

What Needs to Change in the Teaching of Reading

Roger was a high school senior. He was large in stature and was covered with tattoos. Initially, I wasn't comfortable around Roger, he frighten me. The tattoos and his stature were disconcerting. He was a student in a special education resource room and was academically failing in all major subject areas except in recess and lunch. He had been in special education classes since 4th grade, but the teachers told him he would never advance beyond reading at the 1st grade level. I approached him as I did when I was teaching a child in juvenile hall. Just like any one of my school children who knew they were smart, but couldn't read.

I told Roger he would learn to read proficiently to pass all his classes in his last year of high school. I was confident that I could teach Roger and I wanted him to understand that he had the ability to succeed. He was puzzled because I had no books or workbooks to use with him. I explained that his life experiences were the basis for teaching him reading skills and began to ask him to share what he considered his passions. The first idea he shared was his love for raising his pot belly pig. I was fascinated that he was raising a pig. Not something I hear every day.

As an authentic teacher/mentor I needed to make sure Roger knew my sincerity when I asked him, "You're raising a what? You like raising a pig?" He laughed and said, you're going to teach me to read by telling you about raising my pot belly pig? I replied emphatically, "Yes! You have all the knowledge you need now to get started.

We proceeded with the process and his reading improved to such a degree he received A's and one B in all classes related to his language and literacy skills for his last semester of classes in high school. If changes were made in the current educational system, children who were failing would have a chance of actually becoming successful readers. But first, we need to look at what needs to change.

We can conclude that if new assumptions about reading were made in the current system, children who are failing might have a chance to actually become successful readers. First, we need to understand how reading has been traditionally taught. Then we will question what we know or think we know about children—as well as reading—in order to develop a new set of assumptions. The problem children with learning disabilities face in our schools is the continuous teaching of reading in the same way. Schools and the people in charge of curriculum believe in their fallacy for learning, which is the rationale that when children are not learning the structure of how to read, they require more time and more intensive work using the same process. (This can be likened to speaking louder when talking to someone who doesn't speak your language, thinking that volume will compensate for understanding.) Reading is a complex skill, but doesn't need to be that complicated. When we look at teaching reading from a different paradigm, it will cease to be an overwhelming task. Then we will apply our different set of assumptions and track the development of a new paradigm. (A paradigm is not a method or a way of executing practice. It is similar to beliefs and values.) So let's get started.

The Real Reason We Read

The **real reason we read** is to comprehend information. Learning new vocabulary, writing, and spelling are taught in various sequences, but these are usually taught **after** teaching letter sounds and combinations. Instead of teaching the process of literacy **as a total process which integrates all the components**, the traditional approach is to teach parts of the process and progress to learning the whole of reading. The method of teaching parts that eventually should be used to help children see and read the whole word, doesn't make sense for learning disabled children.

Children have different learning styles and while most children understand the relationship with letters and sounds, children with learning disabilities have difficulty distinguishing between sounds and the changes that are made to read different words. We fail to tell children that the words in the English language are from different European countries, so when sounds have a certain pattern, but the pattern isn't consistent, the children are unable to remember and retain the words. Teachers are taught to teach exceptions, but there are so many exceptions that children get confused. Children with learning disabilities are more apt to be **visual learners** and although schools talk about teaching reading as a balanced approach, the teachers still begin the process of teaching sounds, using an auditory method.

How Reading is Currently Taught

Reading has been taught for decades, and is currently taught by learning the letter

sounds and letter combinations. The teaching of reading for teachers is usually introduced in university education methods courses. Consequently, teachers use these universal methods the same way. There is a systematic way each letter sound is learned. The 26 letters are not always learned in the order of the alphabet, but most often teachers begin with teaching the letter “B.” Often the consonants are taught first because most words begin with consonants and are easier to pronounce. As children learn each consonant letter, and the corresponding sound, the objective for reading words is to couple the letters together for three letter words. Vowels are taught in order of the alphabet because the letter “a” when coupled with the letter “b” can make a word. Children write the letters and then learn that letter combinations like “cab” “can” “cap” “car” and “cat” are words. Children are also taught in the beginning stages of reading that words can be formed with just three letters. So the teaching of reading encompasses three letter words first. After these combinations have been mastered (many children with learning disabilities can’t master sounds) the children learn that these sounds form words).

Publishing companies produce many programs with different subtle changes, but they are usually structured in the same format. First, the children learn the letters of the alphabet and what sounds are associated with those letters. These pre-reading skills are referred to as phonemic awareness. Then they learn how the various sounds which are put together, make words and learn to pronounce those words based on the combination of sounds. This process is usually referred to as phonics. The process of phonics recognizes that word forms are predictable. Phonics also taught as understanding that word forms are predictable. However, not all letters maintain the same sounds, so there is much confusion as to what words actually are pronounced the same. For example, *hope* and *rope* are pronounced the same, but not *love* and *move* even though they have the same letters in the same sequence. Children who learn phonics well, and are very successful in pronouncing words, become *word callers* because they do not consistently know what the words mean. They can read almost any word, even if it is an imaginary word because these children have the structure of the phonemes, which is no more than the first consonant of a word or knowledge of either first or last consonant, recognizable.

Some children learn very quickly and other children, no matter how they are taught, can’t “get the picture.” The problem that children with learning disabilities face in our schools is the continuous teaching of reading in the same way. School curriculum is based on various educational philosophies for learning. One specific philosophy is when children are not learning how to read, the assumption is that they require more time and more intensive work using the same process. More time with the same technique will not change the results. You need to change the approach and technique to change the responses of children with learning problems.

**LESSONS
LEARNED** 

Some students, especially those children with learning disabilities are still not mastering the reading process or learning to read sufficiently to become independent readers.

REMEMBER: Change the set of assumptions and we change our thinking. Children need a new way to think about how they learn to read.

However, I am not negating phonics as an approach to literacy and learning to read. It works for most children. It is a very successful method for many children. The specifics of learning words and their pronunciations are best taught between kindergarten and third grade. Those are the years that children are most flexible and open to understanding the parts and essentials of the phonemes, which are the smallest basic unit of language. Letters are phonemes that when put together make words. Whether the letters are vowels or consonants they are designated as phonemes. However, since the English language is a combination of many other languages because of how the United States was settled, we have letter combinations that are not always consistent. Explained in the previous section, *How Reading is Currently Taught*, some phonemes have different sounds when they are combined with different letters. Most children can differentiate between those differences. It is important to understand that the process of learning phonics requires children to understand the subtle differences and be able to follow the examples that present those differences. It is also important for teachers to emphasize those differences giving children a chance to practice words already in their vocabulary, so they know how those differences apply to words they know and use.

Phonics is Appropriate for Most Children

It is important to note that phonics as a structural process and technique to teach literacy skills is suitable for most children. The system has been an effective approach to learning to read. The theory behind the teaching of phonics is that children can't learn to read sufficiently unless they are taught how the individual letters and sounds form words, and how words together create sentences. The philosophy of learning to read is that reading can't be taught without children learning

sounds and being able to differentiate sounds within the words. Additionally, it has been understood and accepted that once children learn words and are able to sound out words in a sentence, they consider this as reading. Learning to read words is the beginning of reading or literacy training. The accepted method of teaching reading is the teaching of phonics.

When children with learning disabilities, or ADD, ADHD have had phonics lessons and classes for many years and are still not progressing at the rate of their peers, it might be advantageous to find another approach to teach them to read. When children are not progressing, because of learning problems, many people who embrace phonics also include supplemental materials and use the term a balanced approach to reading. The additional set of skills includes the system of whole language. When people refer to a balanced reading program they are acknowledging that phonics and whole language are taught together. Since the research doesn't specify to what degree each approach is to be emphasized, it is at the teacher's discretion how much time he or she decides to spend on each approach. However even when a teacher introduces whole language into the reading instruction, phonics is usually taught before whole language instruction. Sometimes introducing a balanced program helps the children with learning disabilities read proficiently. Research for a balanced program is acknowledged helping children falling behind.

However even with combining phonics and whole language, it may still be difficult for children with learning disabilities to progress to read proficiently. After years of trying to teach children with learning disabilities even with a balanced approach, it may be time to change the way we structure reading instruction that is neither phonics nor whole language. As we change and adopt a new structure we change the paradigm.

Why Phonics Doesn't Work for Some Learning Disabled Children

One of the main reasons phonics doesn't work for these kids is that they have difficulty with distinguishing between letter sounds. The term teachers' use is sound or auditory discrimination. Children with dyslexia have difficulty hearing the differences in the various vowel sounds. They can't hear differences in long and short vowels and there are so many rules to decide whether the vowels in the words are long or short that they mispronounce words continually. Whereas a student who is an auditory learner has no problem with hearing the sounds and pronouncing the words. Children with learning disabilities or dyslexia are unable to retain the information told many times how the sounds are different. The retention of sounds is not related to any problems with their memory. The fact that there are so many rules to follow and there are so many words that don't adhere to those rules presents more of a problem to these children. Changes in letter sounds

LESSONS LEARNED



Every child has a different learning style. Be cognizant of what the child really needs and be ready to adapt.

as presented in different words also become a problem. For example, the words *love* and *move* have the same vowels in the same order, but the letter *o* is said differently. The letter *o* has a different sound in each word. Children with learning disabilities have problems determining how those words are pronounced. They would rather look for word patterns and memorize the words that don't have those patterns. Therefore, they need to learn to read using more visual cues or clues. Although phonics may include using visual cues, the structure of phonics instruction is auditory and uses sounds and sound combinations to teach reading.

What Needs to Change in the Teaching of Reading

The old assumptions that children come to school with an empty slate or total lack of knowledge is a fallacy or false assumption. Therefore teaching reading requires a new set of assumptions. Teaching children with learning disabilities to read is a daunting task. For decades school systems have tried all kinds of processes, methods, programs, and still have **not been able to teach learning disabled children to read with modicum success. The reason: they are using the wrong paradigm and don't understand what changes need to be made.** Reading is a complex skill; however, children's prior knowledge increases their ability to acquire reading skills. If reading is taught using a different paradigm then it would cease to be an overwhelming task.

Turning the Paradigm Upside Down

As I discuss the changes we need to make in the belief about education as well as reading, it is important to just understand that new approaches or methods to not necessarily equal a new paradigm.

When we follow lessons learned and look at each child as an individual, we also look at a different paradigm. A paradigm is a set of assumptions that we believe forms our practice. **A paradigm is not a method or a way of executing**