough Americans know about it to make a difference.

The fact is that our literacy problem is the result of a deliberate attempt to dumb down the American people. It was hatched in 1898 — 114 years ago — by John Dewey, a 39-year-old socialist educator, who



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persuaded his fellow socialists that the only way to change America from an individualistic society to a collectivist one was to dumb-down the American people. The easiest way to do it was to change the way reading is taught in our schools. Their plan was to get rid of the traditional phonics method that produces high literacy and replace it with a whole-word method that teaches American children to read English as if it were Chinese. You can read Dewey's plan in his article, *The Primary-School Fetish*, Forum, Vol. XXV, p. 314-28, 1898, and in *School and Society*, 1900. Dewey wrote:

There is ... a false educational god whose idolators are legion, and whose cult influences the entire educational system. This is language study — the study not of foreign language, but of English; not in higher, but in primary education. It is almost an unquestioned assumption, of educational theory and practice both, that the first three years of a child's school-life shall be mainly taken up with learning to read and write his own language. If we add to this the learning of a certain amount of numerical combinations, we have the pivot about which primary education swings....

It does not follow, however, that because this course was once wise it is so any longer. On the contrary, the fact that this mode of education was adapted to past conditions, is in itself a reason which it should no longer hold supreme sway.... 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 then he added a very important caveat to his plan, which left no doubt that this was a conspiracy to deceive the parents of America. He wrote: "Change must come gradually. To force it unduly would compromise its final success by favoring a violent reaction."

If what they were advocating was so beneficial, why would parents react violently against it? In other words, Dewey and his colleagues were willing to use as much deception as possible to advance the cause of socialism in education. And that deception is still going on today.

The idea that a group of socialist educators would take it upon themselves to embark on an attempt to dumb down an entire nation speaks volumes about the evils of socialism. Of course, they embarked on this project before the Russian revolution, before the true evil of communism would show its true colors. But even after the revolution, Dewey visited Russia and came back extolling its virtues. Years later he defended Trotsky against Stalin, but never gave up his belief in a utopianism that kills.

It wasn't until 1933 that the new teaching method was ready for adoption by the public schools of America. And it wasn't until the 1950s that the full destructive effects of the program became obvious. Indeed, it was Rudolf Flesch's sensational book [Why Johnny Can't Read](#), published in 1955, that explained to the parents of America why their children were having such a difficult time learning to read. He wrote: "The teaching of reading — all over the United States, in all the schools, in all the textbooks — is totally wrong and flies in the fact of all logic and common sense."

Flesch then proceeded to explain that from about 1925 to 1950, beginning reading instruction in American schools had been radically changed by the professors of education. They had decided to make American children read English as if it were Chinese. Written English was no longer taught as a sound-symbol, alphabetic system with a relatively small number of phonograms to learn, but as an ideographic system, like Chinese, where every word is a little picture or collection of little pictures numbering in the thousands. This was news to a lot of parents who assumed their children were being taught to read the



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way they had been taught. How else could you possibly learn to read?

The socialist professors claimed that their new method was based on a scientific experiment conducted in 1885 by a 25-year-old American psychologist, James McKeen Cattell, who was studying under Professor Wilhelm Wundt at the University of Leipzig, in Germany. Wundt, founder of experimental psychology, believed that human beings could be studied like dogs or other animals and could be conditioned to behave as society wanted. Man, in other words, was nothing more than a stimulus-response organism. This concept formed the basis of behavioral psychology and its views on behavior modification.

Cattell, a friend of Dewey's, was anxious to see how these principles could be applied to early education, particularly in the teaching of reading. In his experiment, he "discovered" that adult readers read words as whole units, or total word pictures like Chinese characters. If that's the way adults read, he thought, why not teach children to read total word pictures from the very beginning? It sounded like a wonderful idea, except that he failed to realize that an adult reader recognizes the letters in the word so quickly that it seems as if he is reading them as wholes. Indeed, a fluent reader has had to first learn the letters and their sounds before becoming a proficient reader.

Nor was Cattell's idea exactly new. In fact, it had already been tried. The whole-word method of teaching reading had actually been invented in the early 1800s by the Rev. Thomas H. Gallaudet, founder of the Hartford Asylum for the Deaf and Dumb. Gallaudet thought that he could apply to normal children some of the techniques used in teaching deaf-mutes to read.

Since his deaf-mute pupils could not use the spoken language, they could not learn a sound-symbol system of reading, unless they were taught the articulation method. However, Gallaudet had been trained to use the sign method. He taught his pupils to read by a purely sight method consisting of pictures and whole words. For the deaf pupil, written language represented ideas and not language sounds. Gallaudet thought that such a method might work even better with normal children.

In 1835 Gallaudet published his *Mother's Primer*, the first whole-word primer to be published in America. Its first line reads: "Frank had a dog; his name was Spot." Sound familiar? In 1836 the Boston Primary School Committee decided to try Gallaudet's primer on an experimental basis, and, in the following year officially adopted it for use in Boston's primary schools. Seven years later, the decline in students' reading ability was so horrendous that a group of Boston schoolmasters published a blistering critique of the new method. The Boston schools got rid of the Gallaudet method and returned to the traditional method as used by Noah Webster in his celebrated *Blue-Backed Speller*.

But the deaf-mute teaching method did not die. It was kept alive in the new state-owned teachers colleges — or Normal Schools as they were then called — until they were refurbished by a new generation of progressive educators.

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