

SIGHT WORDS ARE THE HUMPTY-DUMPTY OF EDUCATION, SAYS READING PROFESSOR

By Dr. Patrick Groff
San Diego State University

I'm here today because I wrote an article in *The Reading Teacher* (published by the International Reading Assn.), which is an unusual sort of reason. My article is called "The Topsy Turvy World of Sight Words," and it is in the March, 1974 issue.

Let me recount for you just how I got it in there.

First, of course, I wrote the article after doing diligent research. Then I sent it to *Reading Teacher*, and it was promptly sent back, with no indication why, beyond the obvious fact that they just didn't want it. Well, I checked back on everything they had published in the last few years, and they simply didn't have anything on this subject. And I wondered: Is it that bad? Maybe I haven't found the right topic, or the research to refer to, and all that sort of thing.

So I wrote a letter asking why the rejection. The letter of reply said "one of our people quoted in your article said that you have misquoted her." I got her book and sent off Xerox copies of the material proving I hadn't misquoted her.

A second objection was that although I had quoted 29 separate pieces of research in my article, this one fellow says, "I don't have any confidence or faith in any of them." Now this research has been published in the prestigious educational and psychological journals that we have in our very large library at San Diego State.

So I asked, "Please, will you have the reader of my paper give the other side? What evidence have I missed? In which articles of my research does he lack confidence?"

Lo and behold, I got a letter back from the editor saying, "Your article is accepted for publication." An amazing set of event! Nothing like that had ever happened to me before.

I got some letters as a result of that article, proving that a few teachers do read *Reading Teacher*. Teachers in the field, teachers of reading, said, "I enjoyed your article and I agree with it entirely." I didn't get any letters of commendation from any professors of reading. Honest, I didn't! All I got was dirty letters from them.

Of course, the people I quoted were outraged. One man wrote me, saying, "I am going to force you to make a public denial of and apology for your article to the members of the IRA, and have that published in the journal." I knew about this man's publications so I said, "I challenge you." I suggested that I find everything I believe wrong in his books, along with the evidence that I felt substantiated my objections. Then he could quote the research that substantiated what he said. I didn't hear from him again.

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One of the persons I quoted wrote a letter, published in *The Reading Teacher*, saying that I had misquoted him and making a lot of assertions which were completely wrong. I wrote another letter to the editor, denying all those things. But at the bottom of this letter (and it must have been a 'first' in the history of the publication) the editor of *Reading*

Teacher agreed with the man that I had misquoted him. So I have the dubious distinction, I believe, of being the only writer with an article in *The Reading Teacher* who has been publicly chastised by the editor at the same time the article was accepted. This is a very curious state of affairs. I am, of course, glad it brought me here.

I wish I had time to really go in depth into the reasons why this situation prevails why you cannot say the sort of things I said about sight words. In my article I simply said, in reference to the material I had found in my research, that children simply don't look at words that way. They use letters as cues to word recognition. LACTWR, as I call it. **Letters as Cues to Word Recognition**. Write that down, LACTWR, and if you don't like "phonics," use that word. Because that's what kids do — they use letters as cues to word recognition. And they don't do it just in 4th or 5th grade, they do it in kindergarten. They do it just as soon as you can get those little people in front of you and get them to look at words. Some very sophisticated studies have been done recently to show just what the children do.

In spite of that, of course, some people continue to insist we should teach a stock of sight words. There are people who write about sight words, and they have all kinds of contradictory and devious and impossibly-phrased kinds of definitions of what they are. It's just taken on faith that children should recognize about 200 or so sight words and then they can be taught letters as cues to word recognition.

Then I presented another little section on word configuration. You know how they tell you to take a sight word and make a configuration about it. They draw a little box around the word — you know, "cat" will have a little top part at the end and so forth. So I took 250 or so basic words and I drew those little boxes around them, and I saw how many of those boxes look alike. In fact, only about 20 per cent of those words had different boxes. So to say, "Just look at the general configuration and see what it is, well, that just won't work because too many words all have the same kind of little boxes around them. Now we know that the contour of a word is much more than that little box you draw around it, but generally they give you this as a little example of what you should do.

In keeping with this, I must mention Delores Durkin, who is a very important person in the field of reading; she has textbooks out and she is in the higher councils of the IRA. She believes in sight words, the look-say method, and believes that children do look at the words and do read them by sight in the beginning. And then she says, "Now remember, when they look at sight words they don't use any form of analysis. They don't look at the conformation of the word, its contour; they don't look at any particular little clue, like the 'two eyes in look;' they don't look at capital letters as clues — they don't look for anything in the words, they just simply read them." To me this kind of reasoning is so exasperating. And this sort of thing is what got me into the research for my article.

If you'll read Hapney's book, *The Teaching of Reading*, a very interesting book on the history of reading, you'll see the idea of sight reading does really go clear back to the end of the 18th century. And by the middle of the 19th century we had people like Horace Mann, the famed educator, who was proclaiming that this was the sort of reading instruction we should have — reading sight words first. Now the ghastly teaching of phonics that was going on in the 18th and 19th century probably was a good excuse for saying something had to be done. Most of the time there was virtually no attention paid to it. The real trend toward look-say came about the turn of the century, and it came for eight different reasons.

One of these reasons was the support of strong willed, strong minded, evangelistic men like Col. Francis Parker of the University of Chicago; John Dewey, a close personal friend of Colonel Parker, and G. Stanley Hall, a psychologist of that time. All of these people believed that you should read a certain number of sight words first Dewey of course, believed in the incidental teaching of reading. They all believed it would be quite all right if the child didn't learn to read until he was nine years old. G. Stanley Hall even had a defense of illiteracy. He said, "Illiterates escape certain temptations such as vacuous and vicious reading." True!

The second of the reasons, I think, was the *Progressive Education Association*. Progressive education was introduced with a remarkable ideal: to free the schools from bad traditional kinds of teaching. But what it turned out to be was a super child-centered system of readiness, which meant simply "Let's delay everything we do." John Dewey became the mentor of the organization. Exactly the same year that Flesch's book came out, the *Progressive Education Association* died. We haven't heard much of it since.

The third reason. I think, was the advent of reading method textbooks. Edmund Huey published a book in 1906 called *The Psychology and Pedagogy of Reading*, best learned by hearing or seeing them used in a context that suggests their meaning, not by focusing attention on their isolated form or on sound or meaning. He also said that analysis of spoken language, such as phonics, is dangerous before the age of 8 or 9. You can find much the same thing in Delores Durkin's book that I mentioned earlier. *Teaching Young Children to Read*, where she says that she likes the look-say method because it is useful, it enables the child to look at a word and say it, think it, without going into any type of analysis. (It's impossible to do that sort of thing, of course, and this is what my whole article is about).

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The fourth reason that I think has kept sight words on their feet, so to speak, is the misinterpretation of evidence from work done with tachistoscopes and eye movement cameras from around the turn of the century. A tachistoscope is a machine that will flash on a screen words and letters at fractions of a second, up to let's say hundredths of a second. It was found that words and letters could be flashed on the screen and mature readers could read and recognize the words more accurately than they could the letters.

May I refer you to a 1974 University of Iowa dissertation by Hoskey who found you could do the very same thing with 4th and 5th graders. You could use familiar words the 4th and 5th graders had learned and they could recognize individual letters. There's no doubt about that; I think we just have to accept the fact that's what we do as mature readers. Now to use this evidence to try to show that this is what you should do with youngsters — flash words on cards and have them try to read these whole words — this was the misinterpretation there.

The second misinterpretation came with the use of eye movement studies in which someone would photo. graph children's eye movements. He would shine a light in a

child's eyes which would then come down on a film and you could tell exactly what a child was reading then if you matched it up with the copy he was looking at that time.

DeBoer and Dahiman say in their reading textbook in 1970 that confirmation of the value of the whole word method came from early eye movement studies in works in Dearborn, Judd, Buswell and others. These investigations indicated that in a single fixation, the reader recognizes whole words (they were talking about the reader in this case as the beginning reader). They're just absolutely wrong. If you look at the evidence from Buswell, for instance, his first grade children made 19 fixations on the average per each 8 or 9 words on a 3 ½ inch line. Of course they weren't reading it.

I looked at some of the information that has been published elsewhere, and with the word home I found an average first grade child looked at "home" and made eight fixations on the word. DeBoer and Dahiman were telling first grade teachers that children don't do that, they make one fixation each on all these words as they go along, and they read the words as wholes. This kind of gross misinformation, if it was propounded by an unknown, a quack, a preposter, you might laugh it off. But John Doherty was a long-time editor of *Elementary English*, as some of you teachers know, and high in the councils of the *National Council of Teachers of English*.

The thing that fed this whole program was the advent of **Gestalt psychology** which theorizes that we start giving the characterization of any situation in life as a whole, and that experiences are always organized in totality, not in terms of separate parts. In other words, any phenomenon is organized by wholes rather than aggregates of separate parts. The Gestalt psychologists also believe that there's some sort of a thing called innate perception, a kind of unlearned perceptual ability that we have. We can just sort of see things independent of previous learning. Of course, people who believe in sight words would grab onto that and say, "That's just what we want." All this allows the young child to see whole words because he has some unlearned, innate ability to do this sort of thing, and he can fill in the little gaps on his own.

Then there was a thing they called "insight." It was a sort of thing where I try something for a while and then say, "Ah, ha, now I've got it. It just sort of occurs to me, it comes with a sudden flash, a certain dramatic leap forward in my understanding." Now, if you believe in Gestalt psychology you'd say yes, all those things are true. Gestalt psychology has come under a great deal of criticism, but all of these things were, of course, eagerly embraced by Dewey, the *Progressive Education Association*, and all the people who believed in sight words.

The sixth reason used in substantiating sight words was the reduction of vocabulary in the basal readers. From 1922 into the 1940s, the number of words in the basal reader's vocabulary decreased by 45 per cent. The readers simply reduced the number of words the kids look at and then had them look at the words again and again. Well, I think I know what happened when they were looking at those words over and over again. They weren't doing any of the things the look-say people were claiming — looking at words as wholes, for instance. Instead, the kids were figuring the words out for themselves — what letter do I use? . . . How do I look at this sort of thing? . . . What do I use as a cue recognition of this word? . . . The kids were working up their own phonics, if you want to put it that way. This was called incidental phonics, of course, and it was used.

The seventh reason for the influence toward sight reading was really the lack of research on how children actually recognized words. Before 1958 there's very little re-

search on this. I found four studies before 1958 that had something to do with how children recognized words. There were just loads and loads of studies, of course. For instance, in the period between 1924 and 1935 there were 654 published studies in reading — and there was one study of what cues children used to recognize words. Since 1955 there has been a lot of interest in this subject, with the best work done by a psychologist, not by professors of education.

My **last reason** for the stability of sight reading would be the basal reader monopoly. Let me refer to just a few points:

In 1963, Austin and Morrison in *The First R* said that 97 per cent of the teachers in the first three grades used basal reader “phonics.” That’s a monopoly, that is absolutely a monopoly. Hunter Diack in England found about the same thing in 1960. Barton and Wilder in *The Carnegie Study of Reading Research* in 1962 found that 92 per cent of the primary grade teachers said the basal reader was very important or absolutely necessary, in other words, they were depending on the basal readers almost entirely.

Mary Austin, in her book *The Torchlighters*, reported on 638 interviews with people like myself, teacher educators and professors of reading. She found that out of 100 ideas that these people said should receive more emphasis in a reading course, only 2 ideas had to do with word attack, the other 98 had to do with something else. Out of 189 comments by the 600-plus professors of reading, only three said there should be more emphasis on phonics in teaching in college courses. And professors of reading were quite satisfied with the basal reader monopoly.

Now, this is where we were in 1965. I think a lot has happened since 1965. But I think there are some ideas we have to be very careful about if we believe in the idea of teaching letter cues for word recognition.

For instance, there are two books you should read, both by Frank Smith - *Understanding Reading* and *Psycholinguistics in Reading*. You’ll start to find that Frank Smith simply dismisses phonics – simply dismisses. He says there are 166 rules to be learned in phonics so it’s too hard – you can’t teach children to do this sort of thing. Now, I count the same way he does, and I don’t find nearly as many rules.

The other thing that bothers me very much, that is over the horizon and coming this way, is something called “visual literacy.” I read in the journals that the age of handwriting is over ... that wordless books are excellent library materials. I about fell out of my chair when I read that.

So, we’re not out of the woods. I thought we’d be completely out of the woods after Chall, but we’re not. You people have a long row to hoe, let’s put it that way.



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Thirty-four years have passed since professor Groff sounded the alarm alerting us to the dangers of sight-words. Sam Blumenfeld called sight vocabulary “educational thalidomide” in his 1973 in his prophetically titled book, *The New Illiterates*.

I just did a search for “sight words” on Google. For over 30 minutes, I kept hitting “Next” and looking to see what came up. I saw hundreds of sites promoting sight-word materials: sight-word lists, sight-word grade lists, sight-words with pictures, drills on sight-words, sight-word workbooks, sight-word readers, site-word games, on and on with no end in sight. Sometimes they are called “instant words,” Dolch List words,” or “high-frequency words.” I did not find even one site warning parents and teachers of the dangers of sight-words. SOMETHING IS TERRIBLY WRONG!

Obviously the word hasn’t gotten out that sight-words can artificially induce whole-word dyslexia.

The situation is even worse in the schools. I taught in public classrooms for 21 years, and never did I hear anyone warn about the dangers of sight-words. In fact, Dolch Lists sight-words was ordinarily issued to all kindergarten and first grade teachers. Whole Language (Guided Reading, Balanced Literacy, Reading Recovery) dominated reading instruction during all my years in the classroom. Some schools, I will admit with admiration, managed to find the money to implement the expensive Saxon Phonics program. I personally taught Saxon Phonics, the old Open Court, Alpha-Phonics, the Herman Dyslexia program, Spaldings WRTR, Frank Rogers TATRAS, Palo Alto Sequential Steps to Reading, Phonics Pathway, Phonovisual, DISTAR, Noah Webster, etc.

I won’t mention names, but two of the most popular “phonics” programs available today teach lists of sight-words along with their phonics – compromising otherwise excellent phonics programs.

Readers of this essay will want to read essays on the same topic by Dr. Samuel Orton, Dr. Samuel Blumenfeld, Miss Geraldine Rodgers, and Mr. Raymond Laurita on my web site, www.donpotter.net.

I highly recommend Mary Johnson’s *Two-Sentence Test* and Edward Miller’s *Miller Word Identification Assessment Levels 1 & 2*. Both of these assessments will identify students with artificially induced whole-word dyslexia caused by sight-word instruction. They are available for free on my web site.

You will find more informative from Dr. Groff on the www.nrrf.org web site and my web site.

Elizabeth Brown provides in-depth insight into sight-words on her web site: www.thephonicspage.org.

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