

Cryonics Phonics: Inequality's Little Helper

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Why are we still teaching reading the wrong way? Why are “more than 60 percent of American fourth-graders not proficient readers?” asked Emily Hanford, an American Public Media correspondent, in the *New York Times* (October 26, 2018) and on public radio under the title, “Hard Words: Why Aren’t Kids Taught to Read?”¹ The answer? Simple! It’s the lack of “explicit, systematic phonics instruction,” a method backed up by “scientific research.” Poverty is an “excuse” educators have long used to explain reading failure and, in turn, low academic achievement. Unfortunately, says Hanford, many educators don’t know the science and, in some cases, even if they know it, actively resist teaching phonics, thereby setting up millions of kids for school failure.

Other corporate media immediately rallied. A *Wall Street Journal* article explained why schools in New York City and elsewhere have low literacy rates:

[These schools] just pay lip service to the importance of daily phonics lessons in early grades, or don’t know how to instill the basics. The stakes are high. Children who can’t read by third grade find it very hard to catch up. Most New York City public-school students don’t meet targets. Despite the “landmark report” of the 2000 National Reading Panel ... many schools haven’t fully embraced ^{phonics.2}

Forbes magazine (self-described “Capitalist Tool”), asked and answered “Why Johnny Still Can’t Read—And What to Do About It.”³ Said *Forbes*, “As many as half of all children won’t learn to read unless they get systematic instruction in what are called foundational reading skills, including phonics.” If only the advice of Rudolf Flesch, author of *Why Johnny Can’t Read* (1955), hadn’t been ignored in the mid-1950s!

Similarly supportive of Hanford’s critique was the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, a politically conservative education think tank. Inspired by Hanford’s critique, Robert Pondiscio, a senior fellow at Fordham, quoted a teacher who complained about learning nothing about phonics and the science of reading in her graduate studies. Following her example, he wrote the dean of his graduate school of education, complaining that he had been similarly shortchanged.⁴

Hanford’s critique and advice used the schools in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, as an exemplar of the academic success that economically poor students can achieve when schools employ reading instruction “rooted in research that shows any child can learn to read if taught the right way, regardless of poverty.”⁵ But no worry, phonics and similar “early reading skills” provide the sure road to academic achievement.

Phenomenal Phonics

The explanation that phonics and related basic reading skills in the early grades is the answer for

overcoming the impact of deficient socio-economic conditions on students' academic achievement is an old story that begins in the post-World War II years. By the 1950s, U.S. schools had, for decades, been an institution that "scientifically" sorted and tracked students, a process that just happened to be constructed according to varying social classes and skin colors. In turn, sorting and tracking was associated with unequal reading achievement that, in a stellar example of circular reasoning, was presumed to validate the sorting in the first place.

A major challenge to sorting by skin color (and, implicitly, by students' economic conditions) was the Supreme Court's *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling of 1954, which concluded that unequal school resources, based on skin color, produced unequal educational outcomes. However, for Rudolf Flesch, author of several books on how to improve writing, thinking, and speaking, the implications of the landmark decision had no place in his explanation of varying literacy outcomes. The year after the *Brown* ruling, Flesch's best-selling book asked and answered "why Johnny can't read." No, the cause wasn't related to the 1950s poverty rates of over 50 percent of black families and 20 percent of white families.⁶ As he explained in *Johnny* (1-12), deficient literacy outcomes were a consequence of "word learning" instruction (such as "Dick and Jane" instructional texts), combined with an absence of phonics instruction. Flesch criticized educators who attributed the causes of reading failure and, in turn, academic underachievement, to a variety of environmental causes. "Wrong," he insisted, the absence of phonics instruction was the obvious cause of underachievement but was an idea that had "never yet entered the mind of anyone in the world of education." In fact, reading educators reviewing the book⁷ noted that phonics was being taught in schools, but Flesch's critique prevailed in numerous explanations of why the schools were failing students and the nation.

Phonics Arises to Play a Second Role

By the mid-1960s, despite the inclusion of phonics in the early grades, many students continued to have reading problems, especially black students, whose official overall poverty rate was over 30 percent.⁸ The Johnson administration responded with its "War on Poverty" education and anti-poverty legislation, but the impact of this relatively insufficient response on educational outcomes was modest.

At the same time, as part of the 1960s political activism, alternative modes of schooling, such as free schools and open classrooms, emerged, challenging top-down, narrow, pre-established curricula and constrained classroom participation for students. The alternatives included more student-generated topics, more cooperative learning, and more critical views of the social order. Book titles such as *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, *Compulsory Mis-Education*, *The Open Classroom*, *Deschooling Society*, and *Free Schools* reflected various challenges to conventional schooling.

One response to the political activism was *The Crisis of Democracy*, published in 1975 by the Trilateral Commission, an organization of global business and political leaders who put the "problem" squarely: The nation was gripped by an "excess of democracy" contributing to "democratic distemper." Many educators echoed these concerns and initiated attacks on the education alternatives. Central in this response was the employment of purported "scientific" studies, particularly in reading education, that compared literacy and other academic outcomes of conventional classroom schooling with those of educational alternatives. Although the studies claimed to prove that conventional classrooms demonstrated superior academic outcomes, follow-up studies revealed that the outcomes were comparable. But those follow-ups did not appear before top-down instruction again prevailed. Within this reversion, faithful phonics contributed to the creation of classroom learning that reins in students' thinking and teachers' power.

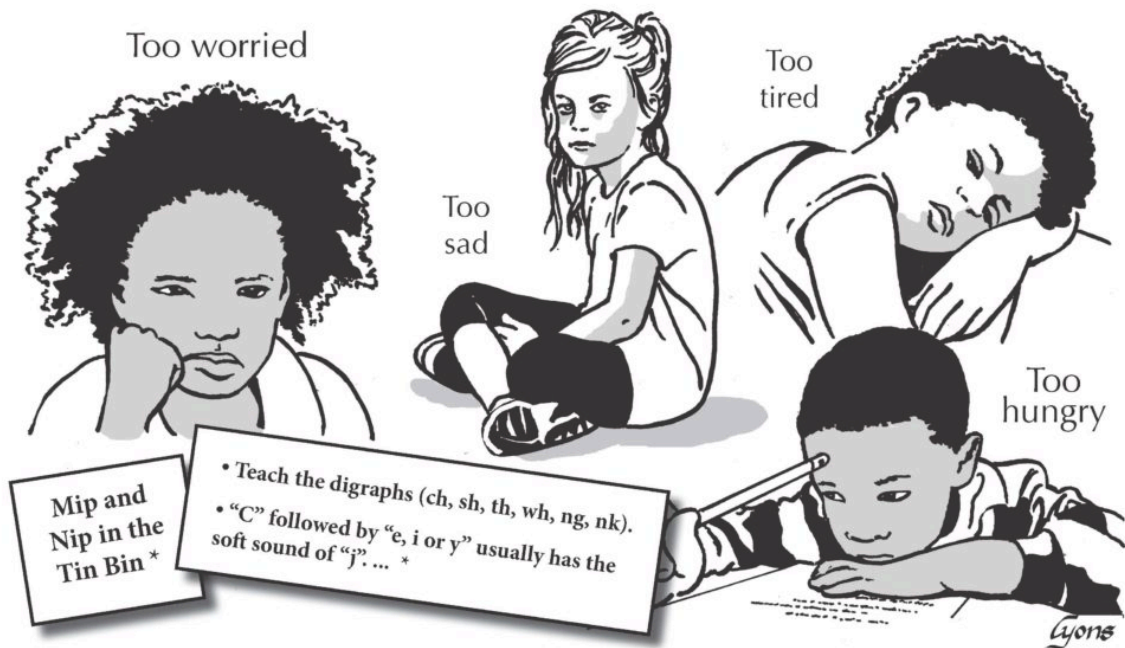
Best articulating the counterattack was Harvard reading professor Jeanne Chall, whose 1967 book, *Learning to Read: The Great Debate*, argued that reading instruction had to be grounded in a tightly

controlled, phonics-first, skills-emphasis pedagogy. Chall introduced her educational model by asking, “How in essence do readers change as they advance from *The Cat in the Hat* to the financial pages of the *New York Times*?” Her answer: use preprogrammed, skills-intensive instruction, orchestrated by a middle-manager teacher who ensured that students’ thinking would not stray. Not until Stage 4 (the high school years), Chall explained, would multiple viewpoints enter the curriculum. Yet even here, thinking would be proscribed. Students could think about a variety of perspectives, though not yet their own. That would be left for the college years—if a student went to college. As educator Ira Shor documented a few years later in *Empowering Education* (1992), the curriculum issues were not fundamentally about the loss of phonics and skills in the classroom, and similar seemingly apolitical instructional issues, but about controlling teacher power and student thinking. Nonetheless phonics and skills did help win the day!

The 1980s began with a severe economic recession, followed by an economic expansion. However, thanks to a “trickle down” policy often referred to as Reaganomics, the wealth of the expansion went largely to the already wealthy.⁹ Reflecting the maldistribution of wealth was an overall child poverty rate around 22 percent, but almost 50 percent for African American children and about 33 percent for Latino children.¹⁰

Yes, the Reagan administration did recognize the nation was “at risk,” but not because of the upward flow of wealth. Rather, the administration issued a 1983 report, *A Nation at Risk*, describing the danger created by an array of educational deficiencies, especially evident in high rates of illiteracy, across the U.S. Who was responsible? America’s schools, of course! What to do was answered two years later (1985), with *Becoming a Nation of Readers*,¹¹ whose pedagogical conclusions placed ever-reliable phonics as the centerpiece of “verified practices.” How phonics and related skills instruction “should be done” was the key question. Nowhere in the report was there a discussion of the impact of children’s socio-economic context on literacy and educational achievement.

However, not all educators were buying it.



Why phonics isn't the answer

* Actual Phonics texts

Despite the demise of previous alternatives to conventional education, an alternative emerged within classrooms that claimed to be a more effective way to teach literacy and nurture more thoughtful, critical students. It was *not* a teaching approach that could singularly overcome the effects of poverty, although many educators did suggest that, but it was more effective for learning to read. Called “whole language,” it employed a linguistic and cognitive theory that conceptualized learning to read as a process using predictable, meaningful texts and, as needed, phonics. Whole language fostered literacy-rich classroom learning that promoted student involvement in deciding what to read and think about, rather than learning through prescribed, prepackaged reading programs.

From the perspective of those concerned about an “excess of democracy” in the classroom, there was good reason to worry that whole language was a Trojan horse pushing open the gates of critical thinking. Indeed, for many educators, whole language could provide an opportunity to put a “democratic surge” back into classrooms. For example, reading educator Carole Edelsky insisted that whole language should be explicitly about creating pedagogy that “opposes social stratification and promotes an egalitarian social order.” To create “a curriculum aiming for justice and equity” there must be “a deliberate, active search for materials that try to promote [these aims], for projects that could reveal the less-dominant sides of issues, for resources that feature voices not usually heard.” Although not all those identifying as whole-language teachers employed this social-justice perspective and classroom practice, the viewpoint Edelsky articulated was a sufficiently prominent part of whole-language writings and teaching to concern dominant political-economic power.

Counterattack, One More Time

The counterattack to whole language took the form of a sequence of federal reports and education mandates designed to promote lockstep reading education that would serve as a template for all subsequent schooling. Phonics, not surprisingly, was the little drummer leading the way. For example, at the end of the George H.W. Bush presidency was a congressional Republican policy

paper, with the rhetorical title, *Illiteracy: An Incurable Disease or Educational Malpractice?*¹² Given the obvious answer to the question, the paper, not surprisingly, served to justify the 1990 Adult Literacy Act, which included a provision for funding phonics instruction. The chair of the Republican Policy Committee hailed the paper and provision, asserting, “Research shows phonics is the most effective way to teach people to read”—even though the paper supported no such conclusion.

Nonetheless, whole-language pedagogy continued to expand through the 1990s, a growth that contributed to the major federal-level legislative counterattack No Child Left Behind (NCLB) during the George W. Bush administration. The president assured the nation that the legislation was “based upon the science of reading, ... something that works.” (At the same time, he rejected a policy for reducing carbon emissions, insisting the science was “still incomplete.”) In turn, his secretary of education, Rod Paige, assured the nation that “phonics-based reading instruction” was the “gateway to learning,” especially for “every [economically] disadvantaged child.”

For Bush, reading achievement became the chief answer to academic and life success across social class and race. “I remember a lady in Houston, Texas, told me,” Bush was fond of repeating, “Reading is the new civil right, and she’s right. In order to make sure people have jobs for the twenty-first century, we’ve got to get it right in the education system.” Parallel with the enforcement of the “new civil right” under NCLB, the overall child poverty rate began, during the Bush years, at about 16 percent and climbed to about 21 percent; for African American children the poverty rate advanced from 31 percent to 35 percent.¹³

And what did the little helper and its word-skills friends contribute?

Many Children Left Behind

Propelling the skills-heavy reading instruction mandated in NCLB was the 2000 *Report of the National Reading Panel*. Convened by Congress, the panel concluded, after a purportedly exhaustive review of the research on beginning-reading instruction, that phonics and direct-skills instruction was the necessary, scientifically proven pathway to academic success. In *Reading the Naked Truth: Literacy, Legislation, and Lies* (2003), I reviewed all of the “scientific” studies cited in the National Reading Panel report and documented how the panel repeatedly misinterpreted and misrepresented the findings in study after study. The following are just a few examples:

- The boost in reading associated with early phonics instruction did not last beyond kindergarten.
- The overall data in the studies reviewed actually contradict the report’s conclusion about the “better reading growth” in skills-emphasis classrooms.
- Systematic phonics teaching was not superior to whole-language teaching in which phonics was taught as needed.

And the outcome of NCLB reading instruction? A decade later, national reading-achievement test results revealed there were no gains in fourth-grade reading scores,¹⁴ a result, I wrote at the time, that would “not surprise anyone who has followed the policy assault on reading education these last 15 years.” Literacy expert Stephen Krashen added that students learning to read through the NCLB Reading First program’s skills-heavy instruction did better than comparison groups in tests of decoding in first grade, but this achievement did not lead to superior scores on reading comprehension tests in later grades.¹⁵ Neither did a later iteration of the skills-heavy beginning-reading instruction produce better results. Assessment of the Common Core State Standards policy, initiated under the Obama administration, found that neither on fourth- nor eighth-grade reading tests were there significant test-score differences between 1992 and 2017!¹⁶

Defrost and Awake

Since 2018, teachers have been striking across the nation because of an unabated decline in educational conditions. Reduced school funding has led to a decrease in teachers' salaries relative to cost-of-living and in the number of supportive staff (librarians, nurses, and school social workers) along with an increase in damaging educational conditions, such as large class size and school infrastructure deterioration. Concomitantly, child poverty has remained deplorably high, with 43 percent of children living in low-income families.¹⁷

Can phonics really be expected to triumph when poor children are more likely to be affected by housing instability, hunger, poor nutrition, and an array of health issues, such as vision impairment, hearing problems, lead exposure, and iron-deficiency anemia? Although poverty is not an inexorable cause of educational underachievement, as educational researchers such as Richard Rothstein (*Class and Schools*, 2004) and educational historian Diane Ravitch (*Reign of Error*, 2013) document, poverty is the single most reliable predictor of school success or failure.

Given the 60-plus-year history of repeatedly thawing and putting in motion the little-solution-that-could, then seeing it fail, a person could reasonably conclude that phonics-is-the-answer-for-overcoming-the-effects-of-poverty-on-academic-achievement would be laid to rest in peace. However, as the renewed demand in the corporate media for heavy phonics instruction reveals, no burial is in sight.

Phonics/Word Skills Versus Whole Language

In the current unthawing of phonics-is-the-answer, whole-language teaching has once again been targeted as the chief reason for poor children's underachievement in literacy and academics. In making this argument, Emily Hanford and the reading professionals she quotes offer a misrepresentation of whole language that would require a separate article to correct. For instance, whole language was not a movement aimed at freeing classrooms of phonics. Nor did whole language proponents think phonics might "actually be bad for kids, might inhibit children from developing a love of reading," or that "phonics wasn't necessary because learning to read was a natural process that would occur if they were immersed in a print-rich environment." Simply put, whole language taught phonics as needed for students' larger engagement with reading, which involved connecting students with books related to their interests, lives, and communities; encouraging voluminous reading in books available in classroom and school libraries; emphasizing comprehension grounded in discussions of books; combining reading and writing; and connecting literacy development to other areas of the classroom curriculum (art, social studies, science, drama, current events). Within a comprehensive, meaning-emphasis, integrated curriculum, literacy is pervasive, and various literacy skills, such as phonics, are taught as needed. Yes, there have been whole-language advocates who eschewed phonics instruction, regarding it as a major encumbrance in learning to read, but this kind of orthodoxy did not characterize the understanding contained within the wider whole-language approach.

As someone who has used a whole-language approach for teaching both young beginning readers and adults with serious literacy problems, my experience underscores that the need for phonics varies among beginning readers, from near none for some, some phonics for most, and "a lot" for a small percentage. Using a whole-language approach would mean addressing various reading abilities and propensities, but doing so requires both teacher competence *and* the classroom conditions for addressing students' varying needs.

How Much Phonics

Should Be Taught?

With respect to the issue of which is “better,” the National Reading Panel report (considered by phonics-first educators to be their gold-standard research document) found, as I noted above, similar literacy-achievement outcomes when comparing phonics-emphasis and whole-language (or what was categorized as “whole-language”) instruction. In my review of the panel’s report, I discussed the studies’ often-questionable categorization of a teaching approach as “whole language,” but putting that aside, I see no reason to doubt the results. Commonly missing from the disputes over “whole language versus phonics” was the recognition that the former required *more* resources because it did more. Whole-language teaching and learning needs small class size to promote discussions, close observation of students’ literacy needs, linkage of reading and writing, integrating reading with other parts of the curriculum, more books and other media promoting literacy and literacy-related projects, and substantial classroom and school libraries. Requiring these resources suggests that in a comparison of “phonics versus whole language” within community, familial, school, and classroom conditions of poor children, the literacy outcomes of phonics might be relatively better because a whole-language approach *could not be sufficiently* implemented. Recognizing this does not, of course, mean that “phonics first” would be successful; it would simply mean that neither would be. Poverty—across community, family, schools, and classrooms—always is a strong determinant of literacy outcomes, regardless of the instructional approach!

Resurrection

As I noted at the beginning of this article, the new insistence that phonics-heavy reading instruction can provide the pathway to academic success, regardless of the poverty afflicting students, spotlights the beginning-reading program in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. Reporting on the instruction in Bethlehem, journalist Emily Hanford insists that hundreds of scientific studies have “shown over and over that virtually all kids can learn to read,” if they are taught to read with a method in which “explicit, systematic phonics instruction” is central.

The 60-plus years of the resurrection and failure of phonics to overcome the impact of poverty on educational achievement leaves the question of the “science” purportedly supporting phonics. Can it be that phonics instruction does indeed have substantial scientific evidence favoring it, but it has not been deployed properly in the classroom?

It’s not apparent what “science” Hanford has in mind, but having written about the research on reading, learning disabilities, and dyslexia since the late 1980s, beginning with my first book, *The Learning Mystique* (1987), what’s clear about this so-called “science” is that much of it is contrived evidence to “prove” pre-existing conclusions. For example, Hanford is much taken with the research on dyslexia, which has searched for neurological dysfunction in beginning readers. However, she fails to consider the decades-long confusion in this research of correlation and causation. That is, the brain functioning of poor readers (“dyslexics”) is different from that of competent readers, but that is largely because of a difference in competence. Similarly, for example, readers able to read Czech will show brain functioning different from those who cannot, but that is not reason to brand the latter as “czechlexic.” (See my essay on the deficiencies of this research in “Brain Activity, Genetics, and Learning to Read” in *Handbook of Early Childhood Literacy*, Joanne Larson and Jackie Marsh, eds., 2012).

Hanford frequently references the “science” on the side of heavy-phonics-and-skills-instruction-for-reading-success, but offers nothing about the evidence on the other side of the dispute. Neither does she explore the purported “scientific evidence” the George W. Bush educators used to push through the mandated skills-based instruction, purportedly based on “the findings of years of scientific research on reading,” that subsequently failed children who were victims of it. (For a thorough

review of this bogus “evidence” see my *Reading the Naked Truth*).

The Program and Evidence for Reading Achievement

In the newest version of “with phonics ‘poverty [can be taken] out of the equation,’” the spotlight has been on schools in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, where a program called Step by Step Learning (SBSL), begun in 2015, has been used to orchestrate early classroom reading education that purportedly has produced laudable reading test results.¹⁸ For example, the literacy skills “benchmarks” of kindergarten students increased from 47 percent in 2015 to 88 percent in 2017, with benchmark scores projected to reach 92 percent in spring 2019.

As I noted above, follow-up studies on the effects of early phonics programs have failed to find long-term benefits on reading achievement. Therefore, I wrote to two administrators in the Bethlehem schools, asking for information about the students’ reading ability in later grades. Neither replied to my request. Consequently, I used the publicly available Pennsylvania reading/language arts tests results, which provided scores for Bethlehem schools. By these measures, the reading achievement for students in SBSL early-reading program either stayed the same as students who had not used the program in previous years or else made only very modest improvement.

For example, students in Bethlehem’s Fountain Hill Elementary School are 65 percent Hispanic, 11.5 percent African American, and 15 percent white.¹⁹ Poverty may be gauged by the 88.7 percent who qualify for free or discounted lunch. In academic achievement measured by test scores in 2018, Fountain Hill ranks 1,342 out of 1,530 Pennsylvania schools. The benefits of the SBSL program? Students who started school before the SBSL program began were in third grade in 2016. Among them, only 35 percent met the state’s reading/language arts standards. In 2018, among third-graders who had been taught with the phonics program, 44 percent met the standards. This 9 percent increase is commendable but far from demonstrating that the phonics program can “take poverty out of the equation.”

In Marvine Elementary School, where 91.7 percent of students qualify for free or discounted lunch and which ranked near the bottom of test scores among Pennsylvania schools, results of the SBSL program were similarly bleak. In 2018, among third-grade students who had been in the program, only 43 percent met the reading/language arts standards. Looking at the scores of fifth graders, who started school before SBSL began, 36.4 percent met the standards, again revealing a very modest benefit of the SBSL program.

In contrast, there is Hanover Elementary school, where only 15.6 percent of students qualify for free or discounted lunch. There the impact of students’ economic circumstances was clearly in the opposite direction: About 85 percent of its students—virtually the same percentage as lunch standards—met the reading/language arts standards both *before* and after the introduction of SBSL program. Similar parallels between the beginning reading skills program and literacy outcomes can be found for all other Bethlehem schools.

Based on the research on phonics in previous decades, cited in the *Report of the National Reading Panel*, these results should not be surprising. The conclusions of one study on phonics and similar word-level training represents the overall findings on intensive phonics instruction: Benefits for “reading comprehension were not significant” (*Reading the Naked Truth*, 92). A recent analysis by literacy researcher Jeff McQuillin drew similar conclusions from a large-scale study in England.²⁰ Once again, “phonics instruction has a modest effect on initial literacy levels, but little to no impact on reading achievement in later grades.”

Little Helper or Little Help?

Can beginning reading skills really be expected to be the pedagogical answer in a city which, among large Pennsylvania cities, has seen income inequality increase the most since 2013, where heads of families were likely working more than one job to meet family expenses?²¹ How much can phonics and friends accomplish in schools where 60 percent of students qualified for free and reduced-price lunches in 2018, an increase from about 50 percent in the 2013-2014 school year?²² Why, given Pennsylvania's corporate wealth, are such questions and expectations even posed?

A vivid snapshot of the poverty facing Bethlehem students and their families was captured in the observation of the head of one social-service organization: "Food pantries used to be for emergencies. Now it's becoming more and more a part of the tactic to survive." People are working more jobs, and more family members are working. Decidedly not a factor in the income rise is the state's minimum wage, which has remained constant.

Surely the Bethlehem school district's administrators and teachers have been doing the best they can with these conditions, but how much can educators do when the 2019-2020 school budget process began with a deficit of \$11 million, incurred in large part because the state required that school districts pay charter-school tuition, which for Bethlehem last year amounted to more than \$29 million.²³ One fiscal response—accepting early retirement of many senior teachers and replacing them with less-experienced, lower-paid teachers—helped contain the deficit, but concomitantly reduced teacher expertise.²⁴

The economic conditions faced by the state's schools and families have been strongly fashioned by a corporate focus on profits. Thanks to business-friendly politicians, corporate tax cuts and limited tax rates for the rich have been abundant. From 1972 to 2018, the contribution of corporate taxes to the state's general tax revenues has diminished from 30 percent to 15 percent. The Pennsylvania policy organization WeThePeoplePA calculates that

corporate tax cuts have increased four times since 2003-2004, from \$796 million to \$3.9 billion per year. [The legislature] has also shifted a growing share of state taxes to middle-class Pennsylvanians, exacerbating an unfair system in which ordinary Pennsylvanians pay up to three times as much of their income in taxes as the richest 1 percent.²⁵

A potential major source of taxes could come from natural gas extraction (fracking), but although Pennsylvania is the second largest natural-gas producing state, the legislature has refused to impose a severance tax on extracted gas.²⁶

Sidestepping Poverty?

Can poverty and inequality be taken "out of the equation" in creating literacy and academic success? From Rudolf Flesch onward, the deplorable, unsubstantiated, simple-minded answer is supposed to be "yes, if a phonics-and-reading-skills-heavy early-reading program is employed." However, as the current rendition reveals, just as over the past 60 years, the answer once again is "no, that's not why Johnny can't read."

The actual long-term questions regarding academic achievement posed by those responsible for economic inequality are: Can we retain the majority of our profits, offer workers and their families insufficient wages, pay little or no taxes to fund schools, and, at the same time, obscure the educational consequences of these decisions? Can we rely on the claim that it's ineffective beginning-reading programs, not poverty, that are blocking poor youngsters from future educational achievement? Can we, the uber-wealthy, not get blamed? The answer, so far, seems to be that as

long as there are professional helpers to resuscitate cryonic phonics, the answers are “yes.”

Notes

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