

Why is America Being Inundated by Disinformation About Dyslexia

by Samuel L. Blumenfeld

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On Sunday evening, April 19, 1992, the CBS network aired a film about dyslexia, starring Kirk Douglas, entitled "The Secret." The secret, of course, was that Douglas, a retired Cranberry grower on Cape Cod, had spent his whole life hiding the fact that he couldn't read. He never really understood why he couldn't learn to read in school even though he knew he was not stupid. He simply was afflicted with this handicap, which only his wife and best friends knew about. Now that his wife was dead, only his friends knew.

Douglas is more or less retired to his fate as a lifelong illiterate until he learned that his little grandson in fourth grade is having a problem similar to his: learning to read. The parents were summoned to the school by the boy's teacher who informs them that their son has a "learning disability" called dyslexia. She suggests that the boy be tested by the school to confirm her diagnosis. The father, Douglas's son, vehemently objected. He tells the teacher in no uncertain terms that his son is perfectly normal physically and mentally and is an outstanding athlete.

But Douglas realizes that his grandson is afflicted with the same disability he has and decides that he must do something about it. He must convince his grandson that simply because he can't read doesn't mean that he's stupid. Only a test will prove that.

Grandpa's daughter-in-law informs him that the boy can be privately tested in Boston at a hospital that has a dyslexia clinic. (The hospital in the film is the Massachusetts General Hospital, which does, indeed, have a dyslexia clinic.) The cost of the test is \$1,200, which the young family can't afford. Grandpa Douglas decides to pay for the test. He arranges to take the boy to Boston without his son's knowledge. And so off they go to the hospital in Beantown and are anxiously awaiting the boy's appointment when father bursts into the waiting room, grabs the boy in a fit of anger and takes him back to Cape Cod.

Douglas, alone at the hospital, doesn't know what to do. But when the call for the appointment comes, Douglas decides that he might as well take the test himself to find out what's wrong with him.

The doctor, a sympathetic female, gives him a battery of tests, which determine that he is quite intelligent. But she does discover that he can't read. He can't sound out a simple nonsense word. She tells him that he has dyslexia, that he was born that way, and that nobody knows what causes it. She also tells him that it is hereditary, which explains to Grandpa why grandson has this condition. It's all in the genes. The doctor says that there is no cure for dyslexia but that there are ways of improving one's reading by learning to sound out words.

Armed with this new knowledge, Grandpa returns to Cape Cod where he argues with his son who resents the fact that Grandpa never helped him with his homework when he was a child. Of course, his father never told him the reason why he couldn't help him: he couldn't read. The son still doesn't know his father's secret.

But it all comes out when Grandpa who is nominated to run for town selectman, is embarrassed when forced to read written questions at a public meeting. The grandson, recognizing that the Grandpa can't read, runs out of the meeting devastated by having been lied to by his grandfather. Grandpa decides to make a public confession about his reading disability at the next town meeting. He does so in a very tense scene in which he turns down the nomination, but his backers, one of whom is in a wheelchair, decide that his handicap should not stand in the way of his running for selectman.

Now the secret is out, Douglas's son realizes why his father never helped him with his homework; the grandson also forgives his Grandpa. The boy's father agrees to have the boy tested and put in special Ed. And they all live happily ever after.

After the film, Barbara Bush appeared and made a few inane remarks about dyslexia and recommended some books to read on the subject.

There was not a word in the film about how the child was taught to read in school, not a word about the 6-year-old debate between advocate of intensive phonics and look-and say, not a hint of the possibility that dyslexia can be artificially induced by faulty teaching methods. Contrary to what the doctor said in the film, no one is born with dyslexia, it is *not* hereditary, and we *do* know the cause of the disability. It is the result of a teaching disability, not a learning disability.

The Experts Spread Disinformation

How it is possible that a multimillion-dollar film, beautifully photographed and acted by an excellent cast can be based on such blatant misinformation and disinformation? The answer is simple. When the produces want to know something about dyslexia, who do they turn to? The experts. And who are the experts? They are the people in the educational and research establishments with a pipeline to the Federal Treasury which is financing all the research on dyslexia. And the official line is that dyslexia is an inherited dysfunction of the central nervous system (See BEL March 1992.)

Far be it for Hollywood produces to seek a second opinion. After all, even Barbara Bush goes along with this nonsense. And so the First Lady, who could have been the most powerful instrument in getting the truth about dyslexia to the public, has simply become an accomplice in the dissemination of falsehood.

On the morning after the film, Monday, April 20, the *Boston Globe* published a long, front-page article on dyslexia conveying in print the same disinformation conveyed by the film. The reporter wrote:

Dyslexia remains a puzzle in many ways after more than 50 years research. But now, several, long-term studies are yielding some direction, so scientist for the first time can agree on what dyslexia is, and where to look for its fundamental cause

In simple terms, dyslexics have reading and writing problems because their brains are innately different.

Comment: This is the most absurd assertion about dyslexia we have read to date! There is no evidence whatsoever that the brain of a dyslexic is any different from the brain of any other normal person. The article goes on:

This biological stumbling block means dyslexic youngsters don't develop good skills matching letters to the sounds of speech.

Comment: The stumbling block is not "biological." It is associational. The readers has learned or been taught to associate whole words with ideas and images instead of being taught to associate letters and syllables with sounds. This is an initial learning problem caused by whole-word teaching methods and the memorization of a sight vocabulary. Our March 1992 BEL proves this beyond the shadow of a doubt. The reporter goes on:

"It makes it impossible for them to learn unambiguously the sound structure of their language." Said Dr. Albert Galaburda, a neurologist at Harvard Medical School and Boston's Beth Israel Hospital. "And this is a prerequisite for earning to read and write.

Scientists have labeled this ability, lacking in dyslexic individuals, "phonological awareness." Phonemes are the combinations of letters that in effect are coded units for different sounds. Dyslexics have trouble learning the letter-sound code and storing the various combinations in their memories.

Even if dyslexics discover ways to compensate for their disability, perhaps by acquiring a vocabulary of certain words they know how to identify and pronounce, the brain abnormality remains for life. A simple way to bring the problem out is to ask a dyslexic to pronounce a nonsense word – which require him or her to "sound it out."

Comment: The reporter assumes that dyslexics memorize whole words as a way of compensating for their innate disability. It's the other way around. It's the memorization of a sight vocabulary that creates the block against phonological awareness. How would anyone be able to decipher a nonsense word unless he or she had been taught intensive, systematic phonics? No one is born with phonological knowledge. No one is born knowing how to sound out words. It has to be taught. When Kirk Douglas was asked by the doctor to sound out the nonsense word, his failure to do so was not an indication that he had been born with a disability. It indicated that he had never been taught, systematic phonics. The reporter continues:

For example, when a college-educated dyslexic who was studied at Massachusetts General Hospital by language disability researcher John Lock was asked go sound out "clabont," the volunteer pronounced it "calaboat."

Comment: Gee whiz, what's so bad about that? Whole Language guru Prof. Ken Goodman says that if a child sees the word *horse* and says *pony* that's perfectly all right, and he doesn't call the kid dyslexic! Frank Smith, Goodman's co-guru in the Whole Language movement, writes in *Reading Without Nonsense*:

"We can read – in the sense of understand print – without producing or imaging sounds...I want to show that phonics, which means teaching a set of spelling-to-sound correspondence rules that permit "decoding" of written language into speech, just does no work. To expect an reader, especially beginners, to learn and rely upon phonics rules is to distract them with involved and unreliable procedures that are in fact largely unnecessary" (p. 49)

“How is it possible without sounding them out? The answer is that we recognize words in the same way we recognize all other familiar objects in our visual world – trees and animals, cards and houses, cutlery, crockery, furniture and faces – that is, ‘on sight.’ ...The fact that written words are made up of letters that seem in themselves to be related to sound is as irrelevant to their recognition as the fact that most automobiles have their model name stuck on them somewhere.” (p. 55)

In other words, the researchers at Massachusetts General Hospital had no business asking someone to read a nonsense word like “clabont.” It doesn’t mean anything, and therefore, according to whole language, philosophy, it isn’t worth reading.

What is sad is that, apparently, none of the experts on dyslexia, such as Dr. Galaburda, ever heard of Kenneth Goodman or Frank Smith. They are obviously unaware of the lunacy that now pervades primary reading instruction in American schools. Their obsession with the supposedly abnormal brains of dyslexics has blinded them to far simpler explanations for widespread reading disability, such as the harmful teaching methods being used in the schools. Lunatic teachers do create problems for their teachers. The article in the *Boston Globe* continues.

Why as many as 12 million people in the United States have this brain-based difficulty in some degree isn’t yet clear, but studies comparing rates of dyslexia in identical and fraternal twins, as well as long-term surveys of families, suggest that genes play an important role in many cases of dyslexia.

Comment: Isn’t it possible that twins taught by the same look-say or whole-language teacher would develop the same reading problem. Of course, the reason why so much emphasis is being put on the notion that dyslexics have some innate brain dysfunction is to get educators off the hook and provide lucrative research opportunities for unemployed psychologists and medical scientists. As long as they can blame reading problems on the students themselves and not on the education system and its teaching methods, the schools can keep on getting away with murder. The reporter writes:

While researchers now more or less agree on the basic flaw in language processing, and that the disability is inherited, and that it doesn’t necessarily affect more boys than girls (as was thought until recently), there’s still no magic bullet in sight...

“Our data show we can predict this problem at least as early as kindergarten, and that early intervention, in the first or second grade, helps protect [against severe reading problems] to some extent”, said Dr. Frank Wood, professor of neurology at Bowman Gray School of Medicine in North Carolina.

Dr. Wood, it should be noted, is the recipient of a \$3-million grant from Uncle Sam to conduct research into the genetic causes of dyslexia. The reporter writes:

One reason for recent progress in dyslexia research is that the federal government has boosted support for several long-term studies. The overall goal is, first, to bring some order into the chaotic field, so that all researches will be talking about the same thing when they say “dyslexia.”...

The next decade should see exciting developments in pinning down precisely the cause of dyslexia, say researchers who are using high-tech scanners and instruments to measure blood flow in different parts of the brain to search for flaws in the ways dyslexics process information.

Some of the newest findings are being reported by Paula Tallal at the Center for Molecular and Behavioral Neuroscience at Rutgers University. She said in an interview that her findings suggest that the trouble dyslexics have can be traced to fundamental problem that's even more basic than phonological weaknesses.

The problem that Tallal has identified is that dyslexics' brains can't process information that changes quickly...

Currently she and her colleagues are looking for abnormalities in brain structure in dyslexics that should account for the processing difficulties. "I think this approach has great potential," she said. "It's a new frontier, and I think there are tremendous possibilities for developing new techniques to get around the problem."

Comment: No doubt, Ms. Tallal and her colleagues are the recipients of some of that federal cash which is helping them explore their "new frontier." Have any of you ever heard of Dr. Samuel T. Orton, the neuropathologist who identified the whole-word method as the cause of dyslexia back in 1929? In his article entitled, "The 'Sight Reading' Method of Teaching Reading as a Source of Reading Disability," published in the *Journal of Educational Psychology* of February 1929, Dr. Orton wrote:

I wish to emphasize at the beginning that the strictures which I have to offer her do not apply to the sight method of teaching reading as a whole but only to its effects on a restricted group of children for whom, as I think we can show, this technique is not only not adapted but often proves an actual obstacle to reading progress, and moreover I believe that this group is one of considerable educational importance both because of its size and because here fault teaching methods may not only prevent the acquisition of academic education by children of average capacity but may also give rise to far reaching damage to their emotional life.

Of course, since 1929 we have learned much more about the damage that look-say, whole-word, or sight method can inflict on children learning to read. That the teaching method is the direct cause of reading disability, or dyslexia, was made quite clear by Rudolf Flesch in his famous book *Why Johnny Can't Read*, published in 1955. In that book Flesch wrote:

The teaching of reading – all over the United States, in all schools, and in all textbooks – is totally wrong, and flies in the face of all logic and common sense. Johnny couldn't read until half a year ago for the simpler reason that nobody ever showed him how. Johnny's only problem was that he was unfortunately exposed to an ordinary American school.

Flesch then explained how in the early 1930s, the professors of education changed the way reading is taught in American schools. They threw out the alphabet-phonetic method and put in a new whole-word, sight method that teaches children to read English as if it were Chinese, an ideographic writing system. Flesch argued that when you impose an ideographic writing system on an alphabetic writing system, you get reading disability. And the disability can become so severe that medical doctors assume something's wrong with the child's brain.

We get further corroboration of Flesch's insights from the late Dr. Hilde Mosse who treated hundreds of reading-disabled children during her career. She wrote in her book, *The Complete Handbook of Children's Reading Disorders*:

The harmfulness of the whole-word method was exposed for the first time only in 1955 by Rudolf Flesch in his book *Why Johnny Can't Read*. The pressure exerted on educators since the appearance of that book, devastating statistics of children with high school diplomas who cannot read, write, or spell have slowly lead to the sporadic reintroduction of phonetic methods. But teachers themselves do not learn phonetics anymore and therefore cannot teach it.

I have experienced how much fighting rages about the whole-word method. In May 1960, I attended the Congress of the International Reading Association. Teachers, reading specialists, school principals, and administrators were present in our discussion group. But no discussion got started. I spoke about the whole-word method as a cause for reading, writing, and spelling disorders. The reaction was astonishing. It was as though a floodgate had opened, and teachers and others spoke freely, openly, and passionately. They described how they (especially the older teachers) had been aware of the great harmfulness of the whole-word method for a long time, but that they had been completely helpless and powerless since they were being forced to use this method. Those teachers who in desperation had the courage to teach phonics had to do so secretly. Some even had to tell the children to do something else quickly whenever someone entered the classroom.

Concerning the anti-phonics bias of our education system, Professor Pat Groff of San Diego State University has written in his book, *Preventing Reading Failure*:

The short history of the traditional objection to phonics helps put into perspective the ideas of a more recent group of opponents to phonics. This latter group of negative critics of phonics has appeared in the wake of Chall's report of 1967 of the research into the relative merits of phonics. This present group is spearheaded by Frank Smith, whose books on reading provide the theory and the rationale for this new anti-phonics movement, and by Ken Goodman, who censures phonics in most of his writings about the techniques of reading instruction...

These erroneous comments about phonics are found in many educational journals, in books written for teachers on the methodology of reading instruction, and even in monographs on reading instruction sponsored by the two largest organizations in the world concerned with the development of literacy – the International Reading Association and the National Council of Teachers of English.

The extent and frequency of these denunciations of phonics and the prestigious sources that publish them doubtlessly have misled numerous reading educators into believing their validity.

Obviously, none of the researchers mentioned in the *Boston Globe* article are aware of the Great Debate that has been raging among teachers and professors since 1955. Why are they so ignorant? It is, perhaps, not in their economic interest to find out the real cause of dyslexia? Is it, perhaps, that they don't read much of anything outside their narrow field of vision. Or are they part of a whole vicious scheme to reduce America to a nation of driving illiterates? Certainly, they can find the relevant words of Orton, Flesch, Chall, Mosse, Groff, and even Blumenfeld in many university libraries. The books haven't been burned yet! Whatever reason for their blind ignorance, the public is being inundated by harmful misinformation that is afflicting millions of children negatively and costing the taxpayers billions of dollars. But what is truly alarming is the degree of public ignorance and the tremendous barriers that exist in the press and within the educational establishment to the dissemination of the truth. When a nation's leaders so readily succumb to self-deception, only tragedy can result.

Note from Internet Publisher: Donald L. Potter

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This article was taken from *The Blumenfeld Education Letter* for May 1992.

Mr. Blumenfeld makes several references to his groundbreaking March 1992 Blumenfeld Education Letter on artificially induced whole word dyslexia. I published this article in 2004 from a copy the late Charlie Richardson sent me. You can access the article at the following address.

http://donpotter.net/pdf/miller_blumenfeld_dyslexia_.pdf

I can testify that I have tested hundreds of students who have been taught to memorize sight words as wholes and as a result have artificially induced whole word dyslexia. I make this claim with great hesitation since it flies in the face of practically everything I have read on the cause of dyslexia. Nevertheless, I find it impossible to deny the evidence I have accumulated since first read Mr. Blumenfeld's article on the subject.

It is important to understand that the terms "sight vocabulary" and "sight words" are use in two entirely different ways. This has lead to immense confusion.

Popular use: There are various sight word lists: The Dolch (220 words) and the Fry (300 words) are the most common. The Dolch list has 220 so-called service words, including verbs, adjectives, adverbs, pronouns, conjunctions, and prepositions - but no nouns since nouns are more subject specific. Fry's list includes all parts of speech. Teachers traditionally have taught these words holistically with pure look-say, whole-word memorization techniques, often before the children even know the letters of the alphabet. Parents were required to time the students to build fast word recognition, often being told not to allow kids time to sound out the words.

Scholarly use: The other use of the term sight-word is restricted to scholarly research in reading. In more scholarly usage, the term is used to refer to ANY words that has been read so many times that it is recognized automatically, without conscious effort. It is recognized so fast that it appears to be identified instantly. We say, "appears" because research has established that due to parallel distributed processing word identification is so fast that it **appears** to be instantaneous, where as in reality it is just exceedingly fast.

The common practice of having students memorize words from a sight word list is that it backfires. Research has demonstrated that it is advanced phonemics awareness that leads to rapid word identification. Memorizing words holistically without reference to the letters and their sounds actually retards the development of vocabulary of words that are instantly recognized.

I find it interesting that the training I got as a dyslexia teacher is essentially the training I got as an intensive phonics teacher. It was graded, sequential, multi-sensory, and phonics based. Interestingly it included phonemic awareness training which back then was called "sound discrimination drills."

I recommend reading Mr. Blumenfeld's 1973 *The New Illiterates and how to keep your child from becoming one* to understand how Mr. Blumenfeld developed his theory of artificially induced dyslexia. It was the result of doing a thorough analysis of the teaching techniques in the Scott Foresman *Dick and Jane* reading series. He concluded that the method itself would create a reading disability that was so similar to dyslexia as to be virtually indistinguishable. For solutions, visit www.blendphonics.org.

Any reader of this article can perform their own experiments to determine if Mr. Blumenfeld's position holds water.

Experiment One

This is based on the *Miller Word Identification Assessment – Level 1*. Just have the kids read each list separately. Mark the words they miss and note if they miss more word on the sight word list or the phonics word list. Also compare the speeds they take to reach each list. If they read the sight word list far more accurately than the phonics list, they have artificially induced dyslexia. If they read both lists poorly, they may have a genetically based form of dyslexia.

50 Sight Words:

the to and said for up down can see come blue red make yellow
two he was that with all a I you it in look is go we little not one
my me big where jump away here help play run find three funny
she on they but at

50 Phonics Words:

bib nip map tag pad lock wig pass pack Tom luck neck duck
fuzz mud hack pest land tank rush bulk dust desk wax lamp belt
job hot pick sick mash ask met sip mix rack jet kid cut deck kick
men hunt rash rest tent fond gulps ponds hump

Experiment 2

These are simple, short vowel nonsense word that any good phonics student should be able to read without hesitation. People with dyslexia will find these exceedingly difficult.

Biss lut vod liss dub vot eff dod tass vuff fiss yat kat vass vog
jish vack neff zick hig troff fress vusk dimp drid glon masdp
hipt bosp criff smub zoft smub bruss zint sunt yact strod jank
phrist vept kam fiff desh tem keshj taff fud kiff yem