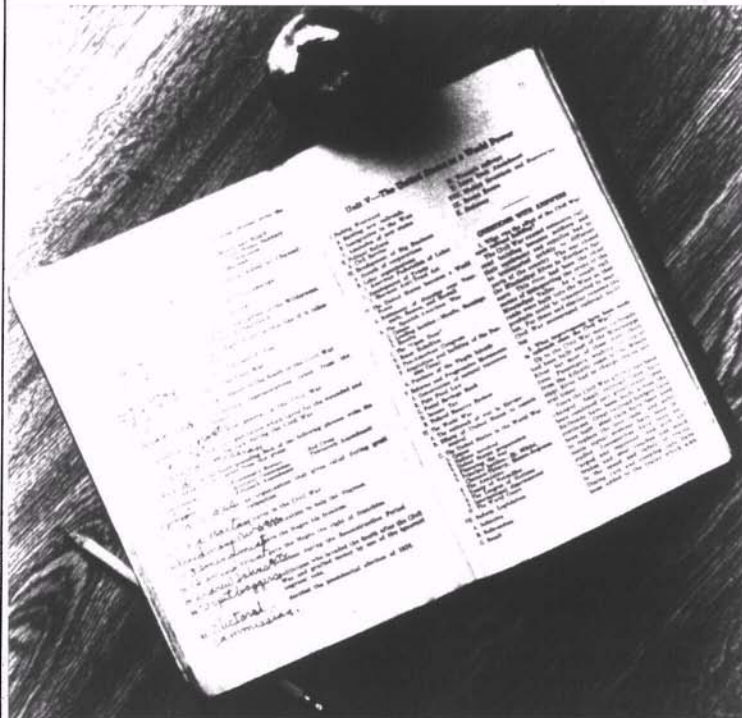


Restoring Cultural Literacy in the Early Grades

Educators need to reexamine slogans that undermine the teaching of traditional knowledge to young children.



Photograph by Dennis Johnson

The acquisition of facts, illustrated here in a review book circa 1940, should not be frowned upon as unworthy but valued as prerequisite to the "higher-order" skills of literacy.

In recent decades we have assumed that the early curriculum should be "child-centered" and "skill-centered." Yet there is a growing consensus among reading researchers that adequate literacy depends upon the specific information called "cultural literacy," and we should therefore begin to impart traditional literate culture to children at the earliest possible age.¹

The need to begin such instruction early is based on technical as well as social considerations. From a purely technical standpoint, our children need traditional background information early to make sense of significant reading materials, and thus gain further information that enables them to make further progress in reading and learning. From a social standpoint, the need to start as early as possible is even more urgent. Young children from the middle class sometimes receive necessary literate information outside the school, but disadvantaged children rarely have access to literate background information outside the school.² Therefore, to change the cycle of illiteracy that debars disadvantaged children from high literacy, we need to impart enough literate information from preschool through third grade to ensure continued progress in literacy on the part of all our children.

Examining the Educational Slogans

Now that these basic truths are becoming widely known, it is time to question and qualify some educational slogans inconsistent with those truths that have actively hindered the teaching of literate information to young children. I do not suggest that the three slogans I shall examine constitute all the intellectual barriers to curriculum reform in the early grades (sheer inertia must never be underestimated). But the harmful slogans are powerful and widely spread. Calling them into doubt might help foster the urgently needed reform of giving young children early instruction in our traditional literate culture.

1. *The home is more decisive for literacy than the school.* No one with common sense would doubt that a child whose parents actively encourage conscientious performance in school will do better, all things equal, than a child whose parents discourage academic performance. We know that many children are all too heavily influenced by the anti-academic values (usually defensive reactions) of their parents and peers. Every conscientious teacher, principal, and supervisor tries to counteract the anti-school ethic that is especially powerful and self-defeating among just those disadvantaged children who are most in need of a pro-school ethic. Although few of us in education have the time or opportunity to abolish the anti-school

ethic in all its defensive manifestations, one good sign of the times is that we are getting help. Parents and the public at large have identified the problem, and are trying to help the schools combat it.

But quite apart from lamenting the negative influences of anti-academic attitudes, some educators have held a rather defeatist view about the possibility of breaking the illiteracy cycle. They accept as axiomatic the slogan that the educational and economic level of the home is more decisive for high literacy than the school can ever be, no matter how supportive the attitudes of the home. This defeatist attitude dates, of course, from the first Coleman report of 1966. Since that time, the slogan that the socioeconomic status of the home is inherently decisive for academic achievement has been part of the received wisdom of many specialists in education.⁵

The slogan is, of course, true as a description of educational outcomes under our current educational arrangements. Children from middle-class homes perform better on the whole than children from poor homes, no matter what schools they attend or what moral support they

receive in the home. Viewed in broad, statistical terms, a child's socioeconomic status is at present the decisive factor in academic performance. But two inferences from the first Coleman report are open to serious criticism: first, the inference that the state of affairs described by the report is inherent and inevitable, and, second (a corollary of the first), that any attempt to reverse the sociological finding by specific school policies would be futile. These doleful inferences are used to support the claim that we can at best try to change the attitudes and actions of parents, but that nothing of consequence regarding the cycle of illiteracy will be accomplished by changing the policies of our already-beleaguered schools.

We must, of course, acknowledge that all attempts to reinforce children's education within the home are welcome. Parental help is useful not only for motivating students, but also for increasing their time-on-task and attitude to learning. My aim in criticizing the slogan of the decisiveness of the home is not to discourage vigorous appeals to parents to help, supervise,

and encourage their children's learning. My purpose, rather, is to insist that, despite the importance of the home, our schools can do a much better job of teaching literacy to all students, even without effective reinforcement from the home.

There is positive evidence, not considered by the first Coleman report, that under a different curriculum our schools can make children acceptably literate even when they come from illiterate homes. The positive evidence is just as compelling as the negative evidence cited in the report. In fact, the positive evidence is more compelling, because it takes into account a larger number of instances and a greater amount of experimental data. I mean by this the historical record.

In the later nineteenth and early twentieth century, American schools succeeded in creating a literate middle class by teaching children of illiterate parents. One factor in their success, lacking in our schools today, was the use of a traditional literate curriculum. Ruth Elson has demonstrated the uniformity of American textbooks in the 19th century, and to her study may now be added Kathryn Neeley's examination of school readers between

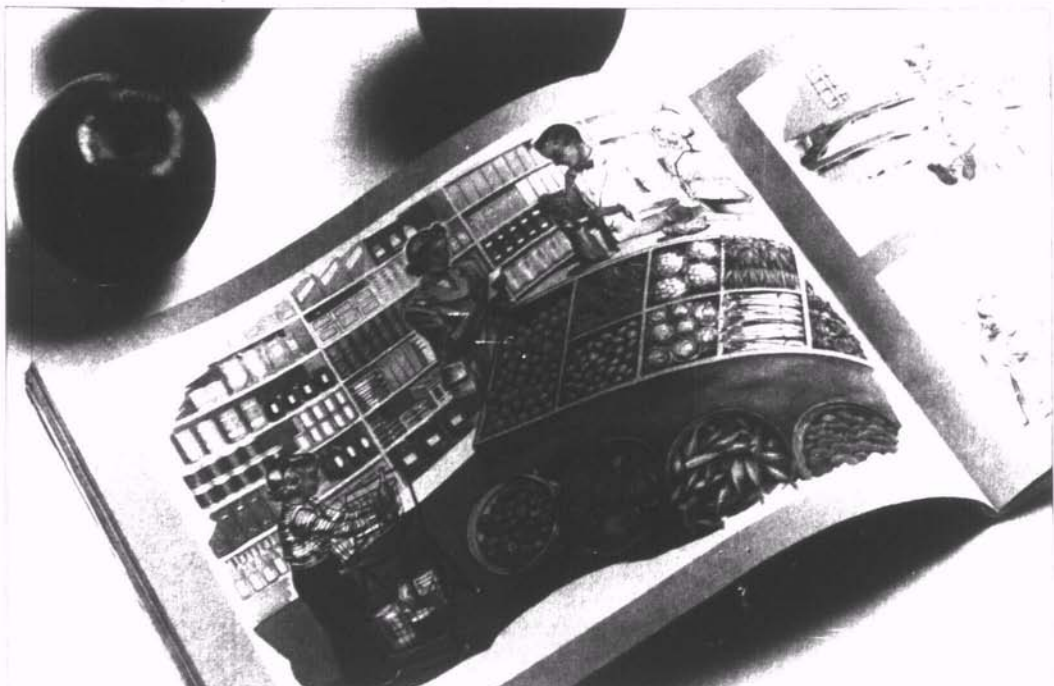
the 1840s and the 1940s.⁴ Both studies find a consistent tendency in earlier schoolbooks to teach common, traditional materials. The commonality of our elementary curriculum in the early twentieth century gave students from literate and illiterate families alike a common foundation in the literate culture, which, as I show in *Cultural Literacy*, is a prerequisite to mature literacy.

Looking outside the United States and taking a still broader historical view of home influence produces evidence that is even more decisive. In the eighteenth century, the establishment of wide-scale national literacy in Britain, France, and Germany (and every other literate country) was first accomplished through the school, not through the home.⁵ In Perpignan, for example, literacy in the French language was achieved by schools that taught children who heard and spoke no French in their homes. Indeed, their Catalan-speaking parents were not literate in any language, and were in fact *opposed* to their children's learning French in school.

The only way national literacy could have been achieved in such large multilingual nations as France and Great

Britain was through the deliberate agency of a national school system that conveyed a common core of literate culture. Parents in Wales, for example, did not always approve of or cooperate with schools that taught English to their children. Nonetheless, Welsh schools graduated pupils who were literate in English language and culture. The cooperation of parents was certainly not available in the schools of Brittany, where Breton-speaking parents opposed the teaching of French. But that did not prevent the schools of Brittany from producing pupils who were literate in French language and culture. In short, the schools can impart high literacy even under severe handicaps, if they do so by teaching not only the mechanical skills of decoding but also the literate national culture. Ernest Gellner has pointed out that all literate national cultures in the modern world have been school-transmitted cultures rather than home-transmitted cultures, and has explained in detail why the pattern has necessarily been followed in every modern nation.⁶

Why, then, did we accept the slogan that the socioeconomic status of the home is more decisive than the policies of the school in achieving mature literacy? What lies behind the well-documented findings of the first Coleman report?



This readiness book, circa 1950, illustrates instruction connected to the experiences of young children; but the life experiences of children today are too varied to constitute a content base for the curriculum. Rather, Hirsch says, we should teach all children the elements of traditional literate culture.

The best explanation I can devise is this: Up to about 1945 in many schools (give or take a decade to allow for the slowness of curricular change), literacy *had* been effectively taught to disadvantaged students under a largely traditional curriculum. It was not until the 1940s that older generations of teachers and administrators had retired in large numbers and were replaced by disciples of Dewey and Kilpatrick who imposed the latest child- and skill-centered textbooks. Up to the 1940s or so, many of our schools were still able to graduate highly literate students who had come from illiterate homes. They effected this transformation through a traditional curriculum both for native black children as well as for children from immigrant European families.

But by the 1940s, with the newer theories ever more dominant in teachers, administrators, and textbooks, our

public schools were turning slowly and overwhelmingly to less traditional, more up-to-date, child-centered materials that gradually ceased to transmit our traditional literate culture. This curricular change constituted a particularly catastrophic turn for the early grades. The effects of the change were not immediately noticed, because the earlier curriculum had already created a large number of literate homes that continued to supply their children with the traditional literate information that had disappeared from the schools.

Thus the new curriculum was not at first disabling for those children who were lucky enough to come from highly literate homes, where they received traditional (originally school-transmitted) literate culture. But the new curriculum did cease to supply literate background information to children from illiterate homes, and

consequently those unfortunates did not receive the needed information from any source. This hypothesis probably explains why the Coleman report of 1966 turned out to be inconsistent with the larger historical record. Unhappily, this hypothesis about the effects of the new curriculum may also explain why our schools in the past four decades have done little to improve the educational and economic status of children from illiterate homes.

The practical implication of these historical observations, when coupled with the data from reading research, is to suggest that we should once again teach all of our children the elements of our traditional literate culture, starting at an early age. That means, for instance, teaching Mother Goose at school, instead of assuming that Mother Goose rhymes might bore children who have already heard them. The

argument about boredom has an easy answer; if parents don't want their children to be bored, and if they know that our schools are going to teach Mother Goose, they can read their kids *Pat the Bunny* or *The Cat in the Hat* or whatever else they choose, with full confidence that "Jack and Jill" are on the way.

In sum, we cannot validly generalize the findings of the Coleman report of 1966. We cannot justifiably continue to repeat the easy slogan that the home is the fundamental determinant of literacy. Our children are not trapped in a cycle of sociological determinism. As late as the 1930s and 1940s our schools were our chief, and at times our only conveyors of our literate traditions. History and common sense suggest that our schools can successfully resume that primary responsibility with better results than ever before. The home should, of course, foster a pro-school ethic, and should, where possible, enhance, enlarge, and encourage the teaching of our literate traditions. But it is our schools which must make sure that our literate traditions are successfully conveyed to every child from every sort of home.

2. *Schools should stress general skills and broad understanding, not mere facts.* Along with the new child- and skill-centered curriculum went an antipathy to "mere facts." The phrases "rote-learning" and "piling up of facts" are still used today as scapegoat terms against a traditional education that has not in fact existed in our public schools for several decades. In the 1920s such terms of abuse radiated from lectures at Teachers College, Columbia, and slowly spread to schools of education throughout the nation.⁷ You will immediately recognize that these scapegoat terms still function as banner slogans, even though the education they attack has long since vanished from the scene. On the other hand, the typical terms of approval in educational writing since the '20s continue to be such phrases as "relevant materials" that are "meaningful to the child," and that inculcate "higher-order skills."

Since we now know that, in order to become literate, young children must

gain a store of traditional information at an early age, it is time to reconsider the pejorative use of phrases like "memorization," (better to say "learning by heart") and "piling up facts" as though they were insult terms. Many "higher-order skills" of literacy are gained *only* by piling up information. No study of language acquisition, for instance, has challenged the common-sense observation that children learn the names of objects by repeatedly being told those names until they remember them.⁸ Thus, at the very roots of language acquisition we find memorization and the piling up of facts. Later on, in earliest training, children must learn the alphabet by heart. I cannot conceive how a child could acquire the alphabet other than by memorization and the piling up of facts. The same applies to the multiplication table, the days of the week, and the months of the year. There's no other way of acquiring those skills.

Of course everybody knows these things. I do not wish to make the shibboleths of modern educational theory seem totally without merit. My point is subtler and gentler. Only recently have we come to understand that "Jack and Jill" and "George Washington" belong to an alphabet that must be learned by heart, and which is no less essential to higher-order literacy skills than the alphabet itself. Certain linguistically based concepts (researchers call them "schemata") belong to the very ABCs of literacy.⁹ The methods by which children learn these higher-order ABCs can be exciting and fun, or they can be deadening and painful. Good teachers always try to choose the pleasant over the painful, if only because the pleasant is more effective. But learning the higher-order ABCs, like learning the alphabet itself, does require learning by heart and piling up information.

The negative connotations of terms like "mere facts" and "memorization" arise from the theory that acquiring facts is inferior to "meaningful" learning experiences that cause children to take interest in and understand the significance of what they are being taught. It is assumed that the piling up of information cannot be meaningful,

or interesting, or motivational to children. Given such alternatives, who would choose to be meaningless and dull? To reinforce this anti-fact, anti-memorization view, psychology since the time of Herbart has instructed us that the only materials that are meaningful to children are those that resonate with their own imaginations and experiences. Hence, the humane principle of meaningful, nonrote instruction has been reinforced by the scientific principle that curricular materials should connect directly with the experiences of young children.

But expert teaching and well-conceived texts, not modernity of content, are the bridges of relevance that connect reading materials with a child's experience. The life experiences of children who enter American classrooms are much too varied to form a definite content basis for child-centered materials. Moreover, most of the literate culture that children will need for later life consists of traditional, intergenerational materials. Consequently, their literacy is more effectively enhanced when they are successfully taught durable, traditional subjects like *Ulysses* and the Cyclops than when they are taught ephemera like Dick and Jane at the Supermarket.

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It's quite doubtful that "mere facts" are really meaningless to young children, any more than they are to adults. We should unblinkingly face the truth that many of the facts we adults know are not perfectly interconnected in our minds. Meaningfulness does not require complete clarity and coherence, or even powerful emotion. E. B. White once said that he learned how to write just as he learned how to drive, without understanding what went on under the hood. How many adults can explain coherently what happens when they switch on a TV set? Most of us just know the less-than-coherent facts about TV: the picture comes on when we punch the power switch, it changes when we change the channel switch, and it goes off when we punch the power switch again. In the technological era, many of us still live in the "magic years"; things happen for us as they happen for children in ways that we do not fully understand and cannot accurately explain.

Take another example. The names that we give to objects and concepts rarely have any coherent logic to them. It is the nature of language to be arbitrary. *Dog* has no more inherent

rightness or logical aptness than *chien* or *Hund*. We have just gotten used to the words. This is as true for adults as for children. In short, the world of adults, like that of children, is at least partly incoherent and arbitrary. The child's world is less coherent and certainly less accurate than our own, but the differences are of degree, not kind. Perhaps many differences between children and adults have been, as Mark Twain said of reports of his death, greatly exaggerated.

Much of the essential information that we adults need can be gained only by being "piled up" as schemata in our memories. If parents and teachers waited until children could adequately understand the alphabet, they would wait until the first year of a doctoral program in linguistics. If they waited until children could adequately understand the first line of "My country, 'tis of thee," they would wait until tenth grade before divulging the words of the song. (Does anyone know an elementary school child who can explain the linguistic meaning of the words "My country, 'tis of thee?") For that matter, does anyone believe that a first-grader can understand "The Star-Spangled Banner," whose readability score probably ranks at the eleventh- or twelfth-grade level? Shall we therefore defer teaching "The Star-Spangled Banner" until twelfth grade?

Even the most ardent proponents of "meaningful" instruction and "higher-order skills acquisition" must accept such inconsistencies when slogans about developmental learning readiness are applied to the early grades. I don't know anyone who is so opposed to learning by heart as to deplore the teaching of the alphabet, or "The Star-Spangled Banner," or "America." But if we acquiesce in accepting *those* incompletely understood elements into the curriculum, why should we exclude other "mere facts" that are equally useful to literacy? Answer: We should *not* exclude those traditional facts, but recognize that young children need many, many items of traditional information that are no less necessary to literacy than the alphabet and "The Star-Spangled Banner."

Another grave weakness in the theory that children are interested only in immediately meaningful, child-centered materials is that young children take great joy in learning vaguely understood information that will only later be fully meaningful to them. Although many of the facts that children need to learn are meaningless to them in a linguistic sense, they are nonetheless highly meaningful to them in a social sense. Children give their own context to such items, and correctly believe them to belong to the fabric of the adult community they wish to join. Children thrive only as members of a community. From the cradle, they take to language and culture like ducks to water. They come into the world with an appetite for acculturation. It is impractical, indeed absurd, to thwart that *natural* appetite for culture on the basis of an abstract theory about learning readiness. Nothing better expresses the absurdity than Dewey's deploring of the "facility" with which young children absorb the cultural facts we pile upon them, or his approval of Rousseau's fatuous remark that "the apparent ease with which children learn is their ruin."

3. *The optimal contents of a language arts curriculum can be determined on scientific principles.* This doctrine about the early curriculum is less a slogan than an unexamined assumption. Science is a neutral servant of our educational purposes. Science represents the reality principle in education. It does not set our goals; it serves them. It helps define their inherent limits, and indicates the best avenues for us to follow in order to achieve them. Any more substantial claim for the role of science in education is a misleading claim.

Suppose, for example, that our primary goal is to achieve high literacy for all children. How can science guide us in choosing the *specific* materials to reach that goal? One currently used, so-called "scientific" approach is to use a quantitatively determined first-grade vocabulary for first grade, a second-grade vocabulary for second grade, and so on. And how does sci-

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ence yield up these graded vocabularies? By word frequency studies. The most frequent words should be taught first, the next frequent next, and so on.

There are serious difficulties hidden under this apparently neutral, apparently scientific approach. Assuming that makers of children's texts use common sense, as McGuffey did long before there were any word frequency studies, they wouldn't have to take special measures to supply young children with the most frequent words of English. They could assume that children would encounter those primary words with approximately the standard frequency in *any* reasonably chosen reading materials. They could rely on the fact that any diverse sampling of texts in a language will produce a similar list of its most frequent words. For instance, the Francis-Kucera frequency list, taken from the huge Brown University corpus consisting of several million words, puts the word *from* in position 26.¹⁰ The Carroll-Davies-Richman (CDR) frequency list, taken from a corpus of elementary and secondary school materials, puts the word *from* in position 23.¹¹ It is safe to assume that *any* intelligently chosen materials for the early grades will provide automatic reinforcement of the most frequent words of the English language.

An even stronger reason for not depending on word frequencies to determine suitable elementary reading materials is that after a certain point—somewhere after the top few thousand words—word frequencies depend entirely on the particular corpus of texts chosen to determine them. But what is the right corpus for the early grades? No one can answer that question on neutral scientific grounds. There is no purely objective, scientific way of choosing the right corpus for determining the correct grade-level of words. Consider, for example, some implications for choosing proper names in texts for early grades by means of the Carroll-Davies-Richman frequency list. On the basis of the most frequent words from 1 to 10,000, the corpus tells us that early texts should contain:

- The Alamo *but not* The Iliad
- Jack and Jill *but not* Cinderella
- Blake *but not* Milton
- Helen Keller *but not* Joan of Arc
- Moses *but not* Jesus
- Galileo *but not* Copernicus
- John Glenn *but not* Charles Lindbergh
- Louis Pasteur *but not* Marie Curie
- Scrooge *but not* Dickens
- Edison *but not* Locke
- Einstein *but not* Socrates
- Hitler *but not* Churchill

This list on its face suggests the inappropriateness of using word frequency as a "scientific" basis for the content of the language arts curriculum. In fact, such a use of word frequency is quite *unscientific* when we simply take the existing word frequencies that are found in current school materials as "objective" guides for determining the proper frequencies for new school materials.

Understanding this, suppose we did agree upon an appropriate corpus for determining grade-by-grade vocabulary according to word frequency. One characteristic of such a corpus would be that it must be constantly revised to reflect changes in the literate culture. Otherwise, the frequency analysis might become quite misleading. Consider this example. The biggest analyzed corpus of English that we have is the one at Brown University, compiled by Francis and Kucera. This corpus not only takes materials from a deliberately indiscriminate sampling of genres, it also remains stuck in the year 1961. Thus, according to the frequencies of the Brown corpus, the first surname that our children should learn after Washington is Khrushchev.

What inference should we draw from this interesting fact? Not, of course, that first-graders should be taught about Nikita Khrushchev before they are taught about Abraham Lincoln. Rather, we should draw the inference that it is all too easy to misapply scientific data. Consider, by contrast, the *scientific* virtues of simply asking a group of literate adults to choose the words and concepts that are most important for children to know to become literate adults. These people will

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do a much better job than either the Brown or the CDR frequency lists, in part because the corpus of texts they have read will be many, many times bigger than even the huge Brown corpus, and in part because their sense of the most appropriate words will be constantly adjusting itself to significant cultural change. Consequently, their judgments will be far less likely to exhibit the Khrushchev effect. This advantage alone will make their judgments more, not less, scientific than the current word frequency approach. Of course, these observations imply no criticism of the valuable work of Carroll, Davies, and Richman, Francis, and Kucera, but are directed toward the unsound, uncritical use of quantitative research.

Other examples of pseudoscience in education could teach us the same moral: there can be no substitute for informed judgments by educated adults regarding the most important contents to be taught to children. If we as a nation decide that we want our

...What residents, school staff, current students, and recent graduates want is "spectator" art and music. Not "varsity" art and music...."

Henry M. Brickell
and Regina H. Paul
Policy Studies in Education
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"[Children's] literacy is more effectively enhanced when they are successfully taught durable, traditional subjects like Ulysses and the Cyclops than when they are taught ephemera like Dick and Jane at the Supermarket."

children to possess mature literacy, there is no substitute for asking literate persons collectively to decide upon the contents required for mature literacy. After we make that determination, we need to develop an effective sequence of those core contents and effectively present them during the 13 years of schooling. Science can surely help us accomplish those jobs, but science alone is not in a position to tell us which words, concepts, and facts we need to teach.

Changing a Losing Game

In criticizing certain slogans and assumptions that are current among some educators, my purpose has, of course, been a constructive one. I take no pleasure in showing prized educational doctrines to be half-truths. Rather, I have tried to focus on just those doctrines, slogans, and assumptions that have actively impeded the teaching of traditional literate information to young children. Only by imparting that information early can we achieve higher literacy and greater social justice. Any half-truth or slogan, no matter how dearly held, that stands in the way of that aim should be ruthlessly cast aside. Our children are more important than our theories.

We have given our theories a rea-

sonable chance during the past four decades, and in light of the current ignorance explosion among young people, our results do not tend to confirm our theories. Even those educators who do not agree with my specific proposals for higher national literacy may nonetheless readily agree with the great tennis player Bill Tilden, whose immortal strategic advice holds for educational policy just as well as for tennis matches: "Always change a losing game." □

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