

Testimony on H.406, H.668 & H.669 on Tuesday, January 28, 2020 before the Vermont House
Committee on Education

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My name is Mack Gardner-Morse. I live in Calais, Vermont.

I attend Town Meetings and have attended a number of Selectboard meetings and School Board meetings and have a little understanding of the time commitment and hard work my fellow citizen put in serving our communities and state. I want to take this opportunity to thank you for serving Vermont. I also want to thank you for the opportunity to speak before you today about the education of our children as children are the future of Vermont.

I'm coming to you today as a concerned citizen and a taxpayer. As some of you may know I wrote a commentary in Vermont Digger about reading instruction in Vermont. I have included it as an appendix (Appendix I) to the material I have submitted to this committee.

Today, I'd like to discuss the current problem with reading education in the primary grades in the majority of our Vermont schools which the bills before this committee are trying to address. What are some of the potential causes of the problem? What is the impact not only on our children, but also on Vermont's economy? I'd also like to give the committee more information about our current reading instruction methodology, Balanced Literacy, and the science behind the Structured Literacy proposed in the bills before this committee. But more importantly, I want to discuss the polarization caused when science outcomes do not match one's beliefs. Finally, I'll conclude with my recommendation for these bills.

Let's start with the problem. For me, it was seeing the results of the 2019 National Assessment of Educational Progress or the Nation's Report Card. See Appendix II. Note that there are four achievement levels: "below Basic," "at Basic," "at Proficient," and "at Advanced." As a rough guide, I have included an interpretation based on grade level.

Why is 4th grade reading so important? Around fourth grade is when that crucial shift from "learning to read" to "reading for learning" occurs.^{1,2} Students shift from relying on their spoken vocabulary and start learning new vocabulary from reading. They need to be able to read to do word problems in math. They need to read to learn history, civics and science. Reading becomes critical for their success as learners.

So, what's the problem with these numbers? What would we expect to see for percent of students that cannot read? Two weeks ago, Mr. Donald Tinney, President of the Vermont National Education Association, gave this committee a lot of information from the International Literacy Association (ILA). Quoting from p. 22 of his document, "*In fact, interventions that are appropriately responsive to individual needs have been shown to reduce the number of children with continuing difficulties in reading to below 2% of the population.*" Last week, Dr. Blache

Podhajski, President of the Stern Center, said that 95% of students could be taught to read. So, only 5% cannot read. Let's look at those numbers again. 32% can NOT read! 32% not 2% or 5%. This seems like a problem to me. What do you think?

As a citizen of Vermont, I find these numbers very troubling for their implication for our children and their reading abilities. I also find it incredulous that no educational leader nor any political leader think these numbers are a problem. What if the State Highway Department plowed the roads and used the truck's wings to push back the snow banks on 9% of the roads, just plowed 28% of the roads, only plowed one lane on 31% of the roads and did not plow 32% of the roads? Would our leaders be silent? What if the response from the Agency of Transportation was, "Well, four-wheel drive vehicles were able to get through?" I'd like our roads so that everyone can use them. I'd like our education system to teach everyone to read. Before we can solve a problem, we must first define the problem. There is a problem with our reading instruction.

How many think this is a special education problem? Which disability has a problem with reading? Students with dyslexia or a specific learning disability with a reading impairment. How many dyslexic students are on IEPs? Slightly less than 5% of all students are on IEPs for a specific learning disability. Approximately 80% of those students are dyslexic. So, approximately 4% of all students have a reading disability. Even if all 4% cannot read that still leaves 28% who cannot read! This is NOT a special education problem. This is a general education problem.

A member of the Vermont Board of Education lays the blame on the socioeconomic status of our children.³ In 2017, Vermont's poverty rate was 11.3%.⁴ If all of them could not read that still leaves 20.7% who cannot read. So poverty does not explain our reading outcomes. Two other points. One, while there is a strong correlation between educational outcome and socioeconomic status in the United States, there are many countries where this correlation is a lot less.⁵ For example, there is a smaller correlation in our neighbor to the North, Canada.⁵ Wouldn't it be nice if education could still be a path to upward mobility? Two, a student's socioeconomic status follows a distribution. So while socioeconomic status may lower the average scores it would not change the distribution of scores.

So, what else is wrong with these numbers? Generally when you test the achievement of a skill there is a distribution of achievement. Only a few are very good, a lot are pretty good and only a few are not good at the skill. The distribution roughly follows a Bell curve with the majority in the middle with tails on either side. Let's look at these numbers. Which achievement level is the biggest? Is it in the middle? NO! The biggest level are the children who cannot read! It is NOT a tail. Is anyone else troubled by these numbers?

Has anyone stated a cause for our student's poor performance in reading? These children have been in our educational system for four years. So, it's not lack of instruction. So, what is the cause? Has anyone mentioned poor instruction? What other cause is going to cause so many normal students to fail to learn to read? That skewed distribution is the result of poor reading instruction. Let's call a spade a spade!

Other people have testified to the educational and emotional harm inflicted on students who fail to read. I'd like to address the economic impact of our failure to effectively teach reading.

In a study from 12 rounds of international assessments conducted between 1964 and 2003, researchers found “... a close relationship between educational achievement and GDP [gross domestic product] growth that is remarkably stable ...”⁶ This means that countries that score higher had more economic growth and this held true over the almost 40 years of testing. This suggests that by failing to educate our students to read, there are economic consequences for Vermont.

In 1999, Governor Howard Dean stated, “The truth is that in our prisons, 85-90 percent of the inmates are dropouts, most because they never could figure out how to read.”⁷ Does anyone remember when it was discovered that some creative prisoner had put a pig-shaped spot on the cow on the Vermont State Seal that is put on the side of State Police cruisers? I thought that was funny. What if instead of paying to incarcerate that person, that person was employed and paying taxes and using their creativity to improve products or provide better customer service? Wouldn't that make this State better?

So if poor reading instruction is the cause, what are we using for reading instruction? 40 years ago the teachers in the State were using Whole Language to teach reading which did not include any phonetics. After the Reading Panel's conclusion on the importance of phonetics to effectively teach reading in 2000, Whole Language added a sprinkling of phonetics “in context” and was re-branded as Balanced Literacy. However, the phonetics is not taught explicitly, in a multisensory and sequential way. So we have been using Balanced Literacy such as Fountas and Pinnell for almost 20 years! What are the results? What has been Vermont's experience? 63% of our children are not proficient at reading! Almost 2/3. 32% of our children cannot read! Almost 1/3. Does this committee think this is effective reading instruction? We do not need to judge who is right in the reading wars. The proof is in the pudding. Balanced Literacy is failing to teach our children to read!

What is the response from our educational leaders? Mr. Tinney from the Vermont NEA says that we already have an effective intervention in Reading Recovery. Reading Recovery was developed by New Zealand educator Marie Clay and brought to the United States by Dr. Gay Pinnell in 1984. Marie Clay also consults with Drs. Irene Fountas and Gay Pinnell in the Fountas and Pinnell leveled literacy method of teaching reading. What is Reading Recovery? Reading Recovery is an intensive intervention for first graders requiring a trained teacher for a half hour of 1-to-1 instruction five days a week for 12 to 20 weeks. What is the criticism of Reading Recovery? See Appendix III. Reading Recovery is not effective for the lowest performing students and Reading Recovery studies typically exclude 25-40% of the poorest performing students from the data analysis.⁸ When students do not perform well in Reading Recovery they may experience problems with self-esteem.⁸ The phonics instruction in Reading Recovery is not sufficiently explicit. Students who do not respond to Reading Recovery are weak in phonological awareness.⁸ Reading Recovery is expensive – costing almost \$8,000 per student.⁸ Researchers also questioned a newer study of the effectiveness of Reading Recovery.^{9,10}

Are these claims valid? We have been using Reading Recovery for extra support to our first graders for 35 years. What's the long term outcome for the lowest performing students? Let's look at the numbers. 32% cannot read. These children needed remediation that worked. Did their intervention work? No, it did not. As a taxpayer, I do not think we should spend educational tax dollars on an expensive intervention that does not work!

Almost all teachers are taught and trained in using Balanced Literacy. Most teachers use Balanced Literacy in their teaching practice. They could not use Balanced Literacy if they did not believe that it is effective. When presented with scientific evidence that using explicit multisensory sequential and systematic phonics is more effective, the teaching profession has doubled down and refused to use it and instead will use any method but explicit phonics! Why? As Dr. Mark Seidenberg notes, "One thing that we've learned from climate change and the other issues over which we have polarization in this country is that facts aren't the thing that change people's beliefs. In fact, confronted with data that contradict deeply held beliefs, instead of bringing people closer together, it can have the paradoxical effects of entrenching them further."^{11,12} Why should teachers change their beliefs when none of their profession's leaders: not professors, union presidents, principals, superintendents nor the Secretary of Education have come out in support of explicit and systematic phonics?

Why do we need a law? Because there are societal costs to not changing to a more effective reading instruction method. Besides the economic loss to Vermont, there are the educational and emotional harm to our children. We have laws about the use of seat belts. If someone is injured while not wearing a seat belt there probably will be additional days of lost work. If the person also does not have insurance, the rest of society pays. The sooner we pass a law requiring a change to effective reading instruction, the sooner we can minimize the harm to our children.

What are the benefits of a law? The law would help school boards direct the use of Structured Literacy, support schools and school administrators that want to adapt Structured Literacy and support teachers who want training in Structured Literacy. What if we had adapted this law 20 years ago based on the recommendations of the National Reading Panel? Teachers would not be feeling threatened today because they would have learned to read using Structured Literacy, been taught and trained in their teaching training program in Structured Literacy and would now be using Structured Literacy to effectively teach reading.

For more specific comments about the bills, I think the bills would benefit from a preamble that defines the problem: Around fourth grade is when that crucial shift from "learning to read" to "reading for learning" occurs. 63% of Vermont's fourth graders are not proficient readers and 32% of the fourth graders cannot read. This impacts their life-long learning and ability to participate fully in life. It is imperative that reading instruction is improved.

I think the focus on K-3 reading instruction is appropriate. As I've already stated, around fourth grade is when that crucial shift from "learning to read" to "reading for learning" occurs.^{1,2} So, reading instruction in K-3 is critical. I disagree with Mr. Tinney's statement that "Many boys, for example, may not be developmental ready to receive reading instruction until grade

four or five.” This statement perpetuates the myth that struggling readers will “grow out” of their problem and the stereotype that reading is harder for boys.

Mr. Tinney spoke against mandating a specific pedagogical practice. I disagree. To not mandate a specific approach would maintain the *status quo*. In the 20 years since the recommendations of the National Reading Panel, teachers could use any method they choose. What is the result? 32% of fourth graders cannot read! Structured Literacy needs to be the primary instructional method. Both Mr. Tinney and Dr. Lipson reference International Literacy Association (ILA) information. In 2019, the ILA released a literacy leadership brief supporting the use of explicit and systematic phonics instruction.¹³ See Appendix IV. Quoting from the brief, “The question of whether to include phonics instruction has been resolved. The answer is yes. The discussion now should be how to include phonics instruction as part of an overall literacy plan that is efficient, effective, and timely for all students. ... Although phonics can be taught in different ways, research supports instruction that is explicit and systematic.”¹³

I also strongly support including the definition and use of the term “dyslexia” in these bills. Dyslexia is a hidden disability that has been adversely affected by the lack of Structured Literacy. Mr. Tinney suggests that the American Psychiatric Association has dropped dyslexia from its Diagnostic Statistical Manual (DSM-5). The term has not been dropped. Here is p. 67 from DSM-5¹⁴ (Appendix V) which includes the following guidance: “Dyslexia is an alternative term used to refer to a pattern of learning difficulties characterized by problems with accurate or fluent word recognition, poor decoding, and poor spelling abilities.” The medical community including psychiatrist, pediatricians and the National Institutes of Health continue to define and use dyslexia. A more complete rebuttal¹⁵ to the letter referenced in Mr. Tinney’s comments is provided as Appendix VI. The importance of the term dyslexia is outlined in an International Dyslexia Association (IDA) response to the book, “The Dyslexia Debate”.¹⁶ See Appendix VII.

On p. 5 of the side-to-side comparison of the bills, on the second to last line, I’d change “beginning with the student’s easiest and most” to “beginning with the English language’s easiest and most”.

With so many struggling readers, it has become more difficult to identify dyslexic students who are struggling with phonemic awareness. Early identification and intervention are essential to helping these children. As Dr. Sally Shaywitz states in *Overcoming Dyslexia*, “The human brain is resilient, but there is no question that early intervention and treatment bring about more positive change at a faster pace than an intervention provided to an older child. The sooner a diagnosis is made, the quicker your child can get help, and the more likely you are to prevent secondary blows to her self-esteem.”¹⁷

Before I continue, I’d like to show a short video from Reading Matters to Maine.¹⁸

In reviewing the current standards for elementary education teacher, I was dismayed to see that the standard does not include the relationship between spoken and written language. While the standard includes the concept of the developmental progression of phonological and phonemic awareness, there is no reference on how to use explicit multisensory sequential and systematic phonics for reading instruction. I think the standard needs to include an introduction

to linguistics so that teachers will have an understanding about how language is acquired. The standard should include the phonemes and how they should be taught. Also, teacher training should include supervised experiences using Structured Literacy.

If we want teachers to teach phonics, I think teachers should be tested on this knowledge. I would suggest adding to these bills that the Vermont Standards Board for Professional Educators adopt the Massachusetts Tests for Educators.

Finally, these bills do not include any penalty nor incentives for teacher training programs and school districts to adopt Structured Literacy. I think an incentive of 100 million dollars spread over several years to help defray the cost of teacher training is appropriate.

Thank you for your time and attention. I'm more than happy to answer questions or discuss these issues. Thank you.

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Appendices

Appendix I

Mack Gardner-Morse's Vermont Digger Commentary: State's declining reading scores mandate change.

<https://vtdigger.org/2019/12/09/mack-gardner-morse-declining-reading-scores-mandate-change/>

Appendix II

2019 National Assessment of Educational Progress for Vermont's Fourth Graders in Reading. U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), 2019 Reading Assessment.

<https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/ndecore/xplore/nde>

Appendix III

Experts Say Reading Recovery Is Not Effective, Leaves Too Many Children Behind: An Open Letter from Reading Researchers, May 20, 2002.

<https://www.wrightslaw.com/info/read.rr.ltr.experts.htm>

Appendix IV

The International Literacy Association's Literacy Leadership Brief: Meeting the Challenges of Early Literacy Phonics Instruction, 2019.

<https://www.literacyworldwide.org/docs/default-source/where-we-stand/ila-meeting-challenges-early-literacy-phonics-instruction.pdf>

Appendix V

American Psychiatric Association. (2013). Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders (5th ed.). Washington, DC: Author. p. 67.

Appendix VI

Dykstra Steven P. "In Defense of Facts: A Reply to 57 Reading Voices on the Issue of Dyslexia", June 2019.

<https://dyslexiaida.org/in-defense-of-facts-a-reply-to-57-reading-voices-on-the-issue-of-dyslexia/>

Appendix VII

Malchow, Hal. IDA Responds to the "Dyslexia Debate", International Dyslexia Association (IDA), April 2014.

<https://dyslexiaida.org/dyslexia-debate/>

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09 December 2019

Declining Scores Mandate Change in Vermont's Reading Education

Around fourth grade is when that crucial shift from “learning to read” to “reading for learning” occurs.^{1,2} The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) has four achievement levels: “below Basic,” “at Basic,” “at Proficient,” and “at Advanced.” According to the NAEP, 32% of Vermont’s fourth graders are “below Basic.”³ U.S. Education Secretary Betsy DeVos said, “Let’s be honest about what ‘below Basic’ really is: They can’t read. In case you’re missing the obvious: That, my friends, is the headline.”⁴ After three years of education, almost a third of our fourth graders cannot read!

What’s the response from education leaders? One is to downplay the tests. The tests “have no meaningful relationship with economic development”⁵ or are only “one metric of education outcomes.”⁶ These are true statements. However, skills-based tests such as the NAEP are very good at determining if students can or cannot read.

Education leaders also shift the blame *away* from our education system, citing societal ills instead – poor nutrition, lazy students, parents not reading to their children, single parent or broken homes, both parents working, screen time (television, computers and/or smart phones), mental health problems, drugs and/or poverty. While poverty does correlate with tests scores,⁵ correlation does not mean causation. Vermont’s poverty rate has been relatively flat since the end of the 2008 economic downturn (12.7% in 2010 to 11.3% in 2017).⁷ So if our poverty rate is relatively flat, why have our fourth grade reading scores been declining for 17 straight years?⁸ Stop downplaying the tests and shifting the blame. Vermont needs to change an education system where after three years of education, almost a third of our fourth grade students cannot read!

The balanced literacy approach and its predecessors have been the dominate teaching method for reading in Vermont for more than 40 years. My school district uses the Fountas and Pinnell Literacy program which is based on the balanced literacy approach to teaching reading. Recent reports note that this type of approach is not supported by cognitive science research.^{9,10} This approach may be harmful to some students and make reading remediation more difficult.⁹ In the upper grades, the books in Fountas and Pinnell Leveled Literacy intervention reinforce racial stereotypes.¹¹

Between 5 and 15% of students have dyslexia.¹² According to the International Dyslexia Association (IDA), “The most difficult problem for students with dyslexia is learning to read. Unfortunately, popularly employed reading approaches, such as Guided Reading or Balanced Literacy, are not effective for struggling readers. These approaches are especially ineffective for students with dyslexia because they do not focus on the decoding skills [sequential phonics] these students need to succeed in reading.”¹³ So why is Vermont continuing to use a teaching approach that 1) fails to teach almost a third of our fourth graders to read, 2) has led to 17

straight years of declining reading scores, 3) is not effective for up to 15% of our students, 4) is not based on cognitive science research, 5) makes reading remediation more difficult, and 6) reinforces racial stereotypes?

For general reading instruction (Tier 1), the legislative report by District Management Group recommends, "Investing in the effectiveness of core reading instruction is critical for students in general education and students with disabilities, and can ultimately reduce the number of students in Tier 2 and special education reading interventions."¹⁴ According to the IDA, "What *does* work is Structured Literacy, which prepares students to decode words in an explicit and systematic manner. This approach not only helps students with dyslexia, but there is substantial evidence that it is more effective for all readers."¹³ Recently, the International Literacy Association has put out a new brief endorsing "systematic and explicit" phonics in all early reading instruction.^{15,16} Vermont needs to change to a Structured Literacy approach for teaching reading.

Making this change in literacy education requires all of Vermont to come together to improve the education for all of our young readers. Question your education leaders. Ask if your school uses a Guided Reading or Balanced Literacy approach, teaching little phonics? Or is your school using a Structured Literacy approach with explicit and systematic phonics? Make this change happen.

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2019 National Assessment of Educational Progress (The Nation's Report Card)

Vermont's Percentages at each Achievement Level for Grade 4 Reading

below Basic (Can NOT Read)	at Basic (Below Grade Level)	at Proficient (At Grade Level)	at Advanced (Above Grade Level)
32%	31%	28%	9%

U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), 2019 Reading Assessment.
<https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/ndecore/xplore/nde>

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Experts Say Reading Recovery Is Not Effective, Leaves Too Many Children Behind

An Open Letter from Reading Researchers

May 20, 2002

Note to the Reader: In this open letter, more than 30 international reading researchers expressed concerns about the continued use of Reading Recovery. These experts urged policy makers, educational leaders, researchers, and federal research organizations to acknowledge the weaknesses of Reading Recovery.

They concluded, "Reading Recovery leaves too many students behind."

- Letter Begins -

We are an international group of researchers who study reading development and interventions with struggling readers. This letter responds to a number of questions that have been raised by educators, policymakers, and parents about the effectiveness of Reading Recovery, a tutoring program designed for struggling first grade students. We hope the following summary analysis will be helpful to those who are considering the most effective ways to help struggling students become proficient readers.

These are not isolated opinions and the findings here are summaries of several peer-reviewed studies and syntheses of research on Reading Recovery. However, it is not our goal to discredit Reading Recovery, but as with any other program, outline its weaknesses to suggest how it can be improved. We believe this should be done for any program that is widely used to address reading difficulties.

1. Reading Recovery is not successful with its targeted student population, the lowest performing students.

There is little evidence to show that Reading Recovery has proved successful with the lowest performing students. Reading Recovery targets the lowest 10-20 percent of first graders who have the prerequisite skills for Reading Recovery.

While research distributed by the developers of Reading Recovery indicates a positive effect of the program, analyses by independent researchers have found serious problems with these conclusions. Studies conducted by researchers associated with Reading Recovery typically exclude 25-40% of the poorest performing students from the data analysis.

In contrast, the studies funded by the National Institute for Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) and the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) in the Department of Education never purposely exclude a child. The data on efficacy is based on all those who are enrolled and available for follow-up. This is known as an "intent to treat" approach, which is standard for any evaluative research.

Reading Recovery's "in-house research" does not follow an "intent to treat" approach. In fact, for the poorest readers, empirical syntheses of "in-house" and independent studies indicate that Reading Recovery is not effective.

In Elbaum et al. (2000), the gains for the poorest readers instructed with Reading Recovery were almost zero. There is also evidence that students who do complete the Reading Recovery sequence in first grade lose much of their gains, even in the 65-75% of better students who finish the program (Hiebert, 1994; Shanahan & Barr, 1995; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998; Tunmer & Chapman, in press b).

A recent study by a group from New Zealand (Chapman, Tunmer, & Prochnow, 2001) shows that students in Reading Recovery may experience problems with self-esteem when they do not perform well. One of the authors, Chapman, stated in an interview with a New Zealand newspaper (The Press, November 1, 1999) "Students actually declined in self-esteem throughout the course of the program and continued to show no acceleration or improvement in the period

following the programme.”(See also Tunmer & Chapman, in press a).

2. Reading Recovery is not a cost effective solution.

Even if it were maximally effective, Reading Recovery is not cost effective because the developers require one-to-one interventions by highly trained teachers. An analysis by Hiebert (1994) found that Reading Recovery was very expensive, costing over \$8,000 per student, reflecting in part the costs of training.

But Elbaum et al. (2000) found that students who participated in Reading Recovery did not outperform students who were provided one-on-one reading instruction by trained volunteers. At least two studies have compared Reading Recovery in a one-to-one grouping with a modified version of “Reading Recovery” administered to a small group (by definition this can’t be Reading Recovery; Evans, 1996; Iversen, 1997). There was no advantage of one-to-one instruction over small group instruction.

There are other first grade programs that are demonstrably efficacious, impact more students because they do not require 1:1 tutoring, are easier to implement, and do a better job than Reading Recovery of improving student reading skills because they do not drop students (Snow et al., 1998; Torgesen, 2000).

Altogether, several studies indicate that teacher: student groupings of 1:3 work as well as groupings of 1:1 (Elbaum et al., 2000). Many of the current NICHD and OSEP pullout interventions utilize group sizes of 1:3 and higher. Thus, solely by virtue of the number of students who can be reached, Reading Recovery is at least 200% more expensive than other first grade interventions.

Reading Recovery specifically states that it is not a program for groups, but provides little empirical support for this philosophy. This philosophy is inconsistent with the research on early intervention.

3. Reading Recovery efficacy studies do not use standard assessment measures.

Most evaluations are restricted to the Reading Recovery developers’ own, nonstandard measures. These same measures are used to determine which students will be considered as part of the sample (continued versus discontinued students). Thus, outcomes are inflated and unconvincing to the research community.

The primary outcome measure used by Reading Recovery “in-house” researchers that has shown the largest effect is an assessment of “text reading” developed by the authors. However, even Reading Recovery specialists acknowledge that “The text reading measure is not an equal interval scale, that is, there are smaller differences in the beginning levels than at upper levels. For beginning readers, it is necessary to look at the reader’s progress in more detail” (Askew et al., 1998, p.10).

Obvious candidates would involve continuous progress monitoring as implemented in numerous research studies and norm referenced tests that are widely available and commonly used in reading intervention research. With use of standard measures like those implemented by independent researchers, student performance could be compared across studies, permitting calculation of response to instruction based on the number of hours of instruction across interventions (see Torgesen, 2000).

4. Reading Recovery does not change by capitalizing on research.

Reading Recovery developers have been and continue to be resistant to integrating the findings of independent, scientifically based reading research into their program and making it more cost effective. The failure to attend to research in modifying the program is its major downfall.

The lack of efficacy of Reading Recovery with the poorest readers is not surprising given the research base that highlights the importance of explicit teaching of phonics for this group. Reading Recovery teaches phonics, but the instruction is not sufficiently explicit. A common finding in research on Reading Recovery is that those students who do not respond are weak in phonological awareness (Snow et al., 1998; Tunmer & Chapman, in press b).

In fact, research by New Zealand researchers Iverson and Tunmer (1993) in which an explicit phonics component was added to a standard Reading Recovery intervention reduced the time required to complete the program by about 30%. Morris, Tyner, and Perney (2000) found that a reading program constructed like Reading Recovery with the addition of an explicit component addressing spelling-to-sound patterns was highly effective, even with those students most at risk.

Reading Recovery has been independently evaluated in New Zealand, the country in which it was developed. These researchers, who have cosigned this letter, asked that this summary be included:

“In New Zealand, where Reading Recovery was developed, the programme has been independently examined on two occasions. Both studies found shortcomings. In essence, the programme is failing to meet the claims regarding its objectives and success.

"Senior Reading Recovery administrators have also overtly blocked attempts by graduate students to independently examine aspects of Reading Recovery. The New Zealand Ministry of Education has stated that because of copyright issues, the Ministry is unable to make changes to the program.

"Despite strong evidence in New Zealand, Australia, and the US that changes are needed to make Reading Recovery more effective, Reading Recovery leaders do not seem willing to incorporate the findings of such research to make the programme more effective. There is and has been considerable debate about the efficacy of Reading Recovery in New Zealand; this debate is indicative of an increasing dissatisfaction among researchers and some educators about the nature of the Reading Recovery programme.

"Finally, the Ministry of Education commissioned a report from the "Literacy Experts Group", released in 1999. Included in this report was a recommendation, unanimously agreed to by experts from the full spectrum of views on reading: "We recommend that Reading Recovery place greater emphasis on explicit instruction in phonological awareness and the use of spelling-to-sound patterns in recognizing unfamiliar words in text." This recommendation has not been adopted by Reading Recovery.”

There are three additions that would impact positively the number of students who benefit from Reading Recovery, their rate of progress, and reduce costs:

- (1) increased group size;
- (2) explicit instruction in phonics and phonemic awareness; and
- (3) use of standardized outcome measures and continuous progress monitoring.

These additions have been ignored despite research summarized in the National Research Council report, Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children, which specifically outlined many of these concerns (Snow et al., 1998, pp. 255-258), the National Reading Panel report, the New Zealand Ministry of Education, and various reviews suggesting that such steps would greatly benefit students who are placed in Reading Recovery.

In summary, the Reading First initiative, recently enacted into law as part of the [No Child Left Behind Act of 2002](#), requires the use of [scientifically based classroom reading instruction for all students](#).

Even with the best classroom instruction, there will still be some students who don't make adequate progress and need additional, more intensive instruction. Reading Recovery has not met the needs of these lowest performing students. Most significantly, its excessive costs can make it more difficult for a school to provide help for all students in need, especially those who are behind in the upper grades.

Thus, Reading Recovery is not a productive investment of taxpayers' money or students' time and is a classic example of a "one size fits all" method.

No single method works with all students. Methods like Reading Recovery that are rigidly implemented and limited in

the number of components of effective reading instruction will not work with all students.

Reading Recovery leaves too many students behind.

Sincerely,

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LITERACY LEADERSHIP BRIEF

Meeting the Challenges of Early Literacy Phonics Instruction

Learning to read can, at times, seem almost magical. A child sits in front of a book and transforms those squiggles and lines into sounds, puts those sounds together to make words, and puts those words together to make meaning.

But it's not magical.

English is an alphabetic language. We have 26 letters. These letters, in various combinations, represent the 44 sounds in our language. Teaching students the basic letter–sound combinations gives them access to sounding out approximately 84% of the words in English print. Of course, equal amounts of time need to be spent on teaching the meanings of these words, but the learning of these basic phonics skills is essential to becoming a fluent reader.

Research has shown the power of this early instruction in phonics for young students' reading and writing development. Government-funded documents have shown that phonics instruction is helpful for all students, harmful for none, and crucial for some. A recent brain research study out of Stanford explained how beginning readers who focus on letter–sound relationships, or phonics, instead of trying to learn whole words, increase activity in the area of the brain best wired for reading. And the meta-analysis work has detailed the significant effect size of phonics instruction on students' early reading growth.

So why is there a debate when the research evidence has been consistent for decades? It's because how we translate that research into instructional practice varies widely, resulting in practices that are sometimes ineffective or unbalanced and instructional materials that too often have serious instructional design flaws. Some phonics instruction is random, incomplete, and implicit. Other instruction is overdone and isolated, devoid of the extensive application to authentic reading and writing needed for mastery. Neither is as effective as it needs to be.

Explicit and Systematic Phonics Instruction

The question of whether to include phonics instruction has been resolved. The answer is *yes*. The discussion now should be how to include phonics instruction as part of an overall literacy plan that is efficient, effective, and timely for all students. What does that instruction look like? And how do we overcome

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the common obstacles teachers often face in delivering that instruction?

Although phonics can be taught in different ways, research supports instruction that is explicit and systematic. *Explicit* means that the initial introduction of a letter–sound relationship, or phonics skill, is directly stated to students. For example, we tell students that the /s/ sound is represented by the letter *s*. This is more effective than the discovery method because it does not rely on prerequisite skills that some students might not have.

Being explicit, however, does not mean that students cannot play with letters and sounds during the instructional cycle. In fact, word awareness activities like word building and word sorts allow students to become flexible in their knowledge of sound-spellings and solidifies that learning.

Being *systematic* means that we follow a continuum from easy to more complex skills, slowly introducing each new skill. Systematic instruction includes a review and repetition cycle to achieve mastery and goes from the known to the new in a way that makes the new learning more obvious and easier for students to grasp. For example, after students learn to read simple short-vowel CVC words like *run*, *cat*, and *hop*, they are often introduced to the skill final-*e* as in the words *hate* and *hope*. This is a conceptual leap for young students where, often for the first time, they learn that two letters can work together to make a sound and these letters are not even beside each other in the word. Not easy!

In systematic instruction, teachers display a known word and compare it to the new to highlight this new concept, as in *hop–hope* or *hat–hate*. This side-by-side minimal contrast makes the learning of the new concept more obvious and easier to grasp. The discussion that teachers can have with students about the two words increases students’ word awareness and understanding of how words work. This exemplifies strong phonics instruction: active, engaging, and thought provoking.

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Key Characteristics of Effective Phonics Instruction

In addition to being explicit and systematic, strong phonics instruction has the following seven key characteristics.

Readiness Skills

The two best predictors of early reading success are alphabet recognition and phonemic awareness. These skills open the gate for reading. Alphabet recognition involves learning the names, shapes, and sounds of the letters of the alphabet with fluency. Phonemic awareness is the understanding that words are made up of a series of discrete sounds, called phonemes. A range of subskills is taught to develop phonemic awareness, with oral blending and oral segmentation having the most positive impact on reading and writing development in kindergarten and grade 1 and phonemic manipulation tasks playing a crucial role up to grade 3.

Scope and Sequence

A strong scope and sequence builds from the simple to the complex in a way that takes advantage of previous learning. The sequence allows for many words to be formed as early as possible and focuses on teaching high-utility skills. Although there is no “right” scope and sequence, programs that strive to connect concepts and move through a series of skills in a stair-step way offer the best chance at student success.

Blending

This is the main strategy for teaching students how to sound out words and must be frequently modeled and applied. It is simply the stringing together of letter-sounds to read a word. It is the focus of early phonics instruction but still plays a role when transitioning students from reading monosyllabic to multisyllabic words.

Dictation

To best transfer students’ growing phonics skills to writing, dictation (i.e., guided spelling with teacher think-alouds) is critical and begins in kindergarten. Although not a spelling test, this activity can accelerate students’ spelling abilities and understanding of common English spelling patterns and assist students in using these phonics skills in writing. Used in combination with word building and structured and unstructured writing experiences in phonics instruction, students have increased opportunities to “try out” their developing skills to express ideas in written form.

To best transfer students’ growing phonics skills to writing, dictation is critical and begins in kindergarten.

Word Awareness

Word building and word sorts are key activities to increase students' word awareness. In word building, students are given a set of letter cards and asked to create a series of words in a specific sequence. This increases students' ability to work with letter-sounds flexibly and fully analyze words for their component sounds and spellings. In word sorts, students look for common spelling patterns, engage in discussions about what they learn about words from this examination, and increase their ability to notice larger chunks in words (an important skill as students transition from monosyllabic to multisyllabic words).

High-Frequency Words

High-frequency words are the most common words in English. Some are irregular; that is, they do not follow common English sound-spellings. Others are regular and needed by students during reading before they have the phonics skills to sound them out. The top 250–300 words are generally taught in grades K–2. Past grade 2, when the majority of the key high-frequency words have been introduced, students need to be continually assessed on their mastery of these words, as a lack of fluency can impede comprehension. Some words are more difficult to master (e.g., reversals like *no/on* and *was/saw*, *of/for/from*, and words that begin with *wh* or *th*). More instructional time and assessment needs to be given around these words.

Reading Connected Text

The goal of phonics instruction is to develop students' ability to read connected text independently. Controlled, decodable text (also known as accountable text) at the beginning level of reading instruction helps students develop a sense of comfort in and control over their reading growth and should be a key learning tool in early phonics instruction. The tight connection between what students learn in phonics and what they read is essential for building a faster foundation in early reading. This is especially critical when students encounter less-controlled leveled readers during small-group lessons. These accountable (phonics-based) texts need to be reread to build fluency, discussed to develop comprehension, and written about to provide opportunities for students to apply their growing phonics skills in writing.

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The success of these key characteristics of phonics instruction rests both on the shoulders of highly trained teachers with a background in phonics routines and linguistics and in instructional materials that aid teachers in meeting a wide range of students' phonics needs.

Common Causes of Phonics Instructional Failure

The reality is that the hard work of teaching phonics begins after all these characteristics are in place. Why? Common obstacles related to instruction and instructional materials too often stand in the way of maximizing students' learning of basic phonics skills. These range from a lack of application to authentic reading and writing experiences (where the learning “sticks”) to a lack of review and repetition resulting in decayed learning. The following are the 10 most common phonics instructional obstacles or pitfalls, all of which teachers have some degree of control over.

Inadequate or Nonexistent Review and Repetition Cycle

We underestimate the amount of time it takes young learners to master phonics skills. When a new skill is introduced, it should be systematically and purposefully reviewed for at least the next 4–6 weeks. The goal must be to teach to mastery rather than just exposure. Only then can students transfer the skill to all reading situations. With the fast pacing of most curricula, a more substantial review and repetition cycle often must be added. This can be achieved through increased opportunities to practice previous skills in blending work, dictation, and the repeated readings of previously read accountable texts.

Lack of Application to Real Reading and Writing Experiences

Students progress at a much faster rate in phonics when the bulk of instructional time is spent on applying the skills to authentic reading and writing experiences, rather than isolated skill-and-drill work. At least half of a phonics lesson should be devoted to application exercises. For students who are below level, the amount of reading during phonics instruction must be even greater.

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Accountable texts ... provide more substantial decoding practice and help to scaffold the leap from most phonics lessons to the reading of leveled texts.

Inappropriate Reading Materials to Practice Skills

The connection between what we teach and what we have young learners read has a powerful effect on their word reading strategies and their phonics and spelling skills. It also affects students' motivation to read. Having accountable texts as part of the daily phonics lessons provides more substantial decoding practice and helps to scaffold the leap from most phonics lessons to the reading of leveled texts, which are far less controlled for phonics skills. The amount of control (e.g., decodability) and the amount of time needed in this type of text varies on the basis of student needs. Adherence to a specific percentage of decodability is problematic.

Ineffective Use of the Gradual Release Model

Some teachers of struggling readers spend too much instructional time doing the “heavy lifting,” such as overmodeling and having students simply repeat (e.g., “parrot” activities). Whoever does the thinking in a lesson does the learning. Students might struggle, but they must do the work and the teacher's role is to provide timely corrective feedback and support.

Too Much Time Lost During Transitions

Phonics lessons often require a lot of manipulatives and materials. Transitional times when materials are distributed or collected should be viewed as valuable instructional moments in which review skills can be addressed (e.g., sing the ABC song, do a phonemic awareness task, review letter-sound action rhymes to focus students' attention on an instructional goal). Every minute of a phonics lesson must be instructive. Planning these transitions is critical for their effectiveness.

Limited Teacher Knowledge of Research-Based Phonics Routines and Linguistics

Teachers with a background in phonics or linguistics are better equipped to make meaningful instructional decisions, analyze student errors, and improve the language and delivery of instruction. Also, teacher attitudes toward phonics instructional materials (e.g., decodable text) and routines (e.g., sorts, word building, blending) matter.

Inappropriate Pacing of Lessons

Some teachers spend too much time on activities they enjoy or are easier for students and less time on the more challenging or substantive activities that increase learning. Lessons should be fast paced and rigorous. They should focus on those activities that more quickly move the needle in terms of student learning, such as blending practice, dictation, word awareness activities, and reading and writing about accountable texts.

No Comprehensive or Cumulative Mastery Assessment Tools

Assessment of phonics skills must be done over an extended period of time to ensure mastery. Weekly assessments focusing on one skill often give “false positives.” That is, they show movement toward learning but not mastery. If the skill is not worked on for subsequent weeks, learning can decay. Cumulative assessments help teachers determine which skills truly have been mastered. They are a critical phonics instructional tool.

Cumulative assessments help teachers determine which skills truly have been mastered [and are] a critical phonics instructional tool.

Transitioning to Multisyllabic Words Too Late

Most curricula focus on monosyllabic words in grade 2, yet the stories students read at that grade are filled with more challenging, multisyllabic words. More emphasis needs to be given to transitioning to longer words at this grade (e.g., going from known to new words like *can/candle* and teaching the six major syllable types). This work can begin at the end of grade 1 to provide a closer alignment between phonics instruction and reading demands.

Overdoing It (Especially Isolated Skill Work)

Some curricula overemphasize phonics (especially the isolated skill-and-drill type of work) while ignoring other key aspects of early reading needs (e.g., vocabulary and background knowledge building) that are essential to long-term reading progress. Modifying reading time to provide a better balance is important, because all these skills plant the seeds of comprehension as students encounter increasingly more complex texts.

Phonics instruction is an essential part of early reading and writing instruction. Students need to learn how to efficiently decode words to increase their word recognition skills. The more words students recognize automatically, the better their

reading fluency, which has a powerful effect on their comprehension of text. And that's the point. Phonics instruction is designed to increase students' ability to read and make meaning from text. However, it needs to be done in a way that is most effective and efficient. It is paramount that teachers and creators of curriculum materials take an objective and thorough look at how we improve that instruction to maximize student learning.

MOVING FORWARD

- Embrace early phonics instruction as integral to elementary literacy plan.
- Incorporate explicit and systematic phonics instruction that directly addresses skills, follows a continuum of skill complexity, and includes a review and repetition cycle that leads to eventual skill mastery.
- Assess phonics instruction to ensure key characteristics are in place, including blending, dictation, word awareness, and high-frequency words.

ILA RESOURCES

[*Advocating for Children's Rights to Read*](#)

This manual informs teachers and reading/literacy specialists, administrators, school and public librarians, families and caregivers, and policymakers how to enact the rights in classrooms, communities, and the world.

[*The Case for Children's Rights to Read*](#)

The goal of ILA's Children's Rights to Read campaign is ensuring every child has access to the education, opportunities, and resources needed to read. This companion resource identifies why the 10 fundamental rights were selected.

[*Literacy Glossary*](#)

Curated by a team of literacy experts, this interactive resource defines the shared language of literacy research and instruction.

[*Standards for the Preparation of Literacy Professionals 2017*](#)

This updated resource provides an evidence-based benchmark for the development and evaluation of literacy professional preparation programs.

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About the International Literacy Association

The International Literacy Association (ILA) is a global advocacy and membership organization dedicated to advancing literacy for all through its network of more than 300,000 literacy educators, researchers, and experts across 146 countries. With over 60 years of experience, ILA has set the standard for how literacy is defined, taught, and evaluated. ILA's *Standards for the Preparation of Literacy Professionals 2017* provides an evidence-based benchmark for the development and evaluation of literacy professional preparation programs. ILA collaborates with partners across the world to develop, gather, and disseminate high-quality resources, best practices, and cutting-edge research to empower educators, inspire students, and inform policymakers. ILA publishes *The Reading Teacher*, *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, and *Reading Research Quarterly*, which are peer reviewed and edited by leaders in the field. For more information, visit literacyworldwide.org.



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- B. The affected academic skills are substantially and quantifiably below those expected for the individual's chronological age, and cause significant interference with academic or occupational performance, or with activities of daily living, as confirmed by individually administered standardized achievement measures and comprehensive clinical assessment. For individuals age 17 years and older, a documented history of impairing learning difficulties may be substituted for the standardized assessment.
- C. The learning difficulties begin during school-age years but may not become fully manifest until the demands for those affected academic skills exceed the individual's limited capacities (e.g., as in timed tests, reading or writing lengthy complex reports for a tight deadline, excessively heavy academic loads).
- D. The learning difficulties are not better accounted for by intellectual disabilities, uncorrected visual or auditory acuity, other mental or neurological disorders, psychosocial adversity, lack of proficiency in the language of academic instruction, or inadequate educational instruction.

Note: The four diagnostic criteria are to be met based on a clinical synthesis of the individual's history (developmental, medical, family, educational), school reports, and psycho-educational assessment.

Coding note: Specify all academic domains and subskills that are impaired. When more than one domain is impaired, each one should be coded individually according to the following specifiers.

Specify if:

315.00 (F81.0) With impairment in reading:

Word reading accuracy
Reading rate or fluency
Reading comprehension

Note: *Dyslexia* is an alternative term used to refer to a pattern of learning difficulties characterized by problems with accurate or fluent word recognition, poor decoding, and poor spelling abilities. If dyslexia is used to specify this particular pattern of difficulties, it is important also to specify any additional difficulties that are present, such as difficulties with reading comprehension or math reasoning.

315.2 (F81.81) With impairment in written expression:

Spelling accuracy
Grammar and punctuation accuracy
Clarity or organization of written expression

315.1 (F81.2) With impairment in mathematics:

Number sense
Memorization of arithmetic facts
Accurate or fluent calculation
Accurate math reasoning

Note: *Dyscalculia* is an alternative term used to refer to a pattern of difficulties characterized by problems processing numerical information, learning arithmetic facts, and performing accurate or fluent calculations. If dyscalculia is used to specify this and performing accurate or fluent calculations, it is important also to specify any additional difficulties that are present, such as difficulties with math reasoning or word reasoning accuracy.

Specify current severity:

Mild: Some difficulties learning skills in one or two academic domains, but of mild enough severity that the individual may be able to compensate or function well when provided with appropriate accommodations or support services, especially during the school years.

In Defense of Truth: A reply to 57 Reading Voices on the Issue of Dyslexia Steven P. Dykstra, PhD

Recently, a collection of professors and others wrote a letter to officials at the Public Broadcasting System, taking issue with reports on dyslexia that aired on PBS. The signers of this letter are a list of some of the best-known and most influential reading voices of the past several decades. They are past presidents and officials of the International Literacy Association, members of The Reading Hall of Fame, and authors of books and curricula found in most of the schools and nearly all of the universities in North America. The link to the letter below is hosted by the Reading Recovery Council of North America, purveyor of the widely-marketed Reading Recovery intervention program, completing the triangle with the ILA and university professors that has defined reading instruction and policy in this country for the past 40 years. The common purpose of these partners is to undermine the work of parents and grass roots organizations working to promote the science of reading in opposition to the discredited philosophies, ineffective practices, and failed products the 57 signers prefer. The letter found at this link is also included as Appendix A.

<https://readingrecovery.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Concern-letter-to-PBS.pdf>

The letter makes two arguments: dyslexia is a vague and useless concept describing a condition which they imply may not be real, and there is no agreed upon treatment for dyslexia. They cite three sources in their argument: The American Psychiatric Association, Julian Elliott and Elena Grigorenko's book, *The Dyslexia Debate* (2014), and the International Literacy Association. It is important to note that many the 57 signers of the letter are or have been major leaders of the ILA, so they are essentially citing themselves. While there are many scientific sources which solidly dispute the claims in the letter, this reply is focused on the two independent sources the letter cites, which I will address one at a time.

Dyslexia, the DSM 5, and the American Psychiatric Association

The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th Edition (DSM 5) is a publication of the American Psychiatric Association. The first substantive argument made in the letter is that the APA expressed ambivalence about the validity of dyslexia. ***“That ambivalence is reflected in the American Psychiatric Association's decision to drop dyslexia as a diagnostic category in the current edition of its Diagnostic Statistical Manual, that field's most respected and widely used reference source.”*** (page 1 of the letter).

Had the APA expressed ambivalence about dyslexia or removed it from the DSM, this would be an important argument. However, it is untrue, and no matter how many times the signers or their followers repeat it, it will remain untrue. The APA did not drop dyslexia from the DSM 5, and they freely use the term without ambivalence.

The source of their false claim is a 2013 document from the APA entitled, Specific Learning Disorder (Appendix B) that includes the following sentence: ***The DSM-5 Neurodevelopmental Work Group concluded that the many definitions of dyslexia and dyscalculia meant those terms would not be***

useful as disorder names or in the diagnostic criteria. Since that sentence was published 6 years ago, many who dispute dyslexia and reading science have latched on to it to claim the DSM does not include dyslexia and the APA finds the diagnosis problematic.

In fact, the sentence only refers to the decision to keep the previous taxonomic structure of the DSM, using the term “Specific Learning Disorder” as an umbrella category which includes more specific impairments in math, decoding, writing, and a variety of other specific skills. Rather than address each of these specific impairments as a category unto itself, the APA chose to maintain the previous structure that treats different learning issues as subtypes of Specific Learning Disorder.

This is abundantly clear if the sentence is seen in fuller context:

“Just as in DSM-IV, dyslexia will be included in the descriptive text of specific learning disorder. The DSM-5 Neurodevelopmental Work Group concluded that the many definitions of dyslexia and dyscalculia meant those terms would not be useful as disorder names or in the diagnostic criteria.”

As the document clearly states, dyslexia is included, just as it was in the past. The APA did not ***“drop dyslexia as a diagnostic category in the current edition of its Diagnostic Statistical Manual”*** as the letter claims. If any signers of the letter wanted to check, they could have looked at page 67 of the DSM 5, which includes the following guidance:

“Dyslexia is an alternative term used to refer to a pattern of learning difficulties characterized by problems with accurate or fluent word recognition, poor decoding, and poor spelling abilities.”

Including dyslexia as an alternative term should not be taken as ambivalence for the term. The DSM does not commonly allow alternative terminology. This example, along with similar allowances for dyscalculia and dysgraphia, are among the very few, possibly the only, such allowances. Far from distancing the DSM from dyslexia, it embraces the term by going well outside normal practice, as it did in the previous editions, contrary to the false claim in the letter.

This is all public knowledge, widely published and explained. It is found in the very document the signers so often cite, and the DSM 5 itself to which they refer, but apparently never read.

If the signers needed more evidence of the APA’s attitude toward dyslexia, they could have reviewed the 2018 APA document on Specific Learning Disorders (Appendix C) that lists the three types of Learning Disorders as “dyslexia,” “dysgraphia,” and dyscalculia. The APA uses these allegedly problematic terms with neither ambivalence nor apology. The document uses the term dyslexia eight times, preferring it to alternative terms which are used less often. Furthermore, the APA, recognized as an expert source by the signers of the letter, refers readers to the International Dyslexia Association, a source the signers disparage, for more information, but makes no mention of the International Literacy Association, a source the signers are trying to promote.

The APA not only doesn't take the position the letter signers claim. In important ways, they take the opposite position. This is most striking when we consider the APA's guidance on the treatment of dyslexia, found in the treatment section of 2018 paper:

“Research has shown that the most effective treatments for reading disorder are structured, targeted strategies that address phonological awareness, decoding skills, comprehension and fluency.”

This strikes at the heart of the signers' second claim: that no way of treating dyslexia has been shown to be most effective. The APA, one of only two independent sources cited in the letter, specifically names an instructional approach which the ILA and signers of the letter so often publicly dispute.

The Dyslexia Debate, Elliott and Grigorenko, 2014

This important work argues that the term dyslexia serves little purpose in the educational realm, and may do more harm than good by encouraging excessive effort to distinguish dyslexic children from other struggling readers. The authors do not, as the letter implies, dispute the existence of dyslexia. Instead, they take issue with the possible confusion of dyslexia with other causes of early reading difficulty. While many other scholars and scientists take a different view, there is no doubt The Dyslexia Debate (2014) is an important and serious work of scholarship.

It must be noted, however, that Elliott and Grigorenko are approaching the issue from both a scientific and practical perspective. Those are two separate debates, but the practical debate is worth understanding in reply to the letter.

The core of Elliott and Grigorenko's practical argument is that spending precious time and resources separating dyslexic children from other struggling readers is wasteful since they all need the same approach, tailored to the needs of each child, built on systematic instruction in the alphabetic principle. Elliott and Grigorenko are unambiguous as to what that instruction must include. Chapter 4 of the book is a systematic take down of whole language and so-called "balanced" approaches that minimize phonics and related skills.

“... the suggestion that a common balanced approach is suitable for all children is overly simplistic and potentially misleading...Irrespective of the child's skills, however, it is now widely accepted that a systematic phonics approach usually leads to superior skills when compared to a non-phonics or nonsystematic phonics approach.” The Dyslexia Debate, Elliott and Grigorenko, 2014, pp, 129-130)

Rather than trust my own understanding of their work, I wrote to Julian Elliot to check my interpretation of their position. I wrote:

“Here in the US, and elsewhere I believe, the diagnosis of dyslexia has been seen as the tool for unlocking needed intervention. Sadly, it does not in most cases. These children continue to get mostly the same instruction with a heavy dose of multiple cues and various strategies

which minimize and obscure the importance of the alphabetic code. As one reading specialist said to me, she teaches phonics to struggling readers if she sees they really need it, whenever they get stuck on a word and nothing else works. The idea of something more planned and systematic was offensive to her."

For me, the finite resources argument is pierced if we simply build the decoding aspect of instruction around those elements science tells us matter most (phonics, phonology, phoneme awareness, morphology, etc) and stop spending precious resources (including time) on approaches which do far less good."

Elliott replied:

"Quite agree, Steve."

While I did not reach out to Elena Grigorenko, it is worth mentioning that she serves on the Scientific Board of Directors of the International Dyslexia Association, an organization maligned by the signers.

The letter cites Elliot and Grigorenko without understanding their work. It takes their questions about the term dyslexia out of context and ignores the reasoning behind them. Elliott and Grigorenko support the kind of instruction many of the signers reject, the kind of instruction the signers say is not especially effective in addressing reading difficulties. The only way you can accept Elliot and Grigorenko's argument about dyslexia is to also accept their clear argument that all struggling readers, and all beginning readers, benefit from the same systematic, code-based instruction the letter says is unproven and the signers of the letter have spent their careers resisting.

Summary

The 57 signers of the letter made a number of false claims, including that the APA rejects dyslexia, that the DSM-5 dropped dyslexia as a diagnosis, and that there is no agreed upon best approach to remediating dyslexia. By promoting this misinformation, the signers themselves are responsible for creating much of the confusion over the term "dyslexia" that they decry. While Elliott and Grigorenko do question the term dyslexia (but not the existence of the disorder) and make important arguments against its use, they do so because all children who struggle to read need the same thing, an approach the letter disputes and many of the signers have worked against for most or all of their careers.

We must consider what it says about the state of reading instruction and scholarship that a letter so thick with lies and so thin with facts could attract so many signatures from so many people of influence. By making claims about the DSM and reading instruction which are so clearly untrue, by building an argument on lies and half-truths, the signers have revealed the source of major problems, and it is not in the use of the term "dyslexia."



IDA Responds to the “Dyslexia Debate”

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April 2014

By Hal Malchow, IDA President-Elect

(<http://eida.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/Dyslexia-Logo.png>)

The dyslexia debate is, at first glance, a small one. Julian Elliott and Elena Grigorenko, in their new book, *The Dyslexia Debate*, argue that the term “dyslexia” describes too many conditions, is too broad for diagnosis, and should be replaced by “reading disorders,” a term that is, oddly, even broader and less scientific than the word they seek to replace.



In 2002 the International Dyslexia Association adopted the following definition for dyslexia: “Dyslexia is a specific learning disability that is neurological in origin. It is characterized by difficulties with accurate and/or fluent word recognition and by poor spelling and decoding abilities. These difficulties typically result from a deficit in the phonological component of language that is often unexpected in relation to other cognitive abilities and the provision of effective classroom instruction. Secondary consequences may include problems in reading comprehension and reduced reading experience that can impede growth of vocabulary and background knowledge.” This language is echoed by the NIH (National Institutes of Health) in its own definition.

The International Dyslexia Association recognizes that the term dyslexia often is used inaccurately to describe other conditions associated with reading difficulties. That usage adds confusion and a lack of specificity to the diagnosis of dyslexia. The more we learn about dyslexia and related disorders, the more complex these conditions appear. But in their pursuit of a more perfect definition, Drs. Elliott and Grigorenko overlook real world consequences for people who actually live with the condition they would rename.

The word “dyslexia” serves many purposes. It is written into the laws of our nation and many states to afford remediation, accommodations, and other services to help people with dyslexia succeed. It is a word woven into decades of research and groundbreaking approaches that alleviate the condition it

describes. It offers a common understanding in classrooms across America that reading difficulties are not easily explained by laziness or low intelligence. Instead they may lie in a neurodevelopmental condition that effective teaching methods can address. To avoid confusion about the term “dyslexia,” many states have incorporated the IDA definition into their laws.

Today, we live in a world where complex issues often are reduced to sound bites empty of real content. And in this world, those who tamper with commonly understood language do so at their peril. As Drs. Elliott and Grigorenko have acknowledged, the debate they launched has reached far beyond their own simple question. The dyslexia debate, in some places, has degenerated into a debate about whether dyslexia, as we currently understand it, is real at all. As a result, Drs. Elliott’s and Grigorenko’s own position has been characterized in ways remote from anything they have written or proposed. By tampering with the language, Drs. Elliott and Grigorenko have themselves become misunderstood.

“We believe that ‘dyslexia’ is a beautiful word. True, it describes a category of learning disorders. But it also describes a community, a body of knowledge, a category of law, a more positive sense of self, and a belief about the progress we can achieve together.”

In her eloquent defense of the word “dyslexia,” Maryanne Wolf, a leading reading scientist at Tufts University, stated that what is most important about this word is that it tells a child who struggles to read, “It is not your fault.” My own story speaks to that point. We in this field, whether we be scientists, educators, or advocates, should understand, more than anyone else, the importance of words. Language and limitations in mastering it are the focus of our work. Changing the accepted language of our field may be appropriate for academic speculation. But changing words has no positive consequence for those who live with this condition.

I came to the International Dyslexia Association not as a professional but as a parent. After my son was diagnosed with learning disorders, he entered The Lab School of Washington as a fourth grader unable to read at all. More than a year later, in preparation for a parent conference, I received a twenty-page document describing testing and detailing deficiencies in a number of mental processes, some of which I never imagined existed at all. It was excruciating to read, but finally I reached the last page where his standardized test scores appeared. After learning about all of the things he could not do well, I saw his reading score. He was reading at the fifth grade level.

I don’t recall that the word “dyslexia” ever appeared in that report. Yet this word guided us to a school that could teach him to read. It brought to that school teachers and staff who were inspired by the challenge of teaching children for whom reading acquisition would be a very difficult task. Finally, it told my son that he was not stupid, but simply had a condition that meant he would have to work harder to master some skills.

The word “dyslexia” may not satisfy Drs. Elliott’s and Grikorenko’s standards as a scientific definition. At the International Dyslexia Association we understand the science behind reading disorders. We also understand the power of common language and the mission and purpose it can provide. We believe

that “dyslexia” is a beautiful word. True, it describes a category of learning disorders. But it also describes a community, a body of knowledge, a category of law, a more positive sense of self, and a belief about the progress we can achieve together. We will continue to use the word “dyslexia” now and in the future.

Hal Malchow is a successful businessman and political consultant who has provided fundraising services for groups like the American Red Cross, the Democratic National Committee, the US Olympic committee and many others. He has worked for six presidential candidates. Hal co-authored of The Sword of Darrow, a young adult fantasy novel, with his then eight-year old dyslexic son, Alex. Through that association Hal joined the IDA Board in 2011 and is now the president-elect.

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