THE TEACHER WHO COULDN'T READ

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Can you imagine going through life not able to read? Can you imagine how illiteracy would put you in a sort of isolation booth, all alone, separated from everyone else by an invisible wall?

That was the predicament of John Corcoran, whose incredible life story has just been published in a new book called "The Teacher Who Couldn't Read." "Being an illiterate," he said, "is like belonging to another culture."

He was a graduate of a university with a bachelor's degree in education and business administration, and he completed over 90 additional graduate hours in education, economics and sociology at four major universities. Counting both his years as a student and as a professional teacher, he attended school for 35 years.

But he did not read any textbook or write the answer to any essay question. People close to him detected that he had some difficulty reading, but apparently none suspected that he was totally illiterate.

Corcoran can't explain why he did not learn to read. "I missed out in the early grades," he said, and it was a life of deception after that. He didn't learn how to sound out syllables and words from the letters printed on the page - because nobody taught him.

The teachers assumed that he was dumb, as in stupid, and put him in the "dummy row" in class. As he grew up, survival in school depended on developing a charade of deception. It was the only game he knew.

How did he pass from grade to grade? "It was because no one took it upon himself or herself to teach me." So every year, he became more resourceful in disguising what he thought was a permanent defect, beyond his control.

By the time he entered college on an athletic scholarship, he was a pro at his masquerade, always living on the edge of anxiety, fearful that someone would pull off the mask and expose the illusion of literacy he created by carrying a newspaper or a book as a prop. After graduation, he became a high school teacher. He would identify the brightest student in the class and depended on her to read whatever was essential.

One day in 1986, when he was 48 years old, Corcoran walked into an adult literacy center and confessed that he wanted to learn how to read. Fortunately, he found a patient, kind tutor who taught him how.

The words on the page began to make sense. For the first time, he experienced the excitement and accomplishment of reading!

It was another emotional step when the tutor convinced him that he should go

public with his experience in an effort to help others and to expose the cruel way he had been treated by all the schools he had attended.

Since then, he has found so many others whom the schools treated the same way. Official surveys show that about 90 million adults, 42 percent of our adult population, are either illiterate or semi-literate.

Corcoran was fortunate that he came from a supportive, two-parent, traditional values family, so that his frustration at being unable to read erupted in basketball and occasional playground fistfights instead of in criminally anti-social behavior (which is what happens to so many illiterates).

Corcoran believes it is wrong to hang ugly labels on children such as "learning disabled." He says the problem is a teaching disability, not a learning disability. He also objects to the phrase "slow learner." Corcoran wasn't slow with numbers at all.

His teachers subjected him to other accusatory labels, too: immature, not motivated, won't respond to class work, doesn't work hard enough. They convinced him that he would always be different from everyone else.

Hanging derogatory labels on children has become big business in the public schools. The public schools get much more money if a child is labeled as having some defect.

Senator Robert Byrd (D-WV), chairman of the Senate Appropriations Committee, recently criticized the Supplemental Security Income program for making payments to children who had been coached to fail tests or misbehave in school in order to fake behavior disorders. The criteria for deciding whether a child is "disabled" include such nebulous and subjective factors as inappropriate or bizarre behavior, attention deficit disorder, isolation, and withdrawal.

The whole explanation of what the school system did to John Corcoran was laid out in Rudolf Flesch's great 1955 book "Why Johnny Can't Read," and then reiterated in his second book 30 years later, "Why Johnny Still Can't Read." It's the failure to teach first-graders how to decode the English language with systematic phonics.

Like the Bourbon kings of Royal France, the public schools never learn. At least 85 percent of public schools still use word-guessing methods such as "Whole Language" instead of systematic phonics, and millions of children face the fate that befell John Corcoran. If children are going to learn to read, parents will have to teach them.