A Brief History of Reading Instruction

including some education milestones

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Foreword

The history of reading instruction is seen to be fairly consistent for over two thousand years, with societies teaching through an alphabetic principle, or phonics, method. That first changed in America around 1837, with sight-word reading adopted in Boston which caused a steep decline in literacy within seven years. That problem was successfully eliminated. However, that did not stop proponents of whole-word (sight-word, look-see, etc.) from continuing their quest to use what is nothing less than educational malpractice to teach students how to read.

Following is a list of events, in chronological order, primarily concerning the history of teaching reading, but also including some education milestones. The occurrences, which begin here at 500 BC, are from various countries and come forward with the concentration being set in America concerning the alterations that began to change successful instruction.

This is by no means a complete compilation but, rather, an overview by the author that does chronicle the dramatic decline in literacy in the United States.
500 B.C. – At approximately this time the first use of an alphabet form, a “syllabary”, was adopted by the Greeks, which predated the modern Greek alphabet by several centuries. It was later adapted and changed by the Romans.

360 B.C. – In his work *The Republic* Plato says: “Just as in learning to read, I said, we were satisfied when we knew the letters of the alphabet, which are very few, in all their recurring sizes and combinations; not slighting them as unimportant whether they occupy a space large or small, but everywhere eager to make them out; and not thinking ourselves perfect in the art of reading until we recognise them wherever they are found.”

1st Century B.C. – Dionysius of Helicarnassus, a Greek who lived in Rome, described the importance of reading this way: “When we first learned to read was it not necessary at first to know the names of the letters, their shapes, their value in syllables, their differences, then the words and their case, their quantity long or short, their accent, and the rest?”

35 – 95 A.D. – Quintilian, one of Rome’s foremost educational practice writers, endorsed the alphabetic method of reading education (letters learned first along with their sounds, then combined into syllables and into words) and states at the beginning of Book I of *Institutes of Oratory*: “It will be best for children, therefore, to be taught the appearances of the letters at once.” While Quintilian emphasized the interaction of reading, writing, and speaking, it was rhetoric that was so important in Roman public life and by Book X, most scholars agree, he considers reading and writing as support for speaking.

The above philosophy is seen as a common method of reading instruction from Classical times through the Middle Ages, when a prime purpose of the few schools that existed was to learn to read Latin. Much of the writing instruction was not so much aimed at personal literacy as it was at copying texts.

15th Century – The hornbook was used by school children for several centuries, starting in the Mid-15th century, in Europe and later America. The hornbook consisted of a wooden paddle with lessons tacked on and covered by a piece of transparent horn. The lessons consisted of variations of the following: the alphabet; vowel and consonant combinations; the Lord's Prayer; a form of a cross; and, a praise of the Trinity. These were typically hand written on a piece of parchment.

1517 – With the Reformation came a demand for reading the vernacular by the many not just Latin by the few. First Luther in Germany, then the Calvinists, asserted that each person should be able to read and study the scriptures as a means to personal salvation. The Bible was translated and the new invention, the printing press, meant books were available to many more people.

1527 – Valentin Ickelshamer, a German, proposed in his primer, *The Shortest Way to Reading*, that speech sounds were primary and letters secondary. He ignored the conventional names for letters at the time and had his pupils learn the individual sounds of speech first and only after they were successful at that, had them name the letters.
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1620 – The Mayflower and its “Pilgrims” establish the Plymouth Colony. Many of these new settlers were Puritans who fled due to religious persecution they suffered in England and their views and values dominate education in the New England colonies and other areas of the New World.

1635 – The first “free school” in Virginia opens. Education in most of the southern colonies was still typically conducted by parents or tutors.

1636 – The first higher education institution, Harvard College, was established in the New World, in Newton (Cambridge), MA.

1638 – Jan Amos Comenius was the first person to put pictures with text feeling it was helpful and necessary for children to see what the world looks like with the help of pictures. *Orbis Pictus*, written in 1638, was the first children’s picture book and later led to audio-visual techniques in the classroom. After Sweden viewed his work, they requested he organize and manage their schools and in 1642, he prepared school texts for six years believing that schools should be organized in stages from easy to hardest.

1647 – Massachusetts Law of 1647, aka the Old Deluder Satan Act, passes. In part: “It is therefore ordered that every township in this jurisdiction, after the Lord hath increased them in number of fifty householders, shall then forthwith appoint one within their town to teach all children as shall resort to him to write and read.”

1660 – John Locke publishes “Essay Concerning Human Understanding,” putting forth his belief that the mind is a blank slate at birth and that knowledge is derived through experience, not innate ideas, as was commonly believed by many at that time. He equated learning to read with learning the letters, though he recognized the need to make learning more interesting in “Some Thoughts Concerning Education” (1693): “…But then, as I said before, it must never be imposed as a task, nor made a trouble to them. There may be dice and play-things, with the letters on them, to teach children the alphabet by playing; and twenty other ways may be found, suitable to their particular tempers, to make this kind of learning a sport to them.” His views greatly influenced American education.

1690 – The first *New England Primer*, attributed to Benjamin Harris, is printed and eventually becomes the most widely-used schoolbook in New England—its use lasting over 100 years in the American Colonies. The content, taught through phonics, was religious instruction combined with learning to read the alphabet, syllables and words. It is one of the first books that included questions addressing understanding: “Q. What is the first commandment? A. Thou [s]halt have no other Gods before me. Q. What is the meaning of this commandment? A. That we should worship the only true God, and no other besides him.”

1702 – English clergyman George Fox produced *Instructions for Right Spelling*, which was used for approximately 75 years. The book proclaimed: “Instructions for right spelling and directions for reading and writing true English.”

1734 – Christian von Wolff brings forth Faculty Psychology, which believes that the mind is separate from the body. His doctrine believes that the mind is best developed through mental discipline, or tedious drill, along with repetition of basic skills and the study of subjects.
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such as classical philosophy, literature, and languages. This doctrine holds influence in American education throughout most of the 18th and 19th Centuries.

1776 – The break with England begins to see politics replace theology as the center of intellectual interest with a conspicuous stress on nationalism and a second emphasis on moralism predominant in readers published until about 1840. Spellers, during this period, maintained that learning the alphabet was the most important step in education. There was, however, particular emphasis upon articulation and pronunciation as well as increasing attention to elocution, with Noah Webster the chief proponent of the change.

1783 – Noah Webster, who did not care for English textbooks, produces the three-volume *A Grammatical Institute of the English Language*, comprising a spelling book, grammar book and a reader. Using numerical superscriptions to indicate vowel pronunciations, Webster claimed his speller would teach the nation a single system of pronunciation.

1787 – The Constitutional Convention produces America’s most historic document which does not mention education or school.

1787 – The Northwest Ordinance is enacted, recognizing the importance of education; “Religion, morality, and knowledge, being necessary to good government and the happiness of mankind, schools and the means of education shall forever be encouraged.” It requires every new state reserve a section of land in each township to support education.

1787 – Webster's revised book, *The American Spelling Book*, is released and soon becomes widely used throughout the States.

1791 – The Bill of Rights is passed by the first Congress of the new United States, however, there is no mention of education in any of the amendments, though the Tenth Amendment to the Constitution transfers powers not specifically delegated to the federal government “to the States, respectively, or to the people.” The responsibility of education, therefore, falls ultimately to the states.

1795 – *The English Grammar*, a literacy text, was published by Lindley Murray. Meeting with immediate success, Murray produced *English Exercises* in 1797, *The English Reader* in 1799, which was a predominant bestseller between 1815 and 1840, *Sequel to the English Reader* in 1800, and *Introduction to the English Reader* in 1801. During the first half of the nineteenth century some 20 million copies of his books were published. Lincoln saluted *The English Reader* as “the best school book ever put in the hands of an American youth.”

1803 – Massachusetts physician Daniel Adams published *The Understanding Reader*, or a *Knowledge Before Oratory*, which opposed having children learn elocution as if by rote from learning lists of “passions,” or emotions to be conveyed. The book conceives of reading as a private, internal activity.

1803 – Albert Picket, former pupil of Noah Webster, publishes *Picket's Union Spelling Book* and, in 1808, *The Juvenile Spelling Book*, which competed heavily with Webster’s speller.
1826 – John Keagy, M.D., publishes *The Pestalozzian Primer*, emphasizing the importance of a child's concrete experience and advocates their handling and use of objects aids to learning how to read and the use of tactile objects as teaching aids.

1826 – *Primer of the English Language* published by Samuel Worcester, directly attacked the established alphabetical method of learning to read and was the first formation of the word method that would, decades later, dominate the scene. Worcester states; “It is not, perhaps, very important that a child should know the letters before it begins to read.”

1828 – After twenty years of research and writing, Noah Webster publishes *The Dictionary of the English Language*, with more than 70,000 entries. The following year, he issues his final version of the speller, *The Elementary Spelling Book*, which eventually earned the nickname “blue-back speller.” The speller, in all its various transformations, dominated the field from 1790 through the Civil War era. In fact, the spelling volume has never been out of print and sold somewhere between 70 and 100 million copies by the end of the nineteenth century.

1830s – The educational system of The Five Civilized Tribes of Native Americans taught their youth English, literature, language, mathematics, foreign language and citizenship. Teachers were evaluated each year before being re-hired. The systems demanded accountability from students, teachers, parents and tribal educational officers. The governments of the nations were legislated out of existence.

1836 – The first of university professor William Holmes McGuffey’s readers is published. Their secular tone sets them apart from the Puritan texts of the day. The *McGuffey Eclectic Readers*, were among the first comprehensive readers specifically designed for each grade of student, enabling children to read material suitable to their age, and are among the most influential textbooks of the 19th Century, dominating the market until about 1880. Their success set the stage for the standard approach in gradation in reading instruction and have sold some 120 million copies in total.

1837 – McGuffey in his Primer stressed comprehension: “Many words in this lesson will cause the pupil to use his dictionary. Let no word be passed over which is not understood." And, "We cannot read well what we do not understand..." And, “Endeavor to understand what you read.” In his readers, McGuffey ends each reading chapter with a list of words to “Spell and Define.”

1837 – Horace Mann becomes Secretary of the new Massachusetts State Board of Education. A visionary educator and proponent of public (free) schools, Mann works for increased funding of public schools and better teacher training. As Editor of the “Common School Journal,” his belief in the importance of free, universal public education gains a national audience.

1837 – Rev. Thomas Gallaudet, director of the American Asylum for the Deaf and Dumb (Hartford, CT), taught deaf children to read via sight reading and proposes the method be used for normal children as well. Boston Schools adopted the teaching method.
1839 – As a continuation of his opposition to oratory as a basis for perfecting a child's reading skills, Daniel Adams publishes *The Monitorial Reader* which has less than one page devoted to the use of voice. Adams invokes the ideas of Briton Joseph Lancaster, who advocated a monitorial system in which older students helped teach younger ones.

1840 – The Connecticut census shows that only one citizen out of 579 was illiterate. There is data showing that the incidence of complex literacy in the country was between 93 and 100 percent. (Note: this more than likely represents only white adult males, as there was both sexual and racial discrimination in education occurring.)

1840 – Josiah Bumstead's book, *My Little Primer*, was the first published work that was specifically based on the word method, stating, that learning letters is “irksome and vexatious to both teacher and scholar…”

1841 – Mann attacked the alphabetic and syllabic methods of teaching reading as meaningless repetition of “skeleton-shaped ghosts” in his lectures and pointed out, for example, that l- e- g, does not spell “leg” but “elegy.”

1844 – Samuel Stillman Greene and the Boston Masters exposed a literacy disaster in Boston, seven years after the Boston Primary Schools implemented sight reading, which was subsequently removed from the curriculum.

1856 – The first kindergarten in the U.S. is started in Watertown, Wisconsin, founded by Margarethe Schurz. Four years later, Elizabeth Palmer Peabody opens the first “formal” kindergarten in Boston.

1862 – The First Morrill Act, the “Land Grant Act,” becomes law. It donates public lands to states, the sale of which is used for the “endowment, support, and maintenance of at least one college…in order to promote the liberal and practical education of the industrial classes…” Over 100 universities and colleges in the United States can trace their roots to this legislation.

1865 – The Civil War ends leaving much of the south, including its educational institutions, in severe disarray. Many schools are closed. Even before the war, public education in the south was far behind that in the north.

1873 – The Panic of 1873 causes bank foreclosures, business failures, and job loss. The results are reduced revenues for education with southern schools hit quite hard, making a bad situation even worse.

1879 – McGuffey’s 3rd Eclectic Reader includes in its preface: “In the latter half of the book, definitions are introduced. It is hoped that the teacher will extend this defining exercise to all the words of the lesson liable to be misunderstood. The child should define the word in his own language sufficiently to show that he has a mastery of the word in its use.”

1880 – Around this time a new movement in reading education began, that for cultural development. This might have been influenced by the German educator Herbart, who published a book in Germany in 1865 espousing this belief.

1889 – As a result of growing dis-satisfaction in some quarters with the word method of teaching, where young children taught using this method were not able to read well in upper
grades, Rebecca Pollard published *Synthetic Method*: “As in music, let there be scales to practice; drills in articulation; a thorough preparation for reading before the simplest sentence is attempted.”

1900 – During the coming decade considerable interest developed in “congenital alexia” or “word blindness” as the cause of retardation in reading, as diagnosed by medical professionals, who found nothing wrong, apparently, in the actual vision of the children so diagnosed.

1910 – This year marked the next period of reading instruction with the birth of the scientific movement in education. A paper published by Edward Lee Thorndike, presented first to the American Association for the Advancement of Science, called for scientific measuring of educational products and in the ensuing years many tests were devised. Over the next fifteen years, aside from the assault of testing, procedures in reading and instruction altered, such as from oral to silent reading, expanded reading research and the development of remedial reading techniques.

1913 – Thorndike’s *Educational Psychology: The Psychology of Learning*, is published describing his theory that human learning involves habit formation, or connections between stimuli (or situations) and responses (connectionism). His belief is that such connections are strengthened by the “Law of Exercise” (repetition) and the “Law of Effect” (achieving satisfying consequences). Contradicting traditional faculty psychology and mental discipline at the time, Thorndike’s ideas eventually govern educational psychology for much of the 20th Century and have an extreme influence on education.

1916 – Louis M. Terman and Stanford University graduate students create an American version of the Binet-Simon Scale, which becomes a widely used intelligence test. Following this, the concept of the intelligence quotient (IQ) is born.

1916 – John Dewey's *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education* is published advancing the “progressive education movement,” an outgrowth of the progressive political movement, and seeks to make schools more effective agents of democracy.

1917 – At the start of World War I, the U.S. Army does not have a way to screen their recruit’s intellectual abilities. Army officer Robert Yerkes, President of the American Psychological Association becomes Chairman of the Committee on Psychological Examination of Recruits. The committee, including Louis Terman from Stanford, is given the task to develop a group intelligence test and they design the Army Alpha and Beta tests. These tests *lay the groundwork for future standardized tests*.

1924 – The Gestalt Theory is presented to the Kant Society in Berlin, by Max Wertheimer, which has an emphasis on learning through whole concept. It becomes important in field of learning and teaching the development of cognitive abilities.

1925 – The next decade saw a further expansion of reading research and another shift in student reading objectives, now stated by the National Society for the Study of Education: to extend the experience of boys and girls, to stimulate their thinking powers and to elevate their tastes, while also to develop a permanent interest in reading. Many new books, teacher's manuals and supplemental materials were published. While there was an impression among some teachers during this time that phonics was in disgrace, every manual that appeared in connection with a basal series of readers recognized phonics.
1926 – Based on the Army Alpha Test, the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) is first administered.

1927 – Neurologist Dr. Samuel Orton, under a Rockefeller Foundation grant, concluded that children who had been diagnosed with ‘congenital word blindness’ (now called dyslexia) were actually severely harmed by the methods that had been used to teach them to read (sight-reading). Later, Dr. Orton and educator Anna Gillingham would create the Orton-Gillingham method of phonics instruction.

1929 – Jean Piaget’s *The Child's Conception of the World* is published. His stage theory of cognitive development (Genetic Epistemology) becomes an important influence in American developmental psychology and education.

1929 – October saw the stock market crash and the Great Depression, devastating the U.S. economy, which resulted in much lower education funding forcing the closing of schools, teacher layoffs and lower salaries.

1935 – A fifteen-year period begins, designated as the period of international conflict and, due to the war, a much smaller number of books were published. The aims and goals of reading are pretty much in line with the period just ended but with interest in reading disabilities on the rise.

1940 – “Remedial reading” was defined by Dr. William Gray: “...the corrective work undertaken by schools with groups of individuals who are retarded in reading.”

1941 – The U.S. enters World War II. During the next four years, as a substantial amount of the country's resources are directed to the war effort, education funding takes a back seat.

1941 – At the outbreak of the war millions of Americans, schooled during the 1930s, took low-level academic tests before being inducted. Of the 18 million men tested, 17,280,000 of them were judged to have the minimum competence in reading required to be a soldier, a 96 percent literacy rate.

1948 – William Gray, a key figure in the incorporation of whole word methodology, publishes *On Their Own on Reading*, adamantly opposing phonics.

1950 – The period is marked by expanding knowledge and technological revolution stretching for 15 years, led by the concern for the survival of democracy. The key solution for problems plaguing humanity is “education-and reading is basic to education.” A national survey showed that some sort of phonics and some sort of whole-word method were both universally being used in first grade.

1950 – When the Korean War began, several million men were once again tested and this time literacy in the draft pool had dropped to 15 points, to 81 percent, even though all that was needed to classify a soldier as literate was fourth-grade reading proficiency.

1953 – *Science and Human Behavior*, by Burrhus Frederic Skinner, is published promoting operant conditioning, behavior changes behavior due to reinforcement, and influences many areas of education.
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1955 – Rudolf Flesch publishes his searing attack on the reading profession, *Why Johnny Can’t Read and What You Can Do About It*, a bestseller for over 30 weeks, selling more than half a million copies. While the book had a profound affect on parents, those teaching reading had other opinions, many remaining antagonistic to systematic phonics. Flesch states: “Be patient: always wait until your child has fully mastered the last lesson before you go on to the next. Always combine reading and writing.” Interest in individualized instruction in reading was at its height in the late fifties and early sixties.

1963 – Samuel A. Kirk uses the term “learning disability”, at a Chicago conference on child perceptual disorders. The term sticks and, in 1964, the Association for Children with Learning Disabilities (the Learning Disabilities Association of America) is formed. Today, more than one-half of all U.S. students who receive special education have been so diagnosed.

1965 – Educator AnnaCORDts was unalterably opposed to phonics. She opined: “…sounding out a word is not only a boresome and laborious task but it is incompatible with comprehension in reading.”

1967 – Respected educator and reading instructor Jeanne Chall publishes *Learning To Read: The Great Debate*, where she suggested a change of code-emphasis and that “systematic” phonics was more effective than “analytic” phonics. Using an excellent tone and examples to cite her case, she and her book did positively change teachers' attitudes toward the use and value of phonics.

1969 – Herbert R. Kohl's *The Open Classroom*, which promotes open education, with emphasis on student-centered classrooms and active, holistic learning, is published. In the late 1970’s there is a conservative “back to basics” movement, largely viewed as “against the open education method”.

1973 – By the end of the Vietnam War, the number of men not inducted by reason of being illiterate had jumped to 27 percent, despite being “better schooled” than their Korean War counterparts (19%).

1981 – Dr. Seuss, creator of a string of mega best-sellers using a controlled “scientific” vocabulary (supplied by his publisher), demonstrated an awareness of the mindlessness of the whole word approach in an interview he gave: “I did it for a textbook house and they sent me a word list. That was due to the Dewey revolt in the twenties, in which they threw out phonics reading and went to word recognition as if you’re reading a Chinese pictograph instead of blending sounds or different letters. *I think killing phonics was one of the greatest causes of illiteracy in the country.*”

1983 – “A Nation at Risk,” the report of the National Commission on Excellence in Education, called for sweeping reforms in the field of education and in teacher training.

1993 – Jacqueline and Martin Brooks’ *In Search of Understanding: The Case for Constructivist Classrooms* is published and is one of many works describing the theory of constructivism, that learning best occurs through the active construction of knowledge as
opposed to passive reception. The learning theory, which has its roots in the work of Dewey, Bruner, Piaget, and Vygotsky, becomes very popular and widely used during the 1990s.

1994 – There were 1,438 American students who scored more than 750 (out of 800) on the SAT in Language Arts, compared to 2,817 who took the 1972 test, a 49% drop. Additionally, there was a 37% drop in the number of students who scored above 600.

1998 – U. S. Department of Education reading tests show that two-thirds of the nation’s high-school students cannot read well enough to do 9th grade lessons.

2000 – Diane Ravitch’s book, *Left Back: A Century of Failed School Reforms*, openly criticizes the progressive educational policies which have been implemented and calls for a more traditional, academically oriented education. Her views are representative of the more conservative trend in education.

2000 – The National Reading Panel, which began its study of the process of teaching reading and its deficiencies two years prior, reported their findings to Congress. It states, as the opening of the findings and determinations: “Overall, the findings showed that teaching children to manipulate phonemes in words was highly effective under a variety of teaching conditions across a range of grade and age levels and that teaching phonemic awareness to children significantly improves their reading more than instruction that lacks any attention to phoneme awareness.”

2001 – The No Child Left Behind Act is signed into law by President George W. Bush. The law holds schools accountable for levels of student achievement and provides penalties for schools that do not make adequate yearly progress (AYP) toward meeting the goals of NCLB.

2004 – The Individuals with Disabilities Improvement Act (IDEA) includes modifications in process and procedural safeguards, increased school personnel authority in decisions regarding special education placement, and aligns IDEA with NCLB.

2005 – While the overall average reading scores for students in 4th grade America improves by seven points, between 1999 and 2004, to 219 (out of 500), the score of 238 is needed to show proficiency in reading. By ethnic group, whites scored 229, Asians 226, American Indians 202, Hispanics 200 and Blacks 198. In 8th grade, overall average scores during the same period increased nine points to 241 (281 being proficient), with whites at 272, Asians at 270, Native Americans at 246, Hispanics at 245 and Blacks at 244.

2007 – At the National Governor’s Association Summit it was reported that more than one million high school students drop out every year. That’s about one every 29 seconds…"

2010 – Fewer than half of all students who graduated from New York high schools in 2009 were prepared for college or careers, as measured by NY state Regents tests in English and math.
Afterword

Consider this: One of the most popular novels published in 1826 was *Last of the Mohicans* which sold so well that a book published today would have to sell over 10 million copies to match it, and very few accomplish that feat – or come even close.

That book contains philosophy, history, culture, manners, politics, geography, analysis of human motives and actions, and is conveyed in data-rich periodic sentences so formidable that only today’s best, most well-educated readers can handle it.

Yet, back in 1826, the country was a small-farm nation without many colleges or universities.

What happened?

With all the evidence at hand, with all the statistics available, with the results of the National Reading Panel in 2000, it should be fairly obvious to even the most casual observer that phonics instruction was replaced and the literacy rate went down.

The introduction of whole-word reading as a method of teaching students how to read has cost the citizens of America over $225 billion annually in remedial education, crime, welfare payments, lost taxes and job incompetence.

To correct or change that which is faulty does not have to be expensive.

It simply needs to be done.

Systematic and explicit phonics instruction must be re-introduced at all pre-school and elementary schools in order to eradicate the illiteracy epidemic that is strangling the United States.
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