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DISADVANTAGED SCHOOL CHILDREN

A reader has sent me a copy of a letter he has been sending to school boards in which he suggests a class action lawsuit against book publishers to force them to stop foisting off on public school children reading those textbooks which are producing a million "functional illiterates" a year. Such a suit could induce the publishers to shift quickly to quality school books. He suggests that the suit ask as compensation that the publishers set up a fund to provide phonics teachers to school dropouts, jailed juveniles and other functional illiterates who have been shortchanged by the public schools.

My correspondent, Abraham Kalish, is a private citizen who represents no group or organization, but has had a lifetime, active interest in education. For 12 years, he was professor of writing and research at the U.S. Defense Intelligence School.

His studies have led him to the conclusion that reading failure is the most important fact which correlates with aggression in delinquent boys. One study shows that over 20% of people in prison have a reading age under ten years.

Kalish thinks that if a pre-school child talks to his parents about practically everything before he starts school, and then after a few weeks becomes reticent (Parent: "What did you learn at school today?" Child: "Nothing special."), chances are that the school is not teaching the child to read.

Yet, reading is fundamental to a child's educational process and progress. The inability to read is mentally crippling and psychologically humiliating. "Is it any wonder," Kalish asks, "that the victim lashes out with mindless vandalism?"

Kalish believes that the failure to develop a child's ability to read with confidence has profoundly changed the role of the teacher. Years ago, the school teacher was mainly a learned monitor. He or she sat behind a desk on a platform, listening to the children recite what they had learned, correcting and grading them, and assigning the next lesson.

Kalish has visited dozens of schools in the last few years, and he has concluded that the teacher's job is mentally and physically exhausting today. In his classroom visits, Kalish finds the teacher standing and talking constantly and loudly, often to

drown out the buzz of uncalled-for remarks by students.

Instead of finding out what the students learned from home study, the teacher was constantly trying to present facts in such an interesting way that they would leave a lasting impression on the students' minds. That system provides a workout for teachers, but the students' role remains passive. Yet children's brains are muscles which develop only when used.

Kalish asks the question, "How many games would a football team win if the coach, intead of having the players practice tackling, kicking and passing, kept talking and doing calisthenics, while the players sat back and watched?" Not only would the players fail to learn by doing, but chances are that they would be terribly bored. In one junior high school in the most affluent section of Seattle, some bright girls complained that school was so boring that they indulged in vandalism solely for excitement.

In a Maryland school, Kalish found that the list of novels for the fourth through eighth grades does not have a single classic. It has only books "written down" for readers of limited intelligence -- books which "lack the thought, imagination, humor, nobility and beautiful language of the school books enjoyed by previous generations."

The list of biographies in this same school for the fifth through eighth grades does not include George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Abrhama Lincoln, George Washington Carver, Charles Lindbergh, or Eddie Rickenbacker. It does, however, include Mother Jones.

Kalish's school visits have led him to confirm Rudolf Flesch's statement in his 1982 book, "Why Johnny Still Can't Read," that the vast majority of public schools still use the discredited non-phonic reading method. Instead of phonics for the first year and a half of elementary education, the schools povide children only with "reading readiness" materials made up almost completely of pictures.

Children are then given readers with a limited vocabulary of 124 words! Yet, a child of five already knows 35,000 words (including such words as helicopter, shadow, beautiful, ridiculous) and needs only to learn the sounds of letters in order to start reading books with words of that level. Any school board can eliminate all this "reading readiness" and "limited vocabulary" nonsense by demanding quality textbooks that use the phonics method to teach children to read.