

The Revival of Phonics May Sound the Death Knell for Tyranny

I came across some good news today. The kind of news that makes me think there is some hope for America and its citizens.

“What is this good news?” you might ask.

It’s simple, really: schools are beginning to teach phonics again.

“Is that all?” I can hear you reply. “That’s not such a big deal!”

Au contraire! Teaching phonics is a very big deal, for in teaching phonics, we enable literacy to surge, which makes knowledge soar, which in turn brings common sense and understanding back to the minds of the voting public.

That America has finally realized the importance of phonics is evident in a recent *New York Times* article by Bella DiMarco, [“Sounding Out a Better Way to Teach Reading.”](#) There, DiMarco describes how early grade school students in central Virginia sound out letters without any cues to help them guess. The joy on their faces when the sounds of the letters click into a word gives a good picture of how much of a decoding game reading is. Once you know the key to the code, everything becomes clear.

Teaching students that code is having impressive effects. “After just one year using the new reading strategy,” DiMarco writes, “Richmond Public Schools raised its early literacy scores by seven points, the largest single-year gains the district has seen.” And it’s not only this school that has

seen success. The entire state of Mississippi first started using a phonics-based approach to reading in 2013, DiMarco tells us. By 2019, its national standing in fourth-grade reading scores went from 49th to 29th. That's not bad considering Mississippi is the poorest state in the union.

But can teaching phonics have that much positive impact on our nation as a whole? Surely American students have always struggled with reading—isn't it overly optimistic to say that teaching phonics can help them grow in knowledge and understanding?

To answer those questions, it's helpful to look at some historical data on literacy rates, data which former teacher of the year John Taylor Gatto laid out in his book, [*The Underground History of American Education*](#).

According to Gatto, "literacy was universal" in the American colonies. In fact, it seems reading was so easy to teach, that many schools in colonial days didn't even offer reading instruction "because few schoolmasters were willing to waste time teaching what was so easy to learn." Apparently, parents—or perhaps dame school teachers—were expected to take care of such a simple task? Perhaps we should consider that an early endorsement for homeschooling...but I digress.

Such high literacy rates were apparently par for the course until World War II, for military tests found a 96 percent literacy rate amongst the millions of men who registered and were either inducted into the military or rejected for various reasons. When the Korean War rolled around a few years later, that literacy rate dropped to 81 percent, Gatto explains, dropping further to 73 percent during recruitment for the Vietnam War.

What happened during these three short decades to cause such a sudden decline in literacy rates? "Well, one change is indisputable, well-documented and easy to track," Gatto wrote.

“During WWII, American public schools massively converted to non-phonetic ways of teaching reading.”

Today only 37 percent of high school seniors [can read proficiently](#). Are the 63 percent who can't read proficiently illiterate? Some, yes. Others can likely read enough to get by, but such reading is unenjoyable, and when reading is unenjoyable, learning and growth in knowledge is much harder to come by.

Such a lack of knowledge doesn't do much for students...but it does do a lot for those in power, whether they are close to home in the schools and local communities, or farther away in the halls of Congress or the White House. If students are unable to read well—if at all—then they will be unable to discern important truths and make connections from those truths to accurately judge the character and actions of those in power. And if they can't accurately judge whether the actions of those in power are right or wrong, then they will tread ever closer to living under tyranny.

[John Adams said it best](#) when he wrote:

I must judge for myself. But how can I judge, how can any man judge, unless his mind has been opened and enlarged by reading? A man who can read will find in his Bible, in his common sermon books that common people have by them, and even in the almanac, and the newspapers, rules and observations that will enlarge his range of thought, and enable him the better to judge who has, and who has not that integrity of heart and that compass of knowledge and understanding which forms the statesman.

And that is exactly why the resurgence of phonics is joyous news. Such instruction clearly sets students on a path to being stronger readers, and once they are stronger readers, they will increase in knowledge and become more discerning, shining a light on, and exposing those who would lead blind

followers on the path toward tyranny.

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