



The Socialist Agenda Behind “Whole Language”

A sight method, like Whole Language, teaches children to read English as if it were Chinese, that is, composed of word-pictures like Chinese characters, rather than letters that stand for sounds. Children are taught a “sight vocabulary,” a list of words they are supposed to memorize by their shape or association with a picture. They do not learn the letter sounds or how to decipher words by analyzing their phonetic structure and breaking multisyllabic words into their syllables, which is the proper way to teach a child to read.



And why do you suppose our educators would use the sight method to teach reading knowing that it is highly inefficient and causes reading problems? The answer is political. In an article in defense of Whole Language in *Education Week* of February 27, 1985, we read:

The accumulating evidence clearly indicates that a New Right philosophy of education has emerged in this country.... By limiting reading instruction to systematic phonics instruction, sound-symbol decoding, and literal comprehension, and by aiming its criticism at reading books' story lines in an effort to influence content, the New Right's philosophy runs counter to the research findings and theoretical perspectives of most noted reading authorities.

If this limited view of reading (and, implicitly, of thinking) continues to gain influence ... the New Right will have successfully impeded the progress of democratic governance founded on the ideal of an educated — and critically thinking — electorate.

First, what is the so-called New Right's philosophy of education that threatens to impede “the progress of democratic governance”? It's the same philosophy espoused by our Founding Fathers who gave us our limited form of government as outlined in the U.S. Constitution. In those days, education was considered primarily a private, religious, and parental concern. In fact, homeschooling was the rule and children were taught to read and write at home or at a Dame's School before they went on to any kind of formal education. And since there was a strong religious component in education, it was implicitly assumed that the purpose of education was to pass on to the future generation the knowledge, wisdom, and values of the previous generation.

That, of course, is no longer the case. When the progressives took over American education at the turn of the last century, their goal was to use the schools as the means of changing America from a capitalist, individualistic, believing nation into a socialist, collectivist, atheist or humanist nation. Their vision of a socialist America is to be found in the futuristic novel of Edward Bellamy, *Looking Backward*, published in 1888. In that novel Bellamy, a Unitarian journalist, projected the fantasy of a socialist America in the year 2000. It was that vision of economic equality that motivated John Dewey and his colleagues to educate Americans in a manner which would lead them to turn America into a socialist society.

And so, when educators write of “democratic governance,” what form of government are they talking



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about? John Dewey often used the word “democracy” as a euphemism for socialism, and as we know, communist countries often referred to themselves as democracies, like the late, unlamented German Democratic Republic. An article in *The Reading Teacher* of November 1987 describes the socialist purpose behind Whole Language:

Whole Language views the learner as profoundly social. Thus practice congruent with Whole Language includes participating in a community of readers during small group literature study, peer writing workshops, group social studies projects with built in plans for collaborative learning.

The purpose of Whole Language is to get rid of individualism. Reading is not, as Whole Language people claim, a social activity. It’s an individual activity in which the reader is engaged with the author on a one-on-one basis. Indeed, reading is the one activity in which an individual can retreat into his or her own world of thought and pleasure by absorbing the words and experiences of authors living and dead. Yes, a group of readers can read a Shakespeare play aloud and then discuss it. But they come to the activity as individuals and may reread the play in the privacy of their own homes as a personal enhancement of their own understanding of human nature.

Whole Language teachers are attempting to make reading a collectivist experience as if reading can only take place in a classroom with other students. In reality a “community of readers” is really a community of believers all believing in the same thing. The same article speaks of a “political vision woven through Whole Language beliefs.... Its goal is empowerment of learners and teachers.”

What does learning to read have to do with political power? Why should a child in primary school, struggling to master the three R’s, be concerned with “empowerment”? An article by Whole Language guru Frank Smith in *Phi Delta Kappan* of January 1989 makes it quite clear that Whole Language is a political movement:

Literacy is power. Literacy can do more than transform thought; it can transform the world. Literacy can raise social consciousness and provide a means for the expression and fulfillment of this consciousness.... Paulo Freire’s pedagogic technique raises social consciousness not as a way of using literacy but as a means of acquiring it.

Smith’s reference to Paulo Freire is quite revealing, for Freire was a leading Marxist theoretician who used adult literacy campaigns in the Third World to foment Marxist revolution. He had worked with socialist and revolutionary governments in Tanzania, Guinea-Bissau, and Angola.

Freire was considered a “master dialectician” by his progressive American admirers and colleagues who revered him as a sort of Brazilian incarnation of John Dewey, whose socialist spirit still hovers over the education establishment. In the introduction to *Literacy: Reading the Word and the World*, written with radical professor Donald Macedo of the University of Massachusetts, Freire wrote:

In order to overcome at least partly, this “crisis of democracy,” a critical literacy campaign must be instituted. It must be a literacy campaign that transcends the current debate over the literacy crisis which tends to recycle old assumptions and values concerning the meaning and usefulness of literacy, that is a notion that literacy is simply a mechanical process which overemphasizes the technical acquisition of reading and writing skills.... We call for a view of literacy as a form of cultural politics.

That’s about as good and clear a description of Whole-Language theory and practice as one is likely to find anywhere. And in order for Whole Language to dominate the education process, teachers have to



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be empowered. Frank Smith writes:

Of course, there is no way that students will be empowered until teachers themselves are empowered. And this will not happen until teachers are autonomous in their classrooms.... The basic question is, Who is to be in charge of classrooms — teachers or outsiders? ... I see but one solution for all these problems. Teachers must become more professional; they must regain control of classrooms, assert themselves politically, and demand that all outside interference in educational practice be halted.

Outsiders, of course, are parents who might object to their children being taught to read by a method that will turn them into functional illiterates. Implicit in the Whole Language philosophy is that phonics is outmoded and must be rejected. Kenneth Goodman, Whole-Language Guru-in-Chief, wrote in *What's Whole in Whole Language*:

Phonics methods of teaching reading and writing reduce both to matching letters with sounds. It is a flat-earth view of the world, since it rejects modern science about reading and writing and how they develop.

It is Whole Language that is comparable to a flat-earth view of the world, since that methodology preceded the development of the alphabet, an invention that made reading easy and accessible to everyone. It did for the ancient world what the computer has done for the modern world. But as we know, there has always been a political agenda behind the whole-word method of teaching reading. John Dewey wrote in *Democracy and Education* in 1916:

The notion that the “essentials” of elementary education are the three R’s mechanically treated, is based upon ignorance of the essentials needed for realization of democratic ideals.

Yet, it was the three R’s, “mechanically treated,” that produced our highly literate Founding Fathers who could write a Declaration of Independence and create the freest society in history where literacy became virtually universal. Sadly, that high literacy is a thing of the past and won’t be revived as long as the public schools are in the hands of the socialists.



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