THE COMING REVOLUTION IN LITERACY EDUCATION

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We are on the brink of an educational revolution that will change the history of the world.

In recent decades, the solution to literacy education was considered to lie in the realm of “phonemic awareness”, and “segmenting” and “blending” of graphemes and phonemes was considered to be the problem that prevented children with “learning disabilities” from learning to read. Reading “disability” was the main reason for “learning disability”, and the reason for education failure in the West.

The fact that “dyslexic” children were unable to “hear” the separate “letter sounds” in spoken words was made in about 1990. Since the 1920s, when the American psychiatrist Samuel Orton made the discovery that the inability to learn to read was far more common than previously thought, he thought that afflicted children “saw things backward” and recommended habitual writing with the “dominant hand” to overcome this; it had been proved that there was actually no problem with the visual perception of afflicted kids, researchers in this area seemed to posit, “Well, if there is nothing wrong with the way they see, there must be something wrong with the way they HEAR”.

And so, even though no cognitive difference between these and “normal” children has ever been found, the idea of “Central Auditory Perception Disorder” has become established in the educational and medical literature of the western world.

However, there is now expanding evidence that the above ideas are completely wrong, and even that all apparently normal children can learn to read during the early years of school, meaning that “dyslexia”, as a biological entity, actually does not exist.

After all, the idea that much of humanity, while able to speak, juggle, walk and learn otherwise normally, lacks the ability to learn academic matters normally is basically a racist way to think.

Although educators are anxious to say such children are “different”, rather than implying they are deficient, it basically amounts to the same thing. What democrat would favor giving voting rights to citizens unable to learn to read?

In opposition to this idea, several new ideas have now come into view. First, Maria Montessori wrote in 1912 (Montessori, 2013) that if preschool children practice forming alphabet letters by hand until they can do so “expertly”, then they learn to read spontaneously, without any other reading instruction at all.

Then, in 2004, an author of this article, Robert Rose, began to distribute his findings in an unpublished on-line teacher research project, that “expert” in Montessori’s mind was the equivalent of a child able to write the alphabet at a minimum rate of 40 letters per minute. His participating early-grade teachers found that virtually all students were easily capable of achieving this skill during the first year of school, given proper teaching and adequate practice.

Thirdly, Marilyn Jager Adams, the world’s leading authority on early literacy training, just published her most important book, ABC Foundations For Young Children, in which she presents recently published proof that most American children finishing the second year of school, still can’t write and name all of the alphabet letters. As she has pointed out, it’s silly to think that kids can learn to read if they can’t tell one letter from another.

Amazon reviews for this book corroborate the idea. And next, after Rose repeated his findings with many other children, Rand Nelson has now done another on-line teacher/student study showing that children able to write the alphabet fluently can also name randomly presented alphabet letters at the same rate or better, and children able to name 40 or more random letters per minute almost never have subsequent problems learning to read. His results may be reviewed at his on-line blog site (Rose, 2014).

Finally, in an article published in a most respected education journal, Vernon and Ferreiro shows that children in Queretaro, Mexico, can easily pass
phonemic awareness tests after being taught simply how to write letters and syllables in Spanish (Sofia, 1999).

In traditional Hispanophone countries, children were taught only to write the letters of the alphabet during the first year of school. During the second year, they were taught to write consonant-vowel syllables (ba, be, bi, bo, bu, etc.). At the end of that year, the children were all literate and able to pass phonemic awareness tests easily, even though they had never received explicit instruction in this subject. The article ended by noting the dearth of studies in the area of handwriting skill, and called for their performance.

Shortly after the year 2000, the retired archivist, John Blackley, for the Calvert School, a private elementary school in Baltimore, Maryland, surface mailed me a hard copy of the centennial history of the school he had written in 1996. In this document the headmaster, G. Vernon Hillyer, was quoted as having written some interesting things. In about 1923, after being headmaster for about 25 years, Hillyer observed that they “had never failed to teach a normal child to read and write”. He also wrote, “If you teach a child to write, you needn’t bother teaching him to read”, noting that anything a child could easily write would also be easily read back aloud.

He also wrote, “Children should definitely learn something about phonics, but not until AFTER they learn to read”. (Capitalization is my own).

The Calvert school had no kindergarten, but at the beginning of the first-grade, children were taught to write “I see a tree”, and thereafter, “the tree is green”. Within a few months these children were fully literate, and went on to read (and write reports on) a rich and full educational curriculum.

In her original and most famous book, Beginning to Read (published in 1990), Adams pointed out that in order to understand what we read, we must go through what she termed the “articulatory loop”, of silently saying the words to ourselves. This is because written language is simply a way of recording spoken language; it doesn’t equal thought, but only allows us to communicate our thoughts to other speaking people. This is probably not true for very simple written entities. We probably know that a traffic “stop” sign means stop, even without uttering the word silently. And when we pass a shop labeled “BAKERY”, we probably know what kind of shop it is directly. But for any more complex written messages (like “a slow writing hand impedes the mind”), it is definitely necessary to “say” the utterance silently in order to comprehend it.

There is also growing evidence that “auditory processing disorder” does not really exist. If it did, children would be unable to distinguish the spoken words, “kit” and “cut”. Perhaps the most compelling evidence for its real existence comes from the fact that brain scans (fMRI scans) done on “dyslexic” children attempting to read have a different and distinctive pattern compared to those of “normal” children. However, it’s now been shown that the dyslexic pattern reverts to completely normal once the children have been successfully remediated. It’s therefore probable that the “dyslexic” pattern is simply the normal illiterate pattern, which lacks the electronic evidence of subvocal speech involved in successful reading. As G. Read Lyon, former director of the American National Institute of Childhood and Human Development has publicly said, “Once the reading normalizes, the brain normalizes too”.

Our personal opinion is that the most telling evidence against “CAPD” is the fact that “dyslexic” kids are able to successfully learn to touch type, as any experienced keyboarding teacher can testify, even though they are unable to read back that what they have successfully “written”.

Writing involves the graphic representation of the successive phonemes of words as they are written, either by hand or on a computer keyboard. Typing therefore is a “phonetic finger dance” with a separate sequence for each learned written word. It is impossible to write without silently saying the words we write either with a pencil or with a computer, and it’s also impossible without “phonemic awareness”.

Many folks these days are really hung up on what they call the “MWIA” (Miller Word Identification Assessment), in which kids are assessed in their ability to read both common and easy words with atypical phonic representation, or more difficult and unusual words which are “phonetically regular”. They believe that the “first way” kids learn to read,
either by “sounding out” or by the global recognition of whole written words can be determined this way, and that attempting to teach in the latter way is the basic cause of reading failure. However, that test actually only distinguishes good readers from poor ones.

Professor Marilyn Jager Adams is at truly magnificent font on the subject of the history of writing. She gave a lecture at Brown University in 2011, which is available on-line as a YouTube presentation. (Marilyn, 2013)

Entitled Learning to Read: What’s hard developmentally was also hard historically, this two hour long lecture gives us great insight into the history of writing. Personally she has commented that it’s amazing that it took so long to understand the teaching of literacy, 3,000 years after the invention of the alphabet.

Prior to the renaissance, reading was intended mostly to be LISTENED to by those hearing the very few literates read aloud. Until about 500 years ago punctuation was not really used, and English spelling conventions are even younger. It was only after the renaissance that silent rapid reading became common.

And prior to the arrival of the printing press, the concept of “phonics” didn’t really exist. The word first appeared in the English language about 1680.

In her lecture, Adams points out that individual young students must go through the same learning steps that history traversed in developing modern writing. Writing was developed long before good reading was, so in which form of written language should we instruct our young students?

In 1999 Professor Diane Mc Guinness published Why Our Children Can’t Read which also gave a good history of writing. In the book she tells of studying the Old English language (“Anglish”) at a British university. Although the Latin alphabet was used, the forms of the old letters was difficult for her to master, until she practiced WRITING them for a while.

In the same book, Mc Guinness pointed out that all viable writing systems, both historically and at present, represent spoken syllables graphically, probably explaining why those in non-alphabetic cultures have confusion with individual “phonemes”, or “letter sounds”.

The basic concept of “phonics” is that reading with comprehension is impossible without “sounding out” words letter-by-letter as we read. Mc Guinness believed we do this so fluently that we don’t realize we’re doing it.

While it’s paradoxically true that written words can’t become familiar and identifiable unless learners understand the alphabetic principle, a completely different concept immediately comes to mind. Instead of “sound OUT” written words, perhaps we sound them IN as we learn to write them.

In written syllabic systems (Chinese, Korean, Japanese, Tamil, Cherokee) it’s obviously impossible for literate adults to have “phonemic awareness”, which is the understanding that spoken phonemes are represented by the sequence of written symbolic graphemes that make up the written words. Without written symbols to represent phonemes, how could they learn what they are?

According to some estimates, there are only about 5,000 different written syllables in the English language, and languages like Swahili, Polynesian and Japanese only have about 100, both easily within the learning capabilities of normal humans.

When a Chinese youngster is practicing and learning to write the character for “tan”, he or she silently says “tan” sub-vocally, thus making a mental association between written syllable and spoken syllables. The ancient Greeks also learned writing through a series of consonant-vowel combinations. After such learned associations took root, written words “looked like” they should be spoken, and spelling was also entrenched.

Proponents of phonics insist there is a simple “code” that children must master. But such a “code” actually doesn’t exist.

Which rule of “code” tells us that the “ch” in the written word “yacht” actually represents the sound of silence? And must children be explicitly taught that the written word “the” is pronounced “thee” before a vowel (thee apple) and “thuh” before a consonant (thuh pear). Good readers read this word the same way they would say it in conversation. Those with excessive reliance on phonics tend to use “thee” all the time.
The Urdu language is alphabetic, but uses the Persian form of the Arabic alphabet in writing. As in English, there are more vowel sounds than there are written vowels (alif being one of them). Urdu readers, like those using Arabic, Hebrew or Persian, must know which vowel sound to use when pronouncing each written word they see. Even more complicating, certain letters are only used in writing words of Arabic or Persian derivation. Yet Pakistanis, Chinese, Japanese all read when they look at a newspaper. Aren’t we all doing the same thing?

We’ll end this essay with the message we started with: Instead of teaching “reading”, what we really should be doing is just teaching writing. And one can’t write words and sentences fluently, if one can’t write the alphabet fluently. This may already be being done in Asia, but in the West the failure to teach the writing of the alphabet fluently in the early grades has become a cultural and political disaster.

REFERENCES: