Beware Of The Phonics Conspiracy

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When Hillary Rodham Clinton charged that Bill Clinton's impeachment was caused by a "vast right-wing conspiracy," she displayed the typical paranoia of liberals. It's not just Watergate and Iran-Contra that nurture their faith in plots; liberals think conspiracies against them are lurking behind every bend in the road.

This attitude is not just acquired by reading fundraisers from People for the American Way (who live in perpetual fear of parental "censorship" over their children's books and videos). The existence of vast right-wing conspiracies is actually being taught in the teachers colleges.

A "reentry woman" (that's the jargon to describe a woman who has reentered college after having been in the real world for some years) just sent me a textbook currently used in a state university in New York to teach aspiring teachers how to teach Whole Language to elementary school students. Whole Language means teaching children to guess at words from the pictures or the context, to skip over words the child doesn't know, and to substitute words that seem to fit.

The textbook includes a chapter warning teachers against a "Far Right" conspiracy of "laypersons" to teach phonics, i.e., sounding out the syllables of the English language. The textbook identifies yours truly as a co-conspirator, along with the Heritage Foundation, the highly-advertised Hooked on Phonics, Norma and Mel Gabler, Dr. Robert Simonds, scholar Sam Blumenfeld, Robert W. Sweet of the National Right to Read Foundation, Pat Robertson, the Reverend Jerry Falwell, and U.S. Senators Orrin Hatch and Jesse Helms.

If this were merely the wild-eyed rantings of some leftwing activist, it wouldn't be worth a comment. But all this is from an actual teachers-college textbook, "Reading Process and Practice, From Socio-Psycholinguistics to Whole Language" by Constance Weaver (1994).

The textbook warns that the "Far Right" urges that children be taught "a lot of phonics" and even phonics "first, before giving children the opportunity to read real literature -- or even sentences!" Italics, capitalization and exclamation points emphasize these ominous accusations.

The textbook author is shocked, shocked that children might be taught to sound out words before they are given whole sentences. The truth is that thrusting complete sentences or books on children before they are taught to sound out words is equivalent to putting children on a football or a tennis team before they are taught how to play the game.

Next, the textbook probes into the motive of the Far Right in advocating phonics, dismissing the thought that it could possibly be anything so sincere as wanting all children to be good readers. We now see the paranoia of the conspiracy-minded leftwingers in full flower.

According to this textbook used to teach teachers, the "hidden agenda" of phonics-advocating Far Righters is "to promote a religious agenda." They supposedly advocate phonics so that children will get all the words "right" and thereby be able to read all the words in the Bible instead of guessing at some of them.

According to this textbook, teaching intensive phonics is a Far Right plot to keep children "from reading or thinking for themselves." It appears not to have occurred to the textbook author that, if children are such good readers that they can read all those big words in the Bible, they will have the ability to read the classics of Western civilization, too.

Undeterred by common sense, the textbook plows ahead with its fantasy about a Far Right plot. The book alleges that another, even more devious, motive of Far Right phonics advocates is to promote "docility and obedience on the part of the lower classes," and thereby "maintain the socioeconomic status quo" and preserve "socioeconomic stratification."

The textbook proudly includes an illustration of the work of a first grader taught by the Whole Language method: "1. RAET MY NAM. 2. RAET THE DAET." The other words are even more unintelligible.

The fact is that nothing, nothing at all, has done more to prevent the "lower classes" from rising above their "socioeconomic stratification" than the failure to teach them how to read. Illiteracy is the systemic disease of the unemployed, the welfare class, and the prison population, all those pathetic thousands of Americans who, despite having attended public schools, are unable to "write my name" or "write the

date."

A recent three-line headline in the St. Louis Post-Dispatch screamed: "A third of our secondary school students are behind in their reading. What should the region's citizens do?"

My answer is, scrap the failed method called Whole Language, and instead teach children how to read by the proven phonics method so they will be able to realize the American dream. But the schools aren't going to do that because their teachers are brainwashed into believing that phonics is a Far Right religious and political conspiracy. How sad.