

## WHY They Can't Read ... and What We Can Do About It!

By Carole Richards

While there is no single answer to eradicating illiteracy, there are solutions to the seemingly endless fight against illiteracy. In the U.S, literacy problems began to emerge in the 1930s and were effectively ignored as they intensified. These basic steps will make a difference:

- Effective training for teachers
- Consistent reading methodologies
- Systematic (structured) phonics

Until and unless these bold changes occur, literacy is not likely to improve.

Teachers have recognized the literacy problem, but fall short of suggesting a solution:

“This we can say with certainty: If a child in a modern society like ours does not learn to read, he doesn't make it in life. If he doesn't learn to read well enough to comprehend what he is reading; if he doesn't learn to read effortlessly enough to render reading pleasurable; ... the chances for a fulfilling life, by whatever measure – academic success, financial success, the ability to find interesting work, personal autonomy, self esteem – are practically nil.”  
*Learning to Read: Schooling's First Mission, American Federation of Teachers, Summer 1995.*

**How bad is it?** “Ninety million or nearly half of American adults have limited literacy skills,” according to the Ohio Literacy Resource Center. Every two years the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) tests 140,000 children in grades 4, 8 and 12 in public and private schools in most states. Overall, less than a third of these children were proficient in reading. And, only a very few (2 to 7 percent) tested at advanced levels. There have been no significant changes in these results in the past 13 years.

Our nation spends \$60 billion dollars every year trying to improve literacy. This national reading problem is

recognized and largely funded by the federal government. The No Child Left Behind Act is the result of the severity of our very low national illiteracy levels.

### Is Literacy a New Problem?

Until about 1930 -- when census figures show less than 5 percent of U.S. adults were illiterate -- schools taught phonics. In the mid-1930's, disciples of “progressive” educator John Dewey replaced phonics with “look-and-say” reading, an experiment in word guessing and memorizing. Silver Burdett, a schoolbook publisher, created the Dick and Jane book series to teach our nation's children to read. This “non-method” was the forerunner to whole language, another non-method based on rote memorization and guessing, and resulted in soaring reading failure.

In 1935, a survey of 375,000 men working in the Civilian Conservation Corps -- a government-sponsored work project -- found an illiteracy rate of 1.9 percent. These men were primarily of low socio-economic status. *Baughman, F.A., Jr., “Johnny can't read because phonics is all but ignored,” The Daily Californian, 16 February 1994, cited in Wiseman, Psychiatry: The Ultimate Betrayal 275.*

### Teacher Preparation Programs Abysmal

In a time of incredible and continual change in our culture, fewer than half of professors in teacher preparation college programs taught in K – 12 classrooms in the past 15 years. And less than 8% have ever taught in an urban school. These professors teach their students reading theories, but not effective reading methodologies.

According to Webster's Dictionary, a theory is defined as a speculative plan or idea as to how something MIGHT be done. A method is a definite procedure or way of teaching.

Our teacher college professors are giving students speculative ideas then, these new teachers are expected to go into the classroom and create their own way of teaching children to read. Over the past 22 years, I have interviewed thousands of teachers. I ask them, “How do you teach reading?” The answer is usually, “I have my

ways”, or, “a little of this and a little of that”, or, “I do the best I can”.

I probe further, asking, “What reading method did you learn to teach when in college?” The response is always, “I didn’t learn a method and I really didn’t learn how to teach reading.”

## Schools Offer No Consistent Methodology

The graduates of our teacher colleges become our classroom teachers. Schools provide “guidelines” to our teachers. State education departments provide long “laundry lists” of standards. Yet, the teachers in the classrooms take these guidelines, laundry lists, basal readers, and do their own thing.

If you imagine a school district with 10 schools, each school is teaching children to read differently, and each grade is teaching differently. And, each teacher in each grade teaches differently. Every teacher in every classroom is teaching differently!

Now add teacher and student transfers into the mix. This creates a “Tower of Babel” in each school, where each child gets different theories and no consistent reading method. In inner city school districts, the problem is compounded by families moving several times during the year. These unfortunate children, who need consistency, are taught differently with each move. It’s a wonder any child learns anything in these districts.

## Is Systematic (Structured) Phonics Successful?

In the late 1930’s, when Silver Burdett sold many schools on the Dick and Jane series, Dr. Samuel Orton, a neurologist, was researching the importance of brain processing and learning to read. Based on this research, Dr. Orton and two teachers, Anna Gillingham and Bessie Stillman, developed a reading METHODOLOGY, not a theory, to teach reading.

Dr. Orton’s proven research-based method uses all the senses: eyes, ears, touch and muscle movement in learning to read. Systematic phonics is an organized structure of sounds and syllables (word chunks), and word patterns. This system gives students a method to break-up and identify unfamiliar large words by vowel-consonant patterns. It does not depend on rote memorization of words or isolated letter sounds.

In a language generally considered complicated and difficult to learn, systematic (structured) phonics has relatively few components and simplifies English:

- 44 Sounds (*divided into 6 sound categories*)
- 5 Patterns of vowels and consonants (*used to break up the words into pieces*)
- 7 Syllable Types (*rules for why vowels are long, short, silent, etc. in each syllable*)

By breaking up larger words, a student learns to decode and spell unfamiliar words no matter their size. Without the system, students guess by the first letter of a word.

In the 1930’s, the U.S. thought the public school system would eradicate illiteracy. Yet our illiteracy rate has soared with the removal of effective phonics instruction. Teacher preparation programs continue to teach reading theory not reading methods. Public school systems, individual schools and individual teachers teach their “own-way method” -- pieced together ideas from the theories learned in college and the classroom.

In 1939, Dr. Orton’s “secret” tool that improves illiteracy became available. Yet our teacher preparation programs and our public and private schools continue to ignore Dr. Orton’s proven research. Our government spends billions of dollars each year on illiteracy as a growing economic problem for our nation. Yet the schools produce the same dismal results!

They Can’t Read! We must do something about it! Provide effective training for teachers, train teachers in consistent reading methods, teach systematic phonics.

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