Why Unifon?

by
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FROM OUR VANTAGE POINT we are able to look back upon the years that Unifon was used in various school systems. When this book was first published, Dr. Margaret Ratz was a visionary, working with a new teaching tool. With the passage of time, we can form a more objective opinion, based on the evidence from the Unifon projects.

The designer of the Unifon alphabet, Mr. John R. Malone, appropriately called Margaret S. Ratz his "apostle." More than any other person, Dr. Ratz was responsible for the consistent success of Unifon in every school system where it was taught, from before 1960 through her retirement years in the mid 1970s.

Another acquaintance of Mr. Malone's was a producer for the local ABC TV affiliate in Chicago. In 1960 he was assigned the task of producing a summer show about what was happening in Chicago. Having heard of the success of Dr. Ratz at Principia College, he and Mr. Malone devised a bold and daring experiment.

Dr. Ratz was put on the payroll of ABC TV in Chicago for three months during the summer of 1960. In front of live cameras, she would teach four pre-school children to read. Three of the children were entering first grade. The fourth was entering kindergarten. None of them could read when they began the program. Dr. Ratz proposed to teach for one hour a day for 17 days—as Mr. Malone describes it, “17 hours with cookies and milk.” After only 17 hours of instruction, on live TV, all four children could read third, fourth or fifth grade books in traditional spelling.

Based on the success of her summer TV program, Dr. Ratz and John Malone were able to acquire grants from Ford Foundation, Western Publishing Company, Mott Foundation, Lilly Foundation and the federal government, among others. The funds were used to conduct Unifon projects in Indianapolis and Hammond, Indiana, in New Orleans, Louisiana, in Washington, DC, and at several locations in the Chicago area.

The Hammond project was funded for a three-year period by a Title III grant under the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act. Dr. Ratz spent the first year (1972) of the Hammond project training and preparing teachers in the effective use of Unifon, and making the teaching materials for the classrooms. (In the age before home computers, everything had to be done by hand.) In the second year, seven classrooms in three elementary schools started using Unifon to teach first graders to read. By March, most of the children in the room were reading regular books on their own. The third year the Hammond schools added another eight classrooms to the Unifon project.

Comments from teachers involved in the Hammond project were uniformly positive. Children could write any word they could say. Some children would make the transition to traditional spelling before Thanksgiving. Children didn't feel frustrated. They were enthusiastic, and so

were the teachers. What Dr. Ratz brought to this project and others was the fact that Unifon could be taught by anybody with the proper preparation.

The 17 hours with cookies and milk, aired on ABC Chicago in 1960, marked the beginning of the Unifon phenomenon. The producer of that program later moved to CBS, where he produced another program, “The Day They Changed the Alphabet,” a portion of which aired as a featured segment on the Charles Kuralt program “On the Road,” in 1973.

Enter John Culkin. Culkin, a former Jesuit priest with a Harvard PhD in education and reading, was then a professor at the New School in New York City. One day a student asked him, “John, have you seen ‘The Day They Changed the Alphabet?’”

Dr. Culkin said, “No.” In 1973, you could not run out and get a copy at your local video store, but Dr. Culkin quickly located a copy of that program. After viewing it, his response was, “Why haven’t I heard of this?” A few days later he located John Malone's phone number and called him. “I’ve seen this program,” he explained. “Have you got any classes around Chicago?”

Malone told him, “I know one we’ve got in town. The others are out of town. There’s a sprinkling around, but this one is pretty good.”

The Howalton Day School was located in inner city Chicago, and met in a local Methodist Church. In 1973 Unifon arrived at the Howalton Day School. Dr. Ratz called Ms. Elisabeth Jones out of retirement to teach Unifon classes for three years. The resources were severely limited, but together Ms. Jones and Dr. Ratz prepared the teaching materials. The challenge they had to overcome at Howalton was the economic, environmental and cultural barriers that discouraged African Americans from developing self-esteem.

It was just before Christmas vacation when Dr. Culkin called Mr. Malone and asked to see Unifon in action. Culkin arranged to come to Chicago in January, 1974, and Malone set up a visit to the Howalton school. Dr. Ratz was invited, but she couldn’t be there. John Culkin had asked to see Unifon in action. Malone apologized, saying that the children had already abandoned it.

Dr. Culkin asked the teacher, Ms. Elizabeth Jones, if one of her students could read something for him. Ms. Jones said “Who wants to read for Dr. Culkin?” All the hands went up.

Culkin chose a little girl, and asked, “Do you want to pick your book?”

The child said, “Oh, any one of them.”

Mr. Malone relates that the girl could read so well that John Culkin stood with his mouth open in amazement. Before that day was over, most of the students had read something for Dr. Culkin. There were some 100 books to choose from, in traditional spelling. Child after child encountered complex words without stumbling. The Howalton Day School became the inspiration for Mr. Culkin to author more than 150 articles about Unifon for various publications. If Dr. Ratz was the primary Unifon apostle, John Culkin became its chief evangelist. On July 20, 1977, Dr. Culkin penned this for The New York Times.

> *"I recently visited the Howalton Day School in Chicago.... For the last three years, the first graders achieved the highest reading scores of all first grade students in the greater Chicago area, urban and suburban, public and private.*
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> *"The students, taking the standard Stanford reading tests using the traditional alphabet, scored at well beyond the third grade level. Some had read as many as 20 books. Mr. Malone supplied the alphabet; Dr. Margaret Ratz provided the pedagogy and training; Mrs. Elizabeth Jones did the teaching.*
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> *"Students had mastered the unifon system by October, were reading and writing by December and had transferred these skills to conventional English by April. Similar results have occurred with extensive experiments involving unifon and the Initial Teaching Alphabet with thousands of students. It works because the children's first experience with print is positive. They become readers and writers simultaneously. They work with their own lively words and they are reading from the first day of the school year. The phonetic alphabet makes sense to the children of the media age."*

In a 1982 article for Science Digest, after the results were tabulated, Culkin was able to add this statistical footnote: "At the private Howalton School in Chicago, first graders who learned to read with the Unifon alphabet tested at the 3.8 grade level."

The efforts of John Culkin resulted in Unifon making some inroads to commercial applications which, at the time, were very expensive. Western Publishing Company had invested over $1,000,000 in printed Unifon resources to be used in classroom instruction. Nu-Vue-Cue, a school for the deaf, implemented Unifon successfully. Smith Corona made Unifon typewriters. IBM made Unifon typing balls for their Selectric Typewriters. Apple Computer developed the fonts and a keyboard layout for four American Indian tribes that used Unifon to memorialize their languages.

According to Science Digest, the two Unifon articles that John Culkin wrote for them elicited more reader response than any others they had ever published. By his untimely death in 1994, John Culkin had made Unifon known well enough that The New York Times had developed a Unifon font and was planning to feature a Unifon page in that newspaper.

Today, technologies have merged, at the dawn of the information age, so that all these resources may be duplicated and implemented in a short time and without massive funding.

We know that from 1974 until her retirement, Dr Ratz continued to instruct teachers and students in Unifon. Recently we discovered that even in her retirement years Dr. Ratz continued to tutor students. One of them sent an e-mail to the Unifon web site at www.unifon.org. Her poignant testimony indicates that Dr. Ratz continued to achieve superb results.

> *"Dr. Ratz was the person that turned my life around. My mother was told that I was 'retarded' and that I would never learn to read. My mom found Dr. Ratz. We were living in Venice, FL at the time and would drive to Sarasota every Saturday. I would have to check with my mom to see how long I was tutored by Dr. Ratz. I do know that because of the program I returned to school after the summer reading at a 5th grade level at the beginning of 2nd grade.*

"I am now a teacher. ...This is the third year teaching the program. It is wonderful to see the growth my students make."

"....If she is still alive, I would love to thank her for the impact she made in my life."

Darellee Regnier

Unifon drifted into undeserved oblivion after the untimely death of John Culkin in 1994. What has happened to reading instruction in the years since then? The Unifon and ITA projects have been replaced by such commercial enterprises as the Phonics Game, Reading Readiness, Success for All Foundation and other expensive pre-packaged curricula. Have they done well? Consider the evidence.

In 1982, John Culkin found that 25 million Americans were functionally illiterate. Fast-forward ten years, to 1992. The Educational Testing Service, on behalf of the U.S. Department of Education, conducted the National Adult Literacy Survey (NALS), a comprehensive study of adult literacy. The. NALS concluded that an estimated 40 to 44 million Americans were functionally illiterate. That represents 46 percent to 51 percent of our population. How can we hope to compete on a global scale if half our population cannot read and understand a traffic ticket, a mortgage, a job application or an instruction booklet?

The New York Times, reporting on the NALS figures in 1993, estimated that businesses lose $25 billion to $30 billion per year from lost time accidents and errors that could be traced to our literacy problem. Our prisons have by far the greatest percentage of functional illiterates, along with the corresponding low self-esteem illiteracy fosters.

Children today enter first grade with a spoken vocabulary of 8,000 to 12,000 words. Using any other resource—Pitman ITA, Phonics Game, Fry List, Reading Recovery or anything else—a first grader is still only expected to recognize at the most 250 words. The statistics illustrate the deplorable results of the commercial applications: half the population of the United States is functionally illiterate.

Unifon, taught for three months in kindergarten or first grade, could turn these statistics around. When children learn first with Unifon, they can write any word they can say in less than three months. When they begin the transition to traditional spelling, they discover that 23 of the 26 letters are already familiar to them!

The vision of John Malone and John Culkin, and the dedicated efforts of teachers like Dr. Margaret Ratz and Elizabeth Jones all deserve more than this legacy of apathy. These pioneers saw the potential of Unifon and found a way to make it a reality. The present crisis in education demands no less from us.

Unifon is a phonemic alphabet. Many countries have adopted phonemic or phonetic alphabets to present their written language. Students typically learn to read in three months. There is no need for spelling classes in Spain, for instance, because words are spelled in sound signs, each letter representing one sound.

Children who learn to read early have a deeper sense of self-worth that matures with them into competitive endeavors in high school, throughout college and their work environment. Children who can read and write spend more time in learning math, science, history, social studies and the humanities. They retain for life their joy of learning, whatever the discipline. Unifon students that we have been able to track typically have graduated two years ahead of their peers and have successful, rewarding careers.

While America gives lip service to raising our quality of education, the adult illiteracy rate continues to rise. Our nation is freefalling from its position of economic leadership and there is no parachute. Our schools struggle to qualify for funding under the "No Child Left Behind" (NCLB) Act. Many of them were in danger of losing federal money, causing the new leadership to "dummy down" the NCLB requirements.

In our bulging prisons an ever-greater percentage of inmates suffer from the low self-esteem of not being able to read. Instead of teaching students to read, write and handle basic math first, public schools implement expensive, slick structured programs. Students who fail to excel are called "retarded" and placed in special classes. In spite of the commercial curricula, college freshmen are often required to take remedial English courses before they can pass a basic writing course. Something is seriously wrong with this picture.

If the businesses that are losing $25 billion annually would invest 1/10 of 1% of that loss and unite with community and schools (public, private and home) to provide Unifon resources and instruction, the current downward spiral of our educational system could be reversed. Our children deserve a chance to succeed, to compete, and to lead productive lives. The government, however well meaning, and despite its legislation and funding policies, has proved to be impotent in dealing with our educational crisis. If you want your business to survive, if you believe our children are our most valuable resource, or if you are a concerned parent, you need to communicate with others in your community to discuss the problem and find a solution.

It is time to reconsider Unifon. Based on its forgotten past, Unifon remains the only *proven* accelerator for education. It could enable a school system to qualify for federal money. It will improve the self-esteem of our children. It offers a promise to help reduce our prison population. It may indeed be the best hope for our children to compete in the emerging global economy.