

LIKE, WHAT UP?



In 1955, Austrian author Rudolf Flesch gave American society a wake up call with his ground-breaking book, “Why Johnny Can’t Read”. He proposed that the phonics method of “sounding out” letters and syllables is the best way to teach reading skills to children; this was in contrast to the “word recognition” technique whereby children try to remember the physical shape of a printed word. While Flesch’s assertion branded him as a schismatic among many educators, principals, teachers, and bureaucratic incompetents in academia, supportive evidence for his view remains persuasive.

AROUND
TOWN

The United States is the only industrialized nation in the world with a remedial reading problem. In Great Britain, where phonics instruction is a basic teaching tool, kindergarten children read the fable of The Three Little Pigs with ease. German youngsters in the second grade read almost anything. By contrast, American third graders have, on average, a reading vocabulary of only 1,800 words. Clearly, the accomplishment of America’s public education system demonstrates a commitment to mediocrity that is without precedent.

During his years in the White House, President John F. Kennedy observed that “success has many fathers but failure is an orphan.” Yet the exception to Kennedy’s aphorism may well be the public school system. The failure of American children in regard to their scholastic achievements is attributed to a growing number of factors and people. Among these are indifferent teachers, unruly children, non-involved parents, overly involved parents, out of touch school boards, television, the internet, rap music, society, violence, drugs, too much permissiveness, not enough permissiveness, “educrats” and a host of medical/psychological illnesses and maladies, many of which are vaguely defined and poorly diagnosed. In the current climate of political correctness, Autism is a favorite scapegoat for the failure of children to learn. But this condition, clinically defined as an “inability to take part in social interaction and the performance of repetitive behavior,” is highly relative. It can apply to inattentive school children and also to grown men who sit comatose on their couches transfixed by sports coverage. For adults in this category, their oft-repeated plea of “Hon, get me a cold one,” validates the secondary element of repetitive behavior.

In a more serious vein, the issues surrounding the failure of public education deserves scrutiny and examination. As a starting point, the topic of economics and its relationship to education needs to be seen in a new light. In New York City, and indeed throughout the state, a campaign of disinformation lulls the populous into believing funding for education is the result of a limitless money supply from state coffers. As part of their strategy, officials who oversee the state lottery point out that a major portion of funds generated by lottery gambling goes to funding public education. Yes, this money does go into the education budget. However, as the late television journalist Al White once noted, “When it comes to education funding, the lottery is a dirty little secret the lawmakers in Albany don’t want people to know about.” According to White, “If the lottery generates ten billion dollars that money does go into the state educational budget, but what lottery officials don’t tell people is this: When they put that ten billion in, they subtract ten billion from the original education budget; so there’s no real financial gain for education. The state isn’t adding a penny for education; all they’re doing is shuffling funds from one account to another. In short, their claim of ‘billions of dollars for education’ is a smoke and mirrors technique of deception.”

At the level of city government, the dynamics of financial planning for public education is on a par with Lewis Carroll’s fantasy work, “Alice in Wonderland.” While Mayor Bloomberg intends to slash \$185 million from the schools this year, the Education Department will spend \$74 million to pay the salaries of teachers who do not have a classroom in any of the city’s 1,100 schools. Some of these instructors work as part time substitute teachers or in temporary positions. Nonetheless, they all receive full pay for up to a year’s time. Under the rudderless leadership of School Chancellor Joel Klein, the Department of Education continues to offer (in spite of a hiring freeze) careers in education with such Orwellian designations as Knowledge Management for Leadership & Organizational Management. While information concerning the purpose of this position is skimpy, the salary for it is decidedly generous at a \$170,000 annually.

In the area of technology, computers and cell phones continue to be examples of innovative designs that have a negative impact on the education of New York City children. To a growing extent, the fine points of English-spelling, grammar and punctuation are now anachronisms of a bygone age. Television, the mirror and crystal ball of the world, promotes this type of downward slide. One of the more telling examples of this can be seen in the contemporary commercial in which a young couple sits at an outdoor café. The

male is attracted by a female who passes by and he looks at her in the reflection of his phone walking down the street. Instantly, his female companion sends him a text message stating, “OMG, U R A PIG!” This type of syncopated shorthand, in verbal and written form, is increasingly common in the classroom, the living room and the boardroom and serves as a social barometer for the culture’s future intellectual decline. As the erosion of basic literacy skills continues over the coming years, will anyone notice the demise of the English language, or will today’s children merely shrug their tattooed and rosary-laced shoulders as they mumble, “Like, what up?”

Parents play a decisive and often times contradictory role in the education of their children. Of particular note, many of the thrice-married TV psychologists who have a brood of delinquent (dysfunctional?) youngsters warn about the dangers associated with two types of parents: those who are indifferent to all needs but their own, preferring to leave the fate of their children in the hands of the school, and those who are “helicopters,” this is, forever hovering over their children and attempting to micro-manage every aspect of their academic life. More often than not, parents in the latter group are convinced their offspring is a genius and the school system is not set up to recognize, create and sustain a universe that revolves around this living apotheosis of human achievement and unparalleled intellect. What many of these doting parents fail to understand is that the ability to rattle off rap lyrics and advertising sound bytes is the primary domain of parrots, not prodigies.

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— Al White, investigative TV journalist and reporter