



Written by [Sam Blumenfeld](#) on December 7, 2012

What Is Functional Illiteracy?

An illiterate is someone who was never taught to read. My mother, an immigrant from Poland, was such an illiterate. She was orphaned at an early age and was never taught to read. Even though she was intelligent, her illiteracy severely limited her intellectual and cultural life. But having been raised in a God-centered religious culture, she had acquired that common sense that permitted her to be a very capable mother and wife.



A functional illiterate, on the other hand, is someone who may have spent up to 12 years in public schools and learned to recognize some words as whole configurations, like Chinese characters, but is incapable of decoding the written language. They are frustrated, handicapped readers who find reading so onerous that they avoid it.

Wikipedia states: “A useful distinction can be made between pure illiteracy and functional illiteracy. Purely illiterate persons cannot read or write in any capacity, for all practical purposes. In contrast, functionally illiterate persons can read and possibly write simple sentences with a limited vocabulary, but cannot read or write well enough to deal with the everyday requirements of life in their own society.”

Curiously enough, four sons of John D. Rockefeller, Jr. — Nelson, David, Laurence, and Winthrop — became functionally illiterate because of the way they were taught to read in the progressive, experimental Lincoln School. But they were not called functional illiterates. They were called “dyslexics,” a fancy word for the same condition. One highly successful functional illiterate told me that he would rather be beaten than have to read, an indication of the psychic pain reading disability can cause.

Thus, one can say that functional illiteracy is worse than just plain illiteracy. All of us are illiterate in languages we can't read. For example, I am highly literate in English but totally illiterate in Russian or Armenian or Arabic. But a functional illiterate believes that he is not intelligent enough to be able to read his own language which he can speak quite well. The primary school he attended actually dumbed him down and impaired the function of his brain. This creates a damaging self-image that can last a lifetime.

Some functional illiterates are driven by their intelligence and ambition to overcome their reading handicap and are capable of creating successful businesses or pursuing successful careers. Some of the biggest stars in Hollywood have been dyslexic. These individuals are usually from middle class, professional families, where parents will pay thousands of dollars for private tutoring. There are even special schools, like the Carroll School in Lincoln, Massachusetts, that cater to such functional illiterates.

But if you are poor and become a functional illiterate, you will probably remain that way for the rest of your life — a diminished life at that. Since poor children attend public schools that teach children to read by the sight method, many of these children will drop out in high school. It makes no sense to



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continue going to school if you can't read. Why schools persist in using teaching methods that create functional illiteracy is not a mystery. It is part of a socialist plan to dumb-down the American people, particularly the poor.

Are you shocked by this revelation? Most Americans find it impossible to believe that our professional educators could be involved in a criminal conspiracy to deliberately dumb-down the children in their schools. But we have absolute proof that this is the case. Indeed, this conspiracy has been going on for over a hundred years.

The simple truth is that a plan to dumb-down the American people was hatched in 1898 by John Dewey, the socialist educator, who 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.

Dewey's assault on traditional primary education was outlined in an article, *The Primary School Fetish*, published in the *Forum* magazine (Vol. XXV, p. 314-28). He 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 fellow progressives, which left no doubt that this was a strategy 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.

Marcus A. Winters writes in his 2012 book, *Teachers Matter*:

Fully one-third of American public school fourth-graders scored below the Basic level in reading on the National Assessment of Educational Progress.... More than half of African American and Hispanic students read below the Basic level. Nor are there any large number of American students with reading achievement high enough that it couldn't stand to be improved: only 7 percent of public school students scored at or above the Advanced level on the NAEP exam.... That so many of



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America's students lack even basic literacy skills and so few of them have very high levels of reading proficiency requires that we focus on the attainment of these basic skills as a public policy matter.

And that is why there is this constant drum beat for "education reform" with a price tag in the billions of dollars, as if it takes so much more money to teach children to read. Actually, in the early days of the Republic, Noah Webster was able to make America the most literate nation on earth with his inexpensive little *Blue-Backed Speller*. My own *Alpha-Phonics* program, which is equally inexpensive, could easily teach millions of children to read if the public schools adopted it. But they won't. Their aim is to continue dumbing down Americans in accordance with Dewey's plan. He wrote:

It is one of the great mistakes of education to make reading and writing constitute the bulk of the school work the first two years. The true way is to teach them incidentally as the outgrowth of the social activities at this time. Thus language is not primarily the expression of thought, but the means of social communication.... If language is abstracted from social activity and made an end in itself, it will not give its whole value as a means of development.... It is not claimed that by the method suggested, the child will learn to read as much, nor perhaps as readily in a given period by the usual method. That he will make more rapid progress later when the true language interest develops ... can be claimed with confidence.

As a result of this "progressive" policy, the dumbing-down of Americans has been hugely successful. In 1988, Arthur Sulzberger, publisher of the *New York Times*, told his fellow newspaper publishers: "Today up to 60 million Americans — one third of the adult population — cannot read their local newspaper. As we edge closer to the 21st century, life is becoming more complex and will become more difficult for adults who cannot read."

In 2003, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) reported that only 13 percent of American adults are highly literate, 56 percent have intermediate literacy skills, and that 43 percent of American adults are virtually illiterate. Why do we continue to tolerate this Progressive miseducation?

In 2007, the National Endowment for the Arts released its own survey of literacy in the United States. According to its report, *Reading at Risk*, the number of 17-year-olds who never read for pleasure increased from 9 percent in 1984 to 19 percent in 2004. Almost half of Americans between the ages of 18 and 24 never read books for pleasure. Endowment chairman, Dana Gioia, commented: "This is a massive social problem. We are losing the majority of the new generation. They will not achieve anything close to their potential because of poor reading."

As for the social consequences of growing functional illiteracy in America, the National Center for Educational Statistics has provided the following data: Over 60 percent of adults in the U.S. prison system read at or below the fourth grade level. 85 percent of U.S. juvenile inmates are functionally illiterate. Adult inmates who received educational services while in prison had a 16 percent chance of returning to prison, as opposed to 70 percent for those who received no instruction. 43 percent of adults at the lowest level of literacy lived below the poverty line, as opposed to 4 percent of those with the highest levels of literacy.

In addition, two-thirds of students who cannot read proficiently by the fourth grade will end up in jail or on welfare. Three out of four individuals who receive food stamps read on the two lowest levels of literacy. 16-to-19-year-old girls at the poverty line and below with below-average reading skills are 6 times more likely to have out-of-wedlock children than their more literate counterparts.



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In other words, the way reading is taught in public schools has consequences affecting millions of young Americans. It creates social problems on such a huge scale, that the nation is hardly able to deal with them. Indeed, there was no such condition as functional illiteracy until American educators invented it.

According to SlowDecline's Weblog: "Functional illiteracy in the United States is growing at a rate of over 2 million new inductees per year into its ranks and the tide will only grow stronger if current educational policies are not changed to address the problem. The Presidential legislation of No Child Left Behind is not working and the country as a whole is now and will in the future suffer the consequences."

So what is the solution to this problem? Patriotic, conservative Americans must organize a movement to teach the illiterates to read, and prevent the schools from creating more illiterates. This can be done if the will is there. But it will take nothing less than a well-organized national crusade for literacy on the part of conservatives, if this country is to be saved as a free society.



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