EDITOR’S NOTE
Evidence-based literacy instruction can be tailored to individual learning needs. This Spotlight will empower you with strategies to support students with dyslexia; research exploring the potential benefits of the Orton-Gillingham method to teach reading; an analysis of morphology and its ability to help develop students’ vocabularies; insight into properly preparing teachers to apply the science of reading to support students with learning differences; and more.
How Teachers Can Help Students With Dyslexia: What Our Readers Say

By Hayley Hardison

If you have dyslexia, you have a superpower,” says Gaby Edwards, a speech language pathologist at The Odyssey School just outside Baltimore. “Because in order to be diagnosed with dyslexia, your cognitive skills or your intelligence level is extremely high. You have incredible capabilities.”

Dyslexia is a processing disorder that hinders children’s ability to read. Children with dyslexia typically struggle to relate sounds to letters and words, interfering with how they “decode,” or lift words off the page when reading.

We asked our social media followers on Twitter, Facebook, and LinkedIn what teachers can do to support their students with dyslexia. We broke down their responses into five main themes. Here’s what they said.

More training for teachers

Estimates suggest about 3 percent to 7 percent of the population have dyslexia. Not all teachers are well equipped to help these students, commenters said.

“We need to make sure that all teachers understand the way dyslexia works; what it impacts and what it does not. After all, how can students understand their condition if their teachers and schools do not understand it?” wrote 6th grade teacher Kyle Redford in a 2016 Education Week Opinion essay.

Commenters pointed to better teacher training on working with dyslexic students as a foundation to support them.

“Implement curriculum in college to help teachers learn what dyslexia is and how they can help my child. As my child got older, she took on this role.”

— Erin F. S.

“Have teachers understand the term dyslexia is an umbrella that could mean central auditory processing issues, visual discrimination issues, depth perception issues and then have access to diagnostic tests to identify which one student is dealing with and strategies to support students dependent on their learning disability.”

— Peta N.

Employ the ‘science of reading’

Education Week reporter Sarah Schwartz has extensively covered the “science of reading” movement, which pushes for the implementation of an evidence-backed approach to teaching kids how to read.

“In brief, the science of reading embraces the systematic, explicit teaching of sounds and letters. While [students] learn how to crack the code, [they] are also introduced to rich stories and texts that build their background knowledge. Eventually, teachers help students weave these skills together like strands in a rope, allowing them to read more complex texts,” Sarah wrote last July.

More than half the states now mandate a “science of reading” approach to early literacy. The literacy movement has been bolstered by parents of children with dyslexia, who advocate for explicit instruction in phonics, noting that the practice—while crucial for dyslexic students—helps all children learn to read.

EdWeek’s social media followers echoed their support for this approach in helping dyslexic students.

“Learn about the science of reading and how instruction and practice aligned to the body of evidence can make a huge difference for those with dyslexia.”

MEGAN L. P.
with dyslexia have access to the instruction they need to achieve literacy in the early grades.”
— Megan L. P.

“Make learning to decode words as multi-sensory as possible to activate more areas of the brain. Let them use speech to text to get their ideas down without having to try to struggle how to spell words, read aloud text to them, let them use spell check & word prediction software.”
— @Michellspedtchr

**Advocate for universal dyslexia screening**

Proponents of universal screening for dyslexia in the early grades argue that it helps curb the need for interventions for students later in school, and research supports this claim.

EdWeek reporter Elizabeth Heubeck recently wrote about researchers’ findings that “[e]arly identification of struggling readers and subsequent prevention programs can reduce by up to 70 percent the number of children placed in special education ... [and] interventions for struggling readers that start in 4th grade take four times longer than those that start in late kindergarten.”

Commenters seconded the importance of universal screening for dyslexia in the early grades as a pillar of support for dyslexic students.

“Teachers need training about dyslexia and to use universal screening to identify struggling students as early as possible. Early intervention is crucial for students with dyslexia! A structured literacy approach & using evidence-based interventions & instruction is needed.”
— @melbrethour

“They should advocate for universal screening and early intervention in their districts. Dyslexic students need structured literacy interventions asap! Teachers should also learn about dyslexia and how to best support their students.”
— @RachelDelCarlo1

**Provide accommodations**

“Teachers also need to know about the powerful role that accommodations and supports can play in unleashing the capacity of dyslexic students to thrive. Simple tools and adjustments like employing audiobooks, using speech-to-text and predictive spelling apps, and allowing extra time on assessments can be game-changers for students with dyslexia,” wrote teacher Kyle Redford in his EdWeek Opinion essay.

Commenters responding to our query echoed that sentiment, highlighting how useful simple accommodations can be in supporting students with dyslexia.

“The interventions others have mentioned are key. But teachers also need to support the accommodations. There are amazing tech options that empower students. Text-to-speech, annotation, editing to mention a few. Districts need to make it easy for students to access these and teachers/schools need to set up and implement systems for students to access the content digitally (and I am not talking about telling kids to take photos of the work) so they can actually use their accommodations.”
— Debbie A. C.

**Employ tech tools wisely**

Ed tech has made its way into various facets of education. Most educators responding to an EdWeek Research Center survey reported feeling invigorated by the use of these tools in the 2023-24 school year.

The jury is still out on many uses of educational technology, including for students with dyslexia, but some commenters offered up tech-tool suggestions. Here are some examples.

“Aside from all the things we can do, not sure if everyone knows about OpenText. It’s a Google extension that, when turned on, uses enhanced font for assisting reading for dyslexics in all docs and websites. Have a student who said it does make reading a bit easier.”
— Donna B. R.

“Allow them to use text-to-speech programs like Bookshare so they can keep up on their reading assignments.”
— @anntirrell
Deliver Differentiated INCLUSIVE INSTRUCTION

Historically, it’s been challenging to deliver systematic, explicit instruction in foundational reading skills to students who have exhibited barriers to reading. But with accommodations and modifications to instruction, these students can access reading instruction. n2y’s free Differentiation Guide for Reading Instruction provides research- and evidence-based strategies that can meet every student’s unique needs.

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What Is the Orton-Gillingham Method For Teaching Reading?

This evidence-based reading methodology is gaining traction. Learn why

By Elizabeth Heubeck & Jaclyn Borowski

In recent years, the once-esoteric term “evidence-based reading instruction” has spread beyond research institutions to become part of the vernacular of classroom teachers tasked with teaching young children to read.

This increasing popularity of evidence- or science-based reading instruction, which refers to practices proven successful in improving reading achievement, goes hand in hand with efforts in many states to legislate mandatory support for teacher training and instruction in these approaches. As part of this legislation, some states provide lists of approved providers of evidence-based reading methods.

Orton-Gillingham is among them, according to the Institute for Multi-Sensory Education, which trains teachers in the approach, which was once used primarily with children who have dyslexia but is now being used more broadly.

That’s because it contains the five components of evidence-based instruction identified by two national panels on reading and early-literacy instruction: teaching phonemic awareness, systematic phonics lessons, promoting reading fluency, vocabulary learning, and reading comprehension. Underpinning this reading instruction is its multisensory approach, whereby instructors use sight, hearing, touch and movement to help students connect language with letters and words.

Overarching concepts

In simplest terms, Orton-Gillingham, like other evidence-based reading instruction methods, breaks down reading and spelling into smaller tasks involving letters and sounds and then builds on these over time. Critical to the Orton-Gillingham method is that these tasks happen in a “direct and explicit” manner, meaning that students learn the structure of a given sound or word and how it fits into the greater framework of the English language.

The approach also emphasizes the importance of teaching strategies “sequentially,” starting with the more common and predictable sound-symbol connections in English before moving on to more advanced and less predictable concepts, of which there are many.

“English is a deeply opaque language,” said Meredith Scott, a 1st grade teacher at Mountain Mahogany Community School, a charter school in Albuquerque, N.M.

Embedding multisensory strategies into the process of learning to read makes the complicated language more accessible to emerging readers, Scott explained. It’s also what distinguishes Orton-Gillingham from other evidence-based approaches.

Flooding the brain with multisensory messages

Every Orton-Gillingham lesson explicitly involves multiple senses: sight, hearing, touch, and movement, explained Scott. Whether learning to master decoding or encoding of words, students using the Orton-Gillingham method do so by seeing, saying, sounding out, and writing letters.

“It’s giving your brain more information,” Scott said. “The hope is that the more ways we approach and explore learning [reading], the more it can stick with us.”

During an Orton-Gillingham lesson, students might tap their fingers or pound their fists as they say sounds and words; write words directly onto sand- or whipped cream-filled paper plates; or place their hands strategically over their throats and identify the type of consonant they’re saying aloud depending on the vibrations made by their vocal chords.

“All of that [sensory input] is going to help with repetition and automaticity. It also adds a level of fun and play that I think is really important for kids,” Scott said. “You’re pushing them, but in a way that is highly attractive to them.”

The larger question, of course, is: Does Orton-Gillingham help students become better readers?

Research remains sparse

Research into Orton-Gillingham’s effectiveness remains sparse, despite the meth-
odology’s lengthy history. It was developed in the 1930s by neuropsychiatrist Samuel T. Orton and educator-psychologist Anna Gillingham and, initially, used primarily as an intervention for students with dyslexia and related reading delays.

In analyses comparing Orton-Gillingham to other reading interventions for students deemed “with or at risk for word-level reading disabilities,” results were mixed. The first such meta-analysis, in 2006, found insufficient research to draw any significant conclusions. A broader-based meta-analysis in 2021 concluded that, while the effect sizes were not statistically significant, they showed “promise” that the method could positively impact student outcomes.

Despite these inconclusive findings, educators who use the method with fidelity report positive results. For instance, Mountain Mahogany Community School’s 2022 reading proficiency scores reached 50 percent on its state assessment when it began implementing Orton-Gillingham, which was 30 percent better than 2018 results.

“Once students learn the foundational skills [in Orton-Gillingham], they are able to move on to more complex skills knowing they have started to ‘crack the code’ and are scholars working towards strong reading and writing skills,” said Scott. “This empowers students to see themselves as smart, capable students who can use what they know to tackle new, more complex concepts.”
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What Is Morphology? Should Teachers Include It in Reading Instruction?

By Sarah Schwartz

Vocabulary development is often the province of English/language arts instruction. But it’s also a core part of Deaquanita Lancelin’s 9th grade science class in the Pine Bluff schools in Arkansas.

Every few days, Lancelin will spend about 15 minutes breaking down academic language with her students, determining the meaning of different word parts, and how those meanings can offer clues about the definition of the word as a whole.

Take the word “hydroelectric,” which was the focus of a recent lesson. If “hydro” references water, what might that demonstrate about this particular type of electric power?

Lancelin can see the “spark” go off when the meaning clicks for her students, she said. “Especially with kids on all different levels of reading, I think it is a great way to level the playing field and get that understanding,” she said.

These exercises in identifying and defining prefixes, suffixes, and root words are examples of morphology instruction—teaching children how to identify the meaningful units, or morphemes, within words.

Advocates of teaching morphology argue that it can help older students who still struggle to read multisyllabic words, and that it can support deeper and richer vocabulary development as reading becomes more complex and discipline-specific. Morphology instruction is also gaining popularity within the “science of reading” movement, which aims to align classroom practice with research evidence. Organizations such as the Reading League have offered resources on the practice.

Still, exactly how and when—or even if—to teach morphology are open questions, said Kathleen Rastle, a professor of cognitive psychology who studies language, literacy, and learning at the Royal Holloway University of London.

“The research literature on morphological instruction is patchy,” she said. “There’s not a great consensus on what should be taught and when it should be taught, and whether it should be taught explicitly.”

How morphological knowledge develops

Studies show that there are two ways that morphology knowledge matters in reading ability, said Michael Kieffer, an associate professor of literacy education at New York University who studies the language and literacy development of students from linguistically diverse backgrounds.

Knowing prefixes like “inter” and suffixes such as “ly” can help students recognize and decode longer, more complex words. But morphology knowledge also conveys meaning—the prefix “inter,” for example, means between—that can allow students to derive the meaning of words they don’t yet understand, Kieffer said.

When children are just starting to learn to read, most of the words that they come across are morphologically simple, said Rastle. “They need to know that’s a meaningful unit,” she said. Some phonics programs explicitly teach these suffixes as part of early reading instruction, she added.

The complexity of words only increases
from there. In a recent analysis of 1,200 children’s books designed for ages 7 and up, Rastle and her colleagues found over 100,000 unique words—most of which included multiple morphemes. “If you know something about morphology, it dramatically lessens the learning load of learning new words,” she said.

Take the word “unhappiness,” for example. The prefix “un” means not, while the suffix “ness” represents a state or condition. If children know the meaning of these word parts, they may have an easier time understanding that “unhappiness,” means the state of being not happy—even if they have never seen the word before.

Children tend to pick up this knowledge implicitly, through exposure to the same morphemes in different words, Rastle said. “But the key is, it takes a long time, and you have to read a lot,” she added.

Some studies have shown that explicitly teaching the structure of words can improve students’ reading ability.

A 2010 metanalysis focused on students in grades pre-K-6 found that, on average, interventions containing morphology instruction had a modest effect on word reading, spelling, and vocabulary knowledge, when compared to usual classroom instruction.

Still, spending time on morphology might not give teachers more bang for their buck than other interventions.

Some studies in the analysis also compared morphology instruction to an alternative approach, in which researchers trained teachers in the second group on a different type of intervention—such as phonological awareness, or general vocabulary instruction. But there were no statistically significant differences between morphology instruction and these other treatments for word reading or spelling.

When it came to improving students’ vocabulary knowledge, though, morphology instruction had a small edge over other interventions.

Because morphology instruction breaks down words into meaningful parts, it can be a way of “bootstrapping” the English language, said Kieffer—an approach that can be especially helpful for English learners.

“Academic language is really morphologically complex,” Kieffer said. “Particularly for English learners who speak languages with Latin or Greek influences, including Spanish, morphology can help them recognize these cross-linguistic relationships.”

Identifying similar root words across languages is one way that Caitlin Woodburn, a 5th grade EL teacher in Metro Nashville public schools, uses morphology in her instruction. “I think I’ve used the hashtag ‘praise the cognate’ before,” she said, referencing words that have the same origin in different languages.

She also explicitly teaches her students how morphology is linked to parts of speech. The words confusion and confused share the same root, but the “ion” ending indicates a noun, while “confused” is an adjective.

In a 2014 paper, Kieffer and his colleagues tested the effect of a 20-week vocabulary intervention for 6th graders across 14 schools in California, in which about 70 percent of students spoke a language other than English at home. Teachers taught students additional meanings and uses of the words and did morphological analyses with students.

At the end of the intervention, students showed moderate improvement in academic word mastery and a small improvement in reading academic text with academic words, compared to a control group.

What teachers can do

As with other elements of reading, there’s no set amount of time that a teacher should or should not be spending on morphology, said Rastle. Teachers have limited minutes in a day, she said. “You’ve got to think about what the purpose of that instruction is, and what it displaces,” Rastle said.

One thing morphology shouldn’t ever displace is phonics instruction in the early grades, Rastle said. Without a foundational understanding of how letters represent sounds, students are blocked from accessing text, she said.

“I don’t know that [morphology] needs to be a huge focus, among all the other things that teachers need to do in reading instruction,” said Kieffer. “In some sense, it’s just priming students to be more metalinguistic.”

Still, he said, morphology instruction might benefit students who are struggling with decoding multisyllabic words, or students who need to further develop their academic vocabulary, said Kieffer.

The Institute of Education Sciences’ Practice Guide for reading interventions in grades 4-9, recommendations which Kieffer helped author, suggests teaching common prefixes and suffixes to help students decode—and derive the meaning of— multisyllabic words. (IES is the research division of the U.S. Department of Education.)

Some school systems have integrated this kind of morphology instruction into whole-class lessons for all students.

Arkansas has developed a “word attack” protocol, which teachers start using in 3rd grade, said Dianna Herring, the K-12 Science Specialist at the Arkansas River Educational Service Cooperative, who has supported Lancelin’s use of the protocol with her 9th graders in the Pine Bluff district.

Teachers explicitly teach prefixes, suffixes, and base words related to classroom content. In 5th grade science, for example, students might learn the affix “sphere,” meaning a broadly spherical object or region. They can use that knowledge to understand the words, “atmosphere,” “hydrosphere,” and “biosphere,” Herring said. Knowledge of the prefix “bio” could then lead them to a deeper understanding of words like “biography,” or “biological.”

“Instead of just teaching that one word in isolation, we’re teaching those morphemes or those word parts, so every time they see those word parts now, it’s easier for them to assign meaning to that,” she said.

Still, which prefixes and suffixes to teach is another open question, said Rastle. “Of the hundred odd suffixes, many of them don’t occur very often, and they’re not consistent in their meaning,” she said.

If teachers are going to spend time on these word parts in class, Rastle suggested focusing on ones that are used often and have consistent meanings—like “ly,” or “ness.” (The IES Practice Guide also provides a list of most frequently occurring prefixes and suffixes.)

Morphology instruction should also be meaningful and contextualized, said Kieffer. The words that students are deconstructing should be related to the content they’re learning—like the science words in Lancelin’s classroom in Arkansas.

“It takes planning and work, because ‘here’s a list of works with ‘tion’ is easier to do,” Kieffer said, but probably less effective.

Connecting this word-level instruction with the text that students read has benefits, Lancelin said: “It’s making it easier for them to want to read.”
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Students with learning differences may need extra support to thrive in school, engage in classroom discussions, and complete tasks. But all students bring unique strengths and needs to the classroom—whether or not they have diagnosed challenges with executive functioning or a learning disability like dyslexia—educators said.

Education Week asked teachers on social media to share the best advice they’ve received for supporting students with learning differences.

They spotlighted flexibility, inclusivity, and clear communication as keys to success.

1. Provide flexibility and choices in the classroom

Many educators responding to our query cited the importance of flexibility, choice, or differentiation to best support students with learning differences.

Differentiated instruction—defined as “identifying students’ individual learning strengths, needs, and interests and adapting lessons to match them”—is a teaching approach that intends to help diverse groups of students learn together.

Critiques of differentiated instruction largely center around logistical concerns—including a lack of time or training for teachers to effectively implement the approach in the classroom. Check out this series of videos by veteran educators Larry Ferlazzo and Katie Hull to explore low-lift strategies to make activities “accessible for students with all types of gifts and challenges.”

In general, advocates of increased student agency in class say that it improves students’ motivation and academic performance. Here’s why these educators incorporate opportunities for student choice or differentiation to support students with learning differences.

“Recognize that each student has unique needs and abilities. Tailor your teaching methods, materials, and activities to accommodate their learning style, pace, and preferences. This personalized approach can greatly enhance their understanding, engagement, confidence and set them up for success in your classroom.”

— Stephanie R.

“Choice! Give students choice on how to best showcase their learning and it’s a win for all.”

— Jessica B.C.

“Easy! Self-paced learning! I never differentiated any better than when I moved to a model of self-paced, blended, mastery-based instruction where I was legitimately able to work with small groups and one on one most of my time in the classroom. My students were more engaged and I was able to better support each of them along their learning journey, whether through extra support or extension activities.”

— Dustin T.

“Letting students choose things for themselves gives them the ability to do something they are comfortable with, however sometimes we have to encourage them to choose something new. Choice is the key for all learners.”

— Tiffany N. E.

2. Ensure effective communication

Students with learning differences need to feel the confidence that they are being heard at school and the security that comes with clear expectations and feedback, educators said.

In a 2021 opinion essay on supporting students with learning differences, educator Elizabeth Stein wrote: “The best thing we can do to support students with disabilities is to hear what they have to say—and notice how they are perceiving and participating in learning experiences. We must … create experiences that embrace and embed student voice and perspective. And when in doubt of how best to support students—just ask them!”

Educators on social media agreed.

“Feedback is crucial. Build their confidence!”

— @MasonDillard_

“Voice and choice help students feel a sense of control.”

— Lisa M.

“Talk to them about their data. Put it in terms that students can understand and form goals together. Help students gain ownership and (eventually) pride in their progress.”

— @MissStreetSmart

3. Cultivate inclusive environments

Educators and advocates have long cham-
pioned the value of inclusive classroom environments for students with disabilities, including deliberate strategies to include all learners in play, discussions, and activities.

“Research has shown that students with disabilities tend to perform better academically when integrated into general education classrooms, and their peers also gain an understanding and develop acceptance of people who are different from them,” wrote EdWeek reporter Caitlynn Peetz in a recent story about creating inclusive classrooms for blind students.

Educators on social media echoed the importance of welcoming classrooms.

“Have patience and most importantly GRACE”
— Dustin R.

“Accept them for who they are and meet them where they are.”
— Celeste G.

“This goes without saying, but patience, acceptance, and empathy goes a long way.”
— Johnson J. ■
Are your unique learners getting reading instruction that’s intensive, direct, systematic, and built upon the five pillars identified by the National Reading Panel? For appropriate instruction, teachers must pinpoint specific challenges and how they impact a student’s overall success, engagement, and motivation. Boost teacher effectiveness with n2y’s free guide *The Science of Reading: The Five Pillars of Reading Instruction.*

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Educating Dyslexic Students Starts With Educating Teachers About Dyslexia

Understanding the science of reading is a necessary starting point

By Robin Zikmund

I am a mom of a child who has been misunderstood and unsupported in our public school system for more than a decade.

I sent my child off to kindergarten full of excitement. Soon into his school days, my happy, outgoing, confident kid became withdrawn, scared, and anxious. Getting him out the door to school became a challenge.

Full of worry, I reached out to our schools and began to ask questions. The teachers reassured me with common phrases: Relax, give it time, he’s a boy, some kids take longer to develop. But I knew in my gut that something wasn’t right. My story will be familiar to every parent of a child with dyslexia—a story I hope that no other parents will have to share in the future.

I trusted my son’s educators. In fact, I cared very much for them and I could feel their genuine care for me and my son. I trusted they knew and understood what was best to teach my son how to read. They are the ones who studied to become teachers—surely, they know best.

But it quickly became clear that my son’s teachers felt as lost as educators as I did as a parent. It didn’t make sense to any of us why learning was so difficult for my son. He was bright, his vocabulary was beyond that of his peers, and his abilities in some areas came with ease. Why was he struggling with reading?

I now have a plaque on my desk that says, “A Worried Mother Does Better Research Than The FBI,” and it’s so true. I was deeply concerned for my son, so I dove into research.

I came across a dyslexia screener; my son checked every box. The more I learned, the more I understood my son. I went to his teachers and was surprised to discover they didn’t have any real knowledge of this common learning disability. My son’s teachers told me their college-prep programs hadn’t included a single course covering these learning disabilities—disabilities that are covered under federal law.

Multiple special education teachers even told me they were not allowed to call it dyslexia—years after the U.S. Department of Education issued specific guidance correcting that common reluctance. (In 2015, the department’s office of special education and rehabilitative services released a letter to state and local educational administrators to “clarify that there is nothing in the IDEA [Individuals with Disabilities Education Act] that would prohibit the use of the terms dyslexia, dyscalculia, and dysgraphia in IDEA evaluation, eligibility determinations, or IEP [individualized education program] documents.”)

I was confused as to why any teacher would graduate with a degree prepared to teach our youth without a basic knowledge of how to meet the needs of this population of students. Far too many special education teachers leave their universities without the skills to effectively teach reading to children with dyslexia.

By 3rd grade, my son became so withdrawn and full of anxiety and said words no parent should have to hear. “What’s wrong with me? I just want to kill myself, Mom.” My son’s academic struggles quickly expanded to a larger concern for his mental health. I realized our education system was not set up to support students like him. Instead, it is often even detrimental to their well-being.

Imagine going to work each day only to struggle with all the tasks that your colleagues can do with ease; that’s what it’s like for our children with dyslexia.”

ROBIN ZIKMUND
that I would call leaders of change: teachers who follow their instincts and are willing to do whatever it takes to help their students. They ask hard questions of their leaders and do their own research to learn what they may not know. These educators may not know it, but they are the heroes in the lives of many students.

My son has had many teachers eager to meet him where he was, but their access to training and resources was limited. In four short years, he will graduate from high school. If we had left things in the hands of our public school system alone, he would be graduating with a reading level below 3rd grade.

My son is one of the fortunate ones; my family was in a position to hire a dyslexic specialist who started working with my son this past January, in his 8th grade year. In just three short months, the specialist made more progress with him than his school had in a decade. But the cost was more than many families can afford.

Our teachers deserve to attend preparation programs that give them the knowledge and understanding of this common learning disability. Any teacher seeking certification in special education or a master’s degree in literacy certainly deserves to understand the science of reading. They deserve to know the five early-reading components defined by the 2000 National Reading Panel report: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. Change needs to start at the university level in our teacher-prep programs.

I am incredibly grateful for the growing attention the media, many states and school districts, parents, and teachers are giving to our national literacy crisis and the endless work that is being done by the change-makers in education.

To the parents out there of a struggling child, know you are not alone, never question your gut instincts. They are almost always right.

To all the teachers and administrators, join the leaders of change and lead from where you are. Changes are coming. ■

Robin Zikmund is the mother of a rising 9th grader with dyslexia, ADHD, and dysgraphia. She is the founder of the Decoding Dyslexia Idaho chapter and a dyslexia advocate for the Institute for Multi-Sensory Education, an organization dedicated to providing effective structured literacy professional development for all teachers.
Explicit Phonics Instruction: It’s Not Just for Students With Dyslexia

By Kyle Redford

When we know better, we do better." There is something forgiving and medicinal about that teaching mantra.

I am regularly realizing that I could have taught something more effectively or that I should have been more culturally responsive in my language or practices. Content becomes outdated or is later revealed to be incomplete or inaccurate. Some teaching memories haunt me so much that I have had fantasies about finding ways to apologize to former students for the cringe-worthy lessons they’ve endured.

I recently had a wake-up call around reading instruction, and determined I need to intellectually embrace something that I have long suspected: While dyslexics clearly need robust reading instruction (often more specialized and intensive than their peers), their needs are not as distinct from non-dyslexics as I have previously advocated.

This realization—spurred by the extensive research and reporting in the radio documentary Hard Words, by APM Reports’ Emily Hanford—is particularly painful because it is connected to dyslexia advocacy work that I have poured myself into over the past decade. While passionately advocating for the dyslexic’s unique instructional needs in articles and essays, presentations and films, I realize now that my advocacy was perpetuating a false distinction when it comes to best practices for whole-classroom instruction.

Scientists have figured out is that learning to read is not natural—it’s not like learning to talk or walk, in which all you need is immersion or interaction with your environment. Without structured, evidence-based reading instruction with phonics at its core, many students will struggle with reading and spelling. If teachers are not taught the science of reading (and if schools and districts do not employ evidence-based curricula), many students are deprived of explicit and systematic instruction in how written language works.

In this regard, dyslexics are the canaries in the coal mine. It is no wonder their struggles and suffering have grabbed more attention—they are more significant and severe. However, there are many students, ones who don’t struggle with a neurological difference, who I suspect may present as dyslexic because they have simply never been taught the proper skills they need to learn to read, or at least read well.

Effective reading instruction requires teachers to go beyond convincing their students of the importance and wonders of reading. Merely repackaging whole language teaching, which was popularized in the 1980s but has not held up to scientific scrutiny, by adding a sprinkle of phonics here and there is not enough. While reading instruction is enriched by providing book choice, read alouds, and ample time for independent reading—hallmarks of the whole language approach and what’s now called “balanced literacy”—those elements alone will not teach early elementary students to decode words. My own intelligent dyslexic child, common sense, decades of research, and 30 years of teaching have taught me that students who don’t know how to decode never become great readers. There is no magic.

It does not make sense to design our reading programs based on our students who learn to read effortlessly, without much direct instruction, and then assume the rest will manage to teach themselves to read simply through exposure to books. Experts estimate that maybe half of all kids will learn to read with broad instruction that includes just a bit of phonics. There may be some percentage (perhaps 5 percent) who will learn to read without explicit phonics instruction would likely be better spellers, and perhaps also better readers, with it.

It is time to start looking at reading problems as breakdowns in teaching. We can’t hold students responsible for learning skills that we do not explicitly teach them.

A “survival of the fittest” approach to reading creates a profound equity issue. Currently, when students struggle with reading, they often have to go outside the system to gain access to evidence-based reading instruction. Learning to read should not be contingent on parental savvy or financial resources. Weak reading instruction is a betrayal of every student’s potential, but most especially those without alternatives.

After listening to Hard Words, I felt guilt and regret about how I had previously framed much
of my own thinking and advocacy. I even momentarily considered slinking off into a corner and staying quiet. But the stakes are too high for that. Children’s potentials are more important than how this conversation reflects on my own credibility or any fears of possible collegial backlash. My friends in the dyslexia advocacy world may be disappointed that dyslexia is no longer the sole focus of my attention. My teaching colleagues (virtual and real) may be made uncomfortable by my critique of the inadequate teaching that is often peddled as balanced literacy, but lacks a strong early phonics foundation. I accept that.

As uncomfortable as it is to admit my blind spots, it seems essential to the work. In the case of reading instruction, if I am going to ask my fellow teachers to bravely (and critically) look at their own instructional practices and make necessary shifts, I need to name my own mistakes and misunderstandings in this area. Every child needs and deserves access to evidence-based reading instruction, not only dyslexic ones.

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