

# Rethinking Dyslexia, Scripted Reading, and Federal Mandates: The More Things Change, the More They Stay the Same

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Recent educational debates concerning dyslexia, scripted reading programs, and federal mandates may appear to be new. However, a plethora of ideas, issues and discussions related to these topics abounded during the 1970s and 1980s. The purpose of this article is to briefly 1) describe the current revival of interest in dyslexia, 2) trace the development of scripted reading programs with an emphasis on their current usage due to federal mandates, and 3) propose recommendations for teachers and administrators to address these issues.

We began our teaching careers in special education in the 1970's, a decade in educational history which delivered a return to the back to basics movement in general education coupled with the landmark passage of the federal Law 94-142 requiring public school education for all special education students. These two movements led to increased scrutiny of classroom instructional practices and a proliferation of commercialized programs for special education teachers and students. Common buzzwords of that decade's lexicon included "dyslexia", "multi-sensory integration", and "visual perception training."

We were led to believe the panacea for every special education ailment was simply using the right program, not in utilizing practitioner judgment and decision-making. Being the young and inexperienced teachers that we were, we followed the current party line until realizing first-hand these programs did not work with our students. We find it disturbing that 30 years later there exists a resurgence of these same ineffective practices and programs. They're back! But this time, with several new twists which will be

explained. The purpose of this article is to provide a brief history of dyslexia, scripted reading instruction, and how federal mandates have brought direct instruction to general education.

At the time of our matriculation and early careers, the term "dyslexia" was bantered around in schools of education, the classroom, and as well as in the professional literature. At that time the term was more broadly defined than today. In fact, the terms "dyslexia" and "reading disability" were often used interchangeably among practitioners as well as academia. The concept of dyslexia was first proposed by Samuel Orton in 1937 to describe children with severe reading difficulties who demonstrated a noticeable absence of physical, emotional, or intellectual interferences. Orton hypothesized dyslexia could result from a lack of hemispheric dominance in the brain. Orton based this conjecture on this observation of the many reversals he saw readers demonstrate, such as *b* for *d* and *saw* for *was*. These mirror images must be a result of the brain receiving simultaneous messages from both hemispheres, rather than one dominant hemisphere (Orton, 1937).

Although Orton later expanded his initial conception of dyslexia (Weaver, 1994), the urban legend that dyslexic readers reverse letters and words continues to persist today. For example, a recent state education policy primer (Wong and Guthrie, 2004) lists the

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following definition for dyslexia in the glossary: "Reading impairment, thought to be a genetic condition, in which children transpose letters" (p. 9). Needless to say, Orton was the first scientist in the 20th century to suggest that dyslexia resulted from a neurobiological disorder which you will see stubbornly persists as an additional urban legend into the 21st century.

As mentioned earlier, "dyslexia" and "reading disabled" were spoken in the same breath 30 years ago. Sam Kirk (Klenk & Kibby, 2000) first coined the term "learning disability" in 1963 to distinguish children who experienced difficulty in learning to read but yet demonstrated no evidence of mental retardation, psychiatric illness, and physical handicaps. By 1964, Critchely wrote of "a constitutional specific type of dyslexia identified among the miscellany of cases of poor readers" (p. 89).

We assumed our students had unspecified perceptual problems stemming from faulty brains and taught them reading using prescriptive, rigidly sequenced, and frankly, quite boring, reading programs such as Merrill Linguistic Readers (Otto, Rudolph, Smith, & Wilson, 1975), DISTAR (Engelmann & Bruner, 1978), Sullivan Programmed Readers (Buchanan, 1973), and ita (Pitmann, 1969). Little did we know that the text in these intellectually sterile readers would come to be called "decodable text" in the 1990s and become the perceived panacea for all reading ailments in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The purpose of this article is to briefly 1) describe the current revival of interest in dyslexia, 2) trace the development of scripted reading programs with an emphasis on their current usage due to federal mandates, and 3) propose active strategies for educators to implement change in current practices.

### Dyslexia

The prevalence of the term "dyslexia" appeared to recede among educators' common vernacular during the 1980s. For example,

a review of articles from *Exceptional Children* published from 1985 to 1989 revealed only an approximately 12% prevalence of studies dealing with dyslexia. Attention to dyslexia appears to resurface, however, in a paper written by Reid Lyon, director of the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, for The International Dyslexia Association in 1995 (Lyon, 1995). By then, the definition had become more specific in terms of causal agents, i.e., dyslexia results from insufficient phonological processing. Lyon along with Sally and Bennett Shaywitz (2003) built upon the 1995 definition to produce the following current understanding:

Dyslexia is a specific learning disability that is neurobiological 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 problem in reading comprehension and reduced reading experience that can impede growth of vocabulary and background knowledge. (p. 2)

Dyslexia is back! And in a big way! Sally Shaywitz's *Overcoming Dyslexia: A New and Complete Science-Based Program for Overcoming Reading Problems at Any Level* (2003) is widely read among educators as well as the general public. As opposed to Orton's hypothesis that dyslexia stemmed from brain hemispheric dominance pathology, today's town criers arm themselves with medical "evidence" that dyslexia's definitive basis is abnormal neurological functioning (Lyon, Shaywitz, and Shaywitz, 2003; Shaywitz, 2003). According to Shaywitz and Shaywitz (2004), data from functional magnetic brain imagery studies prove the biological basis for dyslexia as well as indicate an abnormality in

the neural circuitry of the brains of dyslexic children and adults. Test subjects were asked to demonstrate cognitive tasks which involve the frontal Broca's area of the brain, responsible for articulation and word analysis, and the parieto-temporal and occipito-temporal regions in the back of the brain, which respectively control word analysis and fluency. Researchers noticed an underactivation of the two areas in the back of the brain as well as an overactivation of Broca's area in the front of the brain. "The struggling readers appear to be turning to the frontal region, which is responsible for articulating spoken words, to compensate for the fault in the systems in the back of the brain" (p.8). Focus on the author's use of the word "appear" - hardly a robust enough verb to support the claim that dyslexia is a direct result of faulty neurological functioning. Yes, there may be a correlation between brain functioning and dyslexic readers, but is this THE causal agent? And is phonological processing instruction the proverbial magic bullet?

In addition, this neurological explanation for disability assumes that disability is something that resides within the reader rather than a possible social construction. If the child does not learn to read, therefore, there is something wrong with the child or the person who teaches the child, not with the policy makers and the mandates that they dictate.

Brain research is still in its infancy. Do researchers yet know enough about the intricate workings of the human brain to make such broad-brush and wide-sweeping claims? Bruer (1999) posits, "This (brain research) is an exciting and new scientific endeavor, but it is also a very young one. As a result we know relatively little about learning, thinking, and remembering at the level of brain areas, neural circuits, or synapses; we know very little about how the brain thinks, remembers, and learns" (p. 650). Brain research explanations can also serve as a mechanism to intimidate and silence teachers, since most practitioners

do not feel competent to challenge such clinically oriented descriptions.

In addition, Shaywitz and Shaywitz (2004) claim the neurological basis for phonological processing deficits in dyslexics generalizes across languages and cultures based on the research of Paulesu, Demonet, Fazio, McCrory, Chanoine, Brunswick, et al (2001). These researchers studied dyslexic college students from France, the United Kingdom, and Italy and determined that all subjects demonstrated similar neurological processing behaviors in position emission tomography and magnetic resonance imaging studies. Shaywitz and Shaywitz have either failed to consider or chosen to ignore the burgeoning body of research that questions phonological processing as the causal factor for dyslexic children and adults (Cossu, Shankweiler, Liberman, Katz, & Tola, 1988; Geva & Siegel, 2000; Goswami, 2000; Ho & Lai, 1999; Katz & Frost, 1992; Smythe, Everatt, & Salter, 2004; Wimmer, 1993). Most recently Everatt, Smythe, Ocamp, and Gyarmathy (2004) examined Hungarian children with low scores in at least one area of literacy. These students were administered tests of phonological awareness along with a control group of peers with proficient literacy skills. The poor readers demonstrated phonological skills scores similar to their peers.

Yes, dyslexia is back, but despite medical advances in brain imaging technology, psychologists, neurologists, nor educators can no more proclaim with certainty than Orton could that we have found either the cause or the solution for dyslexia.

#### *Scripted Reading Programs and Federal Mandates*

In terms of instruction for dyslexic students, 1970's special education practitioners used instructional techniques for reading disabled/dyslexic children that unfortunately closely mirror current practices of today. Thirty years ago and today, special educators were taught that children with reading dif-

ficulties needed highly structured programs characterized by the following components: tightly scripted teacher instruction, phonics-first-phonics-only instruction for emergent readers, and frequent drill of previous lessons. For example, we remember two of the most popular programs of that decade, the Orton-Gillingham and DISTAR/Direct Instruction programs, which are now in vogue again.

The Orton-Gillingham technique evolved when Samuel Orton paired with Anna Gillingham, a psychologist at New York's Ethical Cultural School. The two authors contended that children with reading difficulties could not learn to read using current sight-word methods but instead thrived when taught via a multi-sensory approach. For example, the teacher would show a letter to the child, have the child trace the letter, and then repeat the letter name and sound. Although Orton never used the modern-day term "phonological awareness", he did postulate that these children demonstrated deficiencies in the importance of the sound of letters and lacked an understanding of letter-sound relationships (Henry, 1998).

The Orton-Gillingham program follows a diagnostic-prescriptive approach analogous to a medical model used by physicians, not surprising since Orton himself was a scientist and a doctor. Placement tests are administered which determine the entry point where students begin a series of rigidly sequenced multi-sensory lessons, followed by frequent practice and drill and a follow-up assessment to determine mastery of phonological awareness and phonics skills. Basic phonics skills are taught directly, beginning with letters, sounds, letter-sound correspondence, and then progressing to the six most predictable syllable patterns found in the English language. A basic premise of this approach is the notion that these isolated skills are an extension to the reading process, (Rooney, 1995) as opposed to holistic measures which imbed word study within the process of acquiring meaning through the reading of

connected text.

Not only is the Orton-Gillingham program back, but it has returned with various and assorted cousins, similar spin-off programs such as the Scottish-Rites, Alphabetic Phonics, Linda Mood-Bell Learning Process, Herman, Project Read, Slingerland,

Spalding, and Wilson (Henry, 1998) as well as the prevalence of Orton-Gillingham private schools in the United States as well as the United Kingdom (Rooney, 1995).

In addition, *Recipe for Reading*, (Bloom & Traub, 2002) an Orton-Gillingham-based program popular among special education teachers in the 1970's, has also reemerged – with its distinctive orange cover but with a new and improved claim to it.

The objective of this manual is to facilitate the teaching of reading to all children, including those children with learning disabilities who, up to this time, have been unable to fit into the mainstream of the regular educational classroom. The manual will serve as a guide for presenting the work in carefully planned stages, so as to protect students from a sense of bewilderment or failure. To accommodate variable learning rates, Sequence Charts have been designed to help teachers record the individual progress of each child. These are packaged separately and a sample chart is printed inside the front cover of this book. (p. 8)

In addition, the granddaddy of all scripted programs, DISTAR (Direct Instruction Systems for Teaching Arithmetic and Reading), is enjoying a lucrative rebirth. Initially termed "Direct Instruction" and marketed as the instructional program DISTAR, (Englemann & Bruner, 1973) this behaviorist approach was developed from work with disadvantaged preschool children by Seigfried Engleman, a former advertising executive, and psychologist Carl Bereiter (Aukerman, 1971). The earliest versions of the reading program fo-

cused on drill and practice exercises with letter identification, word recognition, and rhyming words. When children could recognize all letters of the alphabet, teachers then explicitly taught spelling patterns before moving into sentences and stories containing those spelling patterns (Bereiter and Englemann, 1966). Similar to Orton-Gillingham and its spinoffs, again we see the part-to-whole emphasis and a phonics-first-phonics-only orientation to beginning reading instruction. Direct Instruction is also characterized by teacher-directed, prescriptive, rigidly sequenced, and fast-paced phonics instruction. Behavior modification techniques such as prompts, fades, corrections, and reinforcements are used as an integral component of the teacher's role (Rhine, 1981). Direct Instruction evolved from a kindergarten through third grade language, reading, and mathematics program to one that later incorporated other grades and subject areas to more recent versions such as SRA's *Corrective Reading*, *Journeys*, *Horizons*, and *Reading Mastery* (Dudley-Marling & Paugh, 2005).

Direct Instruction gained recognition from Englemann and Bereiter's participation in Project Follow Through, one of the most expansive educational experiments in our nation's history. In 1967 the United States Office of Education commissioned 20 universities and research centers to apply promising and innovative programs to the education of inner-city and rural students to determine "what works" best for these academically at-risk children. Direct Instruction was among the 12 of 20 programs evaluated and received favorable results (Goffin and Wilson, 2001).

Within less than a decade, researchers began to reanalyze the Project Follow Through data. For example, Stebbins, St. Pierre, Proper, Anderson, and Cerva (1977) claim misclassifications of the models and flawed statistical analysis favored Direct Instruction over the other models, particularly in the areas of basic skills and self-esteem.

In addition, subsequent researchers questioned the effects of Direct Instruction especially with regard to the social, emotional, and moral development of children. For example, the landmark Schweinhart, Weikart, and Lerner (1986) follow-up study found graduates of the Direct Instruction program demonstrated higher rates of juvenile delinquency than did graduates of High/Scope (Hohmann, Banet, and Weikart, 1979) or the DARCEE program (National Education Association, 1977). Even at age 23, (Schweinhart & Weikart, 1997) these graduates from the Direct Instruction group had three times as many felony arrests as those students in the other curriculum groups.

DeFries, Reese-Learned, and Morgan (1991) explored the sociomoral climate of three kindergarten classrooms using either Direct Instruction, Eclectic, and Constructivist programs. This study suggests Direct Instruction can "hinder children's development of interpersonal understanding and their broader social-cognitive and moral development" (Taylor, 1998, p. 231). Most recently the "Wisconsin Studies" (Ryder, Sekulski, & Silberg, 2003) report students in grades one through three whose teachers implemented an exclusive Direct Instruction-Reading Mastery program scored lower on measures of general reading achievement than those students who were instructed in either a mixed-method Direct Instruction program with teacher discretion or the Houghton-Mifflin basal series.

The Bereiter-Englemann model and DISTAR methodology has produced its own family of spin-off programs. One example is the Open Court Kindergarten Program written by Bereiter and Hughes in the early 1970s (Goffin and Wilson, 2001). Most recently Direct Instruction has been packaged as Reading Mastery (Bruner & Englemann, 2003) and a full elementary offering of Open Court programs (Adams, Adcock, Bereiter, Brown, Campione, Carruthers, et al. 2005).

Direct Instruction, the above mentioned

spinoffs, and the newest scripted program on the block, *Byager/Passport* (Goode, Laughn, Kame'enui, Simmons, & Nowakowski, 2005) provide children with a steady diet of decodable text. As mentioned earlier, decodable text was prevalent in the 1970's but predominantly in special education classrooms for remedial readers. The biggest difference between now and then is the increase in the use of decodable text for all emergent readers, not just those with identified reading problems. What is especially perplexing is the predominance of decodable text programs for all readers despite the equivocal conclusions reached by the National Reading Panel in its report (National Reading Panel, 2000). "Surprisingly, very little research has attempted to determine the contribution of decodable books to the effectiveness of phonics programs" (p. 2-98).

Yes, these programs are all back! Recipe for Reading, DISTAR, Open Court, and our latest addition, *Byager!* These programs were mind-numbing and ineffective then, and they are not any more effective now. As its current president, Richard Allington (2005) recently issued a challenge to International Reading Association members to question the use of scientific reading research based commercial programs.

In fact, I know of now research suggesting that the use of any commercial core reading program reliably produces better results than the use of locally developed core reading programs. Indiscriminate use of any core program such that all children in a grade are placed in a single strand, text, or level contradicts everything research and practice has taught us about matching students with curriculum appropriate to their level of development. The same is true for adoption of a single intervention program for struggling readers. Children differ. Struggling readers differ. Any curriculum decision that fails to acknowledge this must be considered unscientific. (p. 18)

The scripted programs that were born in the special education arena 30 years ago are now being imposed on general education; therefore, not only are our students receiving an impoverished instructional program but general education teachers are also receiving an impoverished orientation to quality literacy instruction. Special educators have historically relied on programs rather than embedded instructional techniques, because "it seems that special education researchers are empiricists and pragmatists, not much given to theorizing and not very interested in the theories of others" (Gaffney & Anderson, 2000, p. 71). General educators must resist the strong push to rely on programs rather than judicious practitioner decision-making and autonomy.

Another frightening occurrence is the federal government's mandates for the use of programs in Reading First schools and state departments of education's bullying tactics to weasel these materials into non-Reading First schools, especially in low-income local education agencies. Rigid, scripted programs for low-income children perpetuate Haberman's concept of the "pedagogy of poverty" (Haberman, 1991). Low-level tasks constitute the majority of the teaching-learning process in low-income schools. These tasks includes the following: "giving information, asking questions, giving directions, making assignments, monitoring seatwork, reviewing assignments, giving tests, reviewing tests, assigning homework, reviewing homework, . . . marking papers, and giving grades" (p. 291). Scripted programs promulgate the continuation or even escalation of such teacher practices. The very children who most need an enriching learning environment, receive quality and stimulating instruction the least. Hodges (2001) counters that children in diverse classrooms need a "pedagogy of plenty. . . inquiry-based instructional practices that require children to search for meaning and to engage in authentic tasks in a literacy-rich environment with high-quality

materials" (p.3).

What does this latest revival in scripted programs indicate for educators, and will we be able to break the cycle? This dilemma may never be solved because of how various educators choose to measure reading, quantitative versus qualitative, and how the reading process is conceptualized, code-emphasis versus meaning-based. These diverse opinions constitute a paradigm shift that may never occur on a large scale basis. Educators may never agree on what constitutes best practice reading instruction. For example, the reading wars that supposedly began with Flesch (1955) were occurring long before with a steady debate regarding the look-say method versus phonics instruction. Flesch merely codified the different philosophies educators have battled since the beginning of reading instruction.

Unfortunately it is the children who become lost in our return to these vintage 1970s programs. Perhaps, however, there are some common ideas that competing forces can agree upon. Among these are: early intervention works better than prevention, reading to children every day is essential, oral language background is vital to future reading success, and graphophonic instruction plays an important role in teaching children to read.

Conversely, we may never agree on the following areas: the emphasis on making meaning is more important than phonics instruction for emergent readers, the relationship between a child and the supportive adult is more important in learning to read than the method or program used, predictable and other natural texts are superior to decodable text for beginning readers, teachers not programs should control the delivery of instruction, students must play a decision-making role in learning to read, and, finally, reading is best assessed through teacher observation of authentic reading tasks.

If we cannot solve these issues, what's the point? The point is educators have been

able to make local decisions and teach reading based on our own beliefs and judgment; however, the federal government now mandates a particular paradigm that everyone must follow if school districts are to receive federal funds. At the same time, the federal government is perpetuating a spin or brainwashing campaign in much the same way Squealer in *Animal Farm* interpreted the policies of the ruling party (Orwell, 1946).

#### What We Can Do to Make a Difference

Practitioners, administrators, and teacher educators express frustration and helplessness in this current political climate of federal mandates. Actually there is much that educators can do to counter these assaults on children and practitioners. We urge you to consider the following four suggestions:

- Encourage classroom practitioners to become both consumers and producers of education research, a practice normally reserved for educational researchers in institutions of higher education; that way, our students will not fall prey to the federal government's narrow definition of what constitutes scientific-based reading research.
- Reinforce the notion that knowledgeable, caring educators teach children to read, not lock-step commercialized programs that rob students and teachers alike of the joys and pleasures of developing literacy.
- Work through professional organizations such as the Association for Childhood Education International, National Association for the Education of Young Children, and the National Council of Teachers of English to develop policy statements to counter the prevailing federal mandates. In fact, the American Association of School Administrators, the Council for Children with Behavioral Disorders, and the National Education

Association have formed a coalition calling for major revisions to the No Child Left Behind Act.

- Stay abreast of current federal and state educational policies. Become an advocate for legislative reform by individually and collectively voicing your opinions to legislators, community members, the media, local school boards, parents, public school administrators and teachers, and your students.

It will take all of us to move education beyond antiquated 1970's reading practices into a more enlightened and humane 21<sup>st</sup> century before it is too late for teachers and students. Our students are worth it. Let us act now before it is too late.

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