

On Lucy Calkins and Trusting the System

Dear Lucy,

Thank you so much for acknowledging what parents of students with dyslexia have known for quite some time; your program does not work for students with dyslexia. We even wish that your program worked for the remaining 80-85% of general education students, but that would simply not be true. As you also stated, the science of how one learns to read is settled. A variety of researchers have studied the skills good readers use to decode words, and they even more fully understand how the strategies used by poor readers and skilled readers differ. According to Reading Rockets, funded by a grant from the U.S. Department of Education, good readers know letter-sound correspondence, how to manipulate sounds within a word (phonemic awareness), how to recognize that word chunks or morphemes make certain sounds (phonics) and are able to apply written spellings representing the spoken word (alphabetic principle). Poor readers do not know how to do those things.

This summer, Emily Hanford referenced a study by Stanovich in 1975. He found that poor readers were those who used pictures to guess the words written on the page. His research into exactly how good readers learn to read (as summarized by Reading Rockets) has been reproduced many times in the past 40 years by a number of independent researchers. Yet, your program encourages teachers to instruct students to learn to read using the exact skills that poor readers use. As parents, it's difficult for us to wrap our heads around the fact that districts using your program are teaching students to read using the skills poor readers use to compensate for their inability to directly decode words using the letters. As parents we sometimes try to teach their child to read by sounding out the letters on the page only to have the teacher use a multistep guessing game to try to figure out a word. It's functionally incompatible. We also know that the dyslexia tutors we hire privately (at personal expense) require so much time to retrain students away from the bad habits associated with guessing words on the page. Simply put, what you teach are the coping mechanisms that poor readers employ when they lack direct decoding skills. We have to pay for our children to learn to directly decode the printed word in order to help them read. It's heartbreaking to watch and participate in this process because our children suffer the loss of self-esteem, positive academic self-concept, and lose out on family time when their literacy learning happens over the summer or after school.

This rebuttal to your essay is intended to convey the parental and family perspective. Let's focus on the consequences of being compliant parents within your program, as delivered by the public schools our children attend. It comes down to this, Lucy: children and parents are both frustrated! We are often told to "just wait and your child will just learn to read on his/her own". Yet, without the decoding skills us "phonics-ceneric folks" are pushing given enough time, some students will learn to just memorize a large bank of words. (Some children simply don't have the ability to rote memorize that many words.) Imagine that your brain is an 8 gig flash drive, but in the English language there are enough words to fill at least a 64GB flash drive. What do you do? You need to limit the words you use to that 8 GB flash drive which might be enough to get by for a few grades, but at some point (usually around 3rd-4th grade) the teacher may realize there is a problem. If you have a student with no behavioral issues, they will more than likely just keep getting passed to the next grade. All along the hidden toll of anxiety/depression about reading in class or just feeling stupid builds as the pressures of school increase

and the knowledge gap between the good readers and the poor readers continues. Parents are told things like “he is holding his own”, “she seems happy”, “he just needs to apply himself”, and “she will eventually catch on”.

You write: “There is reason to be alarmed about the state of education in the US. Almost half our children struggle with reading—that’s alarming. Not long ago, the American Library Association asked graduating seniors (that is, the children who stayed in school through high school) whether they would voluntarily read a book once they’d graduated—and 80% said no. That’s also alarming. American working millennials are among the least well educated groups in the industrialized world (Tucker, 2019).” The problem of low literacy is so prevalent that general education classroom teachers might not spot children with dyslexia or learning disabilities because “the whole class is struggling”. Just last month we know of a mother who was told not to worry about her son’s literacy skills because he is average compared with his class. The teacher was not at all concerned that this student scored 17% on his latest reading assessment given by most of the districts in our state.

Lucy, we know you’d be concerned that we didn’t read to our children prior to enrolling them in public schools or thereafter. Let me assure you that we did. Still that did not teach them to read. But it did teach our kids that we love our family, we love the books in our home and we value literacy. That’s why we fight this battle with all the resources we can muster.

We also want to address your comments about dyslexia specifically:

“My hypothesis is that, at least for right now, it’s unrealistic to think that most general-ed classroom teachers will be able to provide what 27 typically developing readers and writers need while also fully meeting the needs of children with dyslexia, because those children do have very intensive and specialized needs. Whereas the typically developing reader sees a word three times and that word becomes a sight word, allowing the reader to read it with automaticity, for the child with dyslexia that word only becomes automatized after the child sees it thirty times. That is, children with dyslexia require an enormous amount of repetition.”

Maybe you are unaware of what it takes to help students with dyslexia get the services they require. As parents with children who struggle to learn to read, we must become teachers in an attempt to keep up basic skills at home, psychologists to interpret test scores and also deal with the mental/emotional toll that illiteracy takes on a child, lawyers to know our children’s rights to a Free and Appropriate Public Education and state education laws, neuroscientists with basic knowledge of how children read, and dyslexia tutors in desperation to help our children succeed. We know that mothers in particular leave their own careers in order to pursue other educational ventures (such as homeschooling) once their enormous bright and frustrated children are reading five grades behind and school no longer works for them because they cannot access the curriculum or keep up with the reading and writing demands.

We have the added financial burden of paying for outside tutoring or paying to become trained dyslexia tutors. This is usually money that could have gone into family vacations, family retirement funds, or college savings. We are middle class families who can make these sacrifices, but those in poverty don’t

have that option. Moreover, the time a child spends in after-school or summer tutoring is frustrating for the child, who might rather play sports or games with friends after a long day in school, or a long year in school. It runs into tens of thousands of dollars in many cases.... while our children already attend public schools. Orton-Gillingham tutors cost approximately \$100/hour, twice a week for years. Lindamood Bell is \$24,000 for 8 weeks of instruction, often scheduled over the summer, when children are supposed to be learning and growing in the other important and relevant aspects of their lives. This emergency academic scheduling to remediate a child's failure in literacy does not, in fact, work towards embracing the 'whole child', as parents and teachers would both want. This is also scheduled after our children are already stressed out and believe themselves to be failures based on their in-school experiences. This is what we do so that our children CAN access the science of reading, and they appreciate and value and LEARN FROM the 'phonics-centered folks' they work with outside of (and in addition to) their normal school schedule.

Our children commonly see therapists to cope with the overwhelming sense of anxiety, shame and humiliation that comes with poor literacy. It's common for parents of dyslexic students to teach coping mechanisms for dealing with low literacy in public venues. What happens when our 10-year old or 12-year-old can't read the menu and storms out of the restaurant with anger and shame? We'd love for you to be there to see that, Lucy. We really would. You would know those hot tears of anxiety and frustration when our children worry about becoming capable and independent adults, because they cannot imagine a career wherein being functionally illiterate would be permissible. Our children are deeply ashamed when they cannot read. It's a financially and emotionally costly proposition for families to help repair that damage, Lucy.

As families, we are stretched farther than most will ever know emotionally and financially, but we are educated, organized and persistent. We will not give up until children with dyslexia are identified in schools and taught basic literacy skills based on the science of reading as is their right under a free and appropriate education. **Just wait and trust us, Lucy, that the science of reading will work for all children in the classroom, teachers will have more confidence in teaching children how to read and ultimately tests scores will increase.** We think that's what we all want, right?

Meanwhile Lucy, it's a travesty to watch this happening to our families. For families who cannot 'donate' tens of thousands of dollars necessary to teach their children to read, your article doesn't mention where these children SHOULD expect to receive services. Do you have an answer, Lucy? What address should we use when we send you the receipts for the cost to our families?

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<https://www.readingrockets.org/article/how-do-children-learn-read>

<https://www.apmreports.org/story/2019/08/22/whats-wrong-how-schools-teach-reading>