

Learning Disabilities or Teaching Disabilities? Rethinking Literacy Failure

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Mrs. Baxter (pseudonym), an experienced first-grade teacher at a local urban school, is having a very bad day. Several of her students have been struggling mightily with the acquisition of reading skills, and others have descended into sheer boredom. Mrs. Baxter is having a difficult time not blaming herself for the failure of her students.

After all, as her curriculum coordinator has repeatedly emphasized, the school's core reading program is a research-based and well-proven program of instruction. The program is rooted in the development of a set of preliminary subskills thought to underlie the act of reading. Although these skills are developed in isolation from real text, the program provides teachers with a thorough script to follow.

The coordinator has made some veiled suggestions that it may be the fidelity with which Mrs. Baxter is implementing the program that is the source of the students' problems. Her idea of doing several unannounced walk-throughs in the coming weeks to determine if the scripted program is being properly delivered has done little to assuage Mrs. Baxter's anxiety.

Mrs. Baxter has suggested that it may be time to have the students tested to determine the nature and extent of their disabilities. To her horror, she has even allowed herself to harbor the thought of how welcome the diagnosis of a learning disability could be and imagining the relief it might bring for her feelings of guilt and inadequacy.

The fact is that Mrs. Baxter's colleagues have found themselves at a crossroads, and by no means are they alone in U.S. schools. For if a core reading program is used in a school, there are usually three

potential explanations considered when students fail. First, and most common, is the assumption that the problem lies within the students who are failing. Students who do not learn in the same way as other students can be characterized as having specific or generalized learning or language disabilities.

Second, the problem could lie within the program itself. This condition, however, is often regarded by school personnel as highly unlikely. After all, hasn't the program been tested and proven under rigorous research conditions in classrooms throughout the country?

Third, the problem could lie within the match between the program and the learner. This possibility is well known and well respected among literacy leaders, but it is also a fairly unusual conclusion because of the aura that surrounds the research base of the core program. Surely the program, if implemented correctly, will result in success for all but the most impaired students. This is the scenario involving Mrs. Baxter and her failing students, one which is all the more unfortunate because there are no literacy leaders in place at the school, no highly knowledgeable professionals who can encourage their colleagues to step back and examine the situation dispassionately.

Literacy leaders know that core reading programs are seldom, if ever, actually tested and proven effective (Dewitz, Leahy, Jones, & Sullivan, 2010). Instead, they use carefully written claims that well-tested, proven strategies and approaches are used within the program. How frequently and how effectively these strategies are used is simply not part of the research evidence. Unless a literacy leader is in place

to serve as an advocate for failing students, many suffer an even stranger fate.

In Mrs. Baxter's school, a debate is raging. On one side are those who advocate having the students repeat the first grade so that they can cycle through the core program again, perhaps with additional learning support to provide more intensive instruction and practice in the skills embodied in the core program. On the other side are those who argue that the students should be exposed to a different program designed specifically for students who are experiencing difficulty in acquiring the underlying skills embodied in the core program.

Again, there is no literacy leader in place to point out that the "new" program is based on the identical assumptions and underlying philosophy of the core program itself and will be, for the students it is aimed at helping, simply more of the same. If the learning problem is indeed a mismatch between the needs of the student and the manner in which instruction is delivered in the programs, then the prospects for authentic success are dim.

In our view, the delivery of "more of the same" is a form of institutional teaching disability that we have dubbed "instructional perseveration," defined as the compulsive repetition of an instructional program that has not brought about the desired effects. It is difficult to find another situation outside of educational circles where professionals, having encountered abject failure in one course of action, say, "Let's do it again!" Such decisions most certainly spring from the fact that, in many of the situations that we have described earlier, school personnel simply do not know what else to do.

This is where the role of the literacy leader becomes crucial. We take it as axiomatic that no student should be declared as having a learning disability until we have exhausted our instructional repertoire and been unable to find an instructional match. One essential quality of the literacy leader is knowledge of a broad cross section of teaching techniques and strategies, a collection of ideas that can be orchestrated to adjust and modify the core program to meet the students' needs. It is the literacy leader's intellectual



qualities and commitment to students that drives him or her to learn more and more about how one can approach the teaching of literacy.

As literacy leaders are acutely aware, one's vision, or one's philosophical beliefs about the nature of reading and of children, is the driving force behind instructional decisions (Mercado & Turner, 2010). If teachers firmly believe that students must master the underlying phonological skills that enable them to pronounce the words they encounter on a page, teachers will gear their instruction toward that goal.

Failure in a synthetic phonics program (i.e., progressing from word part to whole words) does not mean that we must repeat the approach. Literacy leaders strive to learn analytic (i.e., progressing from whole words to word parts) and analogic (i.e., noting regularities between known and unknown words) phonics as alternative approaches that might be a perfect fit for some students. In the same vein, vocabulary need not be acquired through the study of word lists. Literacy leaders can adjust their approaches to incorporate the authentic text and meaningful relationships that can be enormously successful with students who fail to respond to traditional approaches.

One such example is the literacy leader who forgets the program and embarks on the use of the Language Experience Approach, using topics of great interest to the students and enabling them to experience engaged learning. The ideas and words included in the experience become the vehicle through which skills can be developed.

As another example, Kersten and Pardo (2007) described how they created a "hybrid pedagogy" (p. 153) by blending elements from the core reading program (e.g., reading from the basal series) with more authentic literacy activities (e.g., writers' workshop, literacy stations). Both examples illustrate how teachers who position themselves as literacy leaders make adaptations to core reading programs so that literacy instruction is responsive to students from all cultural, linguistic, and racial backgrounds (Au, 2006).

It cannot be denied that just as teachers arrive at a set of beliefs about the nature of literacy, so do their students. Who among us has not encountered students who have come to believe that the speed with which they read defines their skill as a reader? What about students whose primary goal is to commit to memory the ideas and, in some cases, even the exact words of the writer?

The dangers of regarding fluent and automatic reading as a substitute for mature and thoughtful literacy have been well documented (Applegate, Applegate, & Modla, 2009; Pikulski & Chard, 2005). The job of the literacy leader is to help students achieve a healthy balance whereby they use all of their skills to arrive at the ultimate goal: becoming skilled and motivated readers who read thoughtfully and purposefully for an array of purposes.

So, the primary task of literacy leaders is to help all of their colleagues keep their eyes on the prize and develop the flexibility they need to adjust their programs to achieve a solid match with all students. At that point, we have a fighting chance to rein in the proliferation of disabilities of all kinds, regardless of which side of the desk they reside.

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