

Preparing Literacy Professionals: The Case of Dyslexia

Journal of Literacy Research
2018, Vol. 50(2) 262–270
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DOI: 10.1177/1086296X18765917
journals.sagepub.com/home/jlr



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Abstract

In this article, I discuss implications of the discourse and rhetoric of dyslexia advocacy and of recent state policies for the preparation of literacy professionals. I then synthesize reflections on my experiences teaching and learning about dyslexia and reading difficulties within university-based schools of education, and in trainings offered by publishers of commercial reading programs. Here, I draw a distinction between being trained to deliver a program and developing a professional knowledge base for the teaching of reading. I use these reflections to identify two goals for university-based graduate programs aimed at ensuring equity and inclusivity in the current policy context.

Keywords

policy, teacher preparation, in-service teachers, learning disabled, teacher knowledge

In 2010, the International Dyslexia Association (IDA) began offering accreditation to programs based on its standards for dyslexia specialists (IDA, 2018b). In the years since 2010, trends in state policies have prompted a surge in dyslexia-specific training and programs, which either encourage shifts in focus or compete with International Literacy Association (ILA)—accredited graduate programs for advanced certification in literacy.

Dyslexia has historically been a contested construct, with debates surrounding everything from its definition to diagnostic criteria, etiology, and the nature and effects of varied approaches to remediation (Elliot & Grigorenko, 2014). Still, over the past 5 years, more than two thirds of all U.S. states have discussed or passed dyslexia-specific legislation (see Dyslexia, 2018 for a list). Although the nature and focus of new policies vary across states, dyslexia advocacy groups have consistently lobbied for

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state adoption of IDA's definition of dyslexia (see IDA, 2018a) and increased regulation of dyslexia screening, remediation, and teacher preparation or professional development (Decoding Dyslexia, 2018; Gabriel, 2017; Gabriel & Woulfin, 2017).

In 2016, the ILA published a research advisory on dyslexia meant to offer guidance to the public and ILA's membership as they respond to policy, media, and related discussions. The advisory noted that "the nature and causes of dyslexia, and even the utility of the concept, are still under investigation" (ILA, 2016, p. 2) and argued for a broad knowledge base to support instruction for all students. This publication was immediately met with an open letter from IDA (2016), which urged ILA to "review and clarify" a number of claims in its advisory. ILA in turn released an addendum to the original advisory, addressing or contesting each of the points raised by IDA (ILA, 2016). This exchange amounted to a public display of ideological divisions between the two organizations, which include differences in their interpretations of research, evidence, definitions of dyslexia, and suggestions for addressing reading difficulties. ILA argues against one-size-fits-all and scripted approaches to reading intervention, citing research syntheses like the National Reading Panel (NRP), which they interpret as evidence for broadly prepared, knowledgeable professionals. Meanwhile, IDA also references the NRP, but argues for a specific approach, now labeled "structured literacy," which Malchow (2012) writes "is not designed to replace Orton Gillingham, Multi-Sensory, or other terms in common use. It is an umbrella term designed to describe all of the programs that teach reading in essentially the same way." In a press release introducing the term, Malchow (2012) explains, "This term will help us simplify our message and connect our successes. 'Structured Literacy' will help us sell what we do so well" (n.p.). Although professional organizations and accrediting bodies air their differences, their members must respond to shifting policies and increasing pressure to recognize and address dyslexia in particular ways.

Deconstructing a Definition of Dyslexia

In this section, I discuss my interpretation of IDA's (2018a) definition and descriptions of dyslexia, which have been taken up by advocacy groups and adopted by many states as part of recent dyslexia-specific policies. IDA describes dyslexia as "a specific learning disability that is neurobiological in origin" (IDA, 2016) which "exists on a continuum" (IDA, 2010, p. 2). This construction has several rhetorical functions that have paved the way for the recent increase in dyslexia-specific legislation at the state level, and dyslexia-specific teacher training programs either recognized or required by states and districts. First, the assertion that the disability is neurobiological in origin suggests that it is a scientific, biological reality. Differences in diagnostic criteria across settings and professions (e.g., education, medicine) and the exclusion of dyslexia from the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (5th ed.; *DSM-5*; American Psychiatric Association, 2013) has led many to question dyslexia's status as a diagnostic category (Elliot & Grigorenko, 2014). The formulation of dyslexia as neurobiological, rather than cognitive or behavioral, constructs a version of dyslexia that is natural, verifiable, and therefore unassailable. This formulation has made it easier for advocacy

groups to build arguments about the need for dyslexia-specific legislation despite the lack of clarity surrounding the diagnosis.

Second, the formulation of dyslexia as a continuum implicitly links dyslexia to diagnostic spectrums like autism and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). These are both (more) culturally familiar categories, and implicitly grouping dyslexia with them provides the public with a set of familiar ideas for understanding dyslexia. For example, dyslexia, ADHD, and autism are each explicitly included in the neurodiversity paradigm (Walker, 2014), within which neurological differences once perceived solely as deficits are recognized as natural, valuable forms of human diversity that have tangible benefits for individuals and teams (Austin & Pisano, 2017). Along these lines, books, films, celebrities, and research centers highlight “the dyslexic advantage” (Dyslexic Advantage, 2015; Eide & Eide, 2012), the connection(s) between dyslexia and creativity, and the overrepresentation of people with dyslexia in high-status professions or roles on highly successful teams (Yale Center for Dyslexia & Creativity, 2018). Like other specific learning disabilities, dyslexia is identified, constructed, and experienced differently across racial and economic groups (Blanchett, 2010; Hoyles & Hoyles, 2010, see also Sleeter, 1987). Thus, whatever advantages are associated with the label are likely to be applied and experienced differently depending on race and class.

The notion of a dyslexic advantage, and the coupling of dyslexia and creativity, are relatively recent (Elliot & Grigorenko, 2014) and represent only some of many perspectives on the nature, meaning, and impact of dyslexia. Where reading difficulty among schoolchildren is often linked with poor life outcomes, lower high school completion rates, lower paying jobs, and higher rates of incarceration (cf. Winn & Behizadeh, 2011), dyslexia has been discursively linked to the opposite extremes: a high degree of entrepreneurship, creative genius, and above-average intelligence (Eide & Eide, 2012). Separating “dyslexia” from general “reading difficulty” helps construct “dyslexics” as exceptional members of society who deserve the support of public policies.

Third, the metaphor of a continuum suggests that everyone could be just a little bit dyslexic, which has paved the way for the popularization of higher prevalence estimates than ever before. Prevalence statistics cited in advocacy have popularized the idea that “1 in 5” children has (often undiagnosed) dyslexia. The provenance of this oft-reported statistic is difficult to trace because multiple organizations use it, but explain it differently. For example, the National Center for Learning Disabilities (2018) reports that 1 in 5 children has “learning or attention issues,” of which dyslexia may be one. Yet, Reading Rockets archived a “study” alert claiming that “the definitive resource on dyslexia” (i.e., IDA) has reported that 1 in 5 children may be dyslexic (Yankton Press & Dakotan, 2015). Similarly, Learning Ally (formerly Recording for the Blind and Dyslexic [RFBDB]) sponsors a “1 in 5” initiative within which they claim that “research from the National Institutes of Health as well as Yale University shows that around 1 in 5 people struggle with reading despite having average to superior intelligence” (Learning Ally, 2016). No reference for a particular study is given, but the estimate is attributed to organizations that appear trustworthy and authoritative.

In a frequently asked questions (FAQ) section, the Yale Center for Dyslexia & Creativity (2018) simply states that “dyslexia affects 20 percent of the population and

represents 80–90 percent of all those with learning disabilities. It is the most common of all neuro-cognitive disorders.” No citation is provided. I could not identify an instance where “1 in 5” was presented alongside a citation for a study rather than an organization. As a rhetorical tool, this single statistic has several important functions. First, it normalizes dyslexia and the labeling of people as dyslexic by suggesting it is very common. Normalization may distance children with dyslexia labels from the assumptions of deficiency or even deviance that have historically plagued them (Fitch, 2002). The “1 in 5” statistic also suggests schools may be underidentifying dyslexia if less than 20% of their student population is dyslexic.

ILA and some of its members still question dyslexia as a construct, while IDA’s members and affiliates successfully argue its prevalence and significance. According to the Literacy Research Panel’s report (ILA, 2016), there is reason to question prescriptive program guidance and many of the commonly used advocacy talking points. However, the current discourses of dyslexia advocacy do not just function as an indictment of public schools, they also implicate everyone who might have been unaware of the sheer volume of “dyslexics” among peers and within families. These discourses seem to compel policy makers—as parents, neighbors, and community members—to act, even when there are still open questions for many in literacy research and practice communities.

The Teaching and Learning of Dyslexia

Unfortunately, advocates have tightly coupled the diagnosis of dyslexia to a specific set of assumptions about the design and delivery of effective reading instruction—assumptions that belie much narrower conceptions of effective teaching than those outlined by ILA (2010) or those suggested by studies of the varied profiles of reading difficulty (e.g., Dennis, 2012; Spear-Swerling, 2015; Valencia, 2010). The narrowing of what counts as effective literacy intervention raises important questions about how reading difficulty is framed as a policy issue, and who benefits least and most from the current framing.

Even as these questions arise, recent state policies place pressure on public schools and institutions of higher education to acknowledge and engage with dyslexia in historically unprecedented ways. For example, recent legislation in Connecticut requires teacher educators to devote a certain number of course hours to the topic of dyslexia, and to ensure the term appears on reading course syllabi. In addition, an increasing number of states now recognize or even require degrees or certifications that are tied to training to deliver dyslexia-specific programs rather than the traditional mix of graduate coursework (Dyslexia, 2018).

For example, teachers in Mississippi can earn a master’s degree in dyslexia therapy, which consists of training to provide instruction using the DuBard Association Method®. Teachers in Massachusetts can earn a master’s degree in reading online that consists almost entirely of training to provide Wilson Reading® instruction. I believe that the premise of such programs, sometimes offered by or in partnership with schools of education, raises questions about the purpose, location, and nature of graduate

study, professional knowledge, and the role of commercial interests in the preparation of literacy professionals. It also signals a dangerous narrowing of both the focus and scope of preparation for literacy professionals.

Training Versus Knowledge Development

As a public schoolteacher, I was required to earn a graduate degree from an accredited program, which included coursework in reading methods, assessment, and remediation designed to address ILA standards. Graduate courses included discussion and debate with groups of 20 teachers meeting over a period of several months, and were aimed at preparing graduates to teach a range of students in a range of school settings given a range of available resources. Part of the goal of frequent discussions was to compare and contrast varied approaches by identifying, synthesizing, and applying research evidence. I would categorize my experience in ILA standards-based graduate courses as professional learning aimed at a broad understanding of reading instruction, development, and research, which could be used to make increasingly informed decisions about future instruction. It was the foundation of a knowledge base for teaching reading, which I further developed in a reading specialist certification program. Although this knowledge base is often measured by passing scores on a PRAXIS III exam or a certain number of graduate credits/hours, its defining feature is its flexibility. I did not learn how to implement any one particular approach; I learned something about multiple approaches and discussed, critiqued, and synthesized my way to principles for practice.

Later, as a reading therapist on the staff of a private neuropsychology practice, I was trained to provide instruction using specific brand-name programs that parents often requested for students with dyslexia labels. Unlike most graduate coursework, but much like district-sponsored professional development, program-specific trainings were conducted in a transmission-style workshop format designed to develop skills to implement the program with fidelity. Workshops most often included video demonstrations and opportunities to practice with feedback to ensure standardized delivery of the program. Research was mentioned, especially research that supported program methods, but it was not evaluated, discussed, or synthesized. Questions and discussions were focused on correct implementation rather than evaluation or critique. Workshops were often held with large groups of 40 or more teachers meeting during one intensive period (e.g., 8 hr or two full days), and were aimed at ensuring fidelity of program implementation with students who meet specific criteria for program placement. I would categorize my experiences in such workshops as narrowly focused training on procedures for a particular program, in contrast to development of a flexible knowledge base for teaching reading. There is likely a place for both training and knowledge development experiences in the preparation and support of literacy professionals, but current trends in legislation suggest that narrower training could become increasingly prevalent. Trainings without opportunities for the development of professional knowledge and judgment limit the possibility that teachers will draw on a wide range of resources and perspectives when responding to individual students. This represents an emphasis on training, or skill development for specific applications—in this

case, skills to deliver a single program with fidelity—versus development, or the process of integrating a range of skills and knowledge that can be flexibly recombined in a variety of unpredictable contexts. A recent emphasis within state legislation on program-specific training rather than broader traditional approaches to graduate study marks shifts in what states view as preparation to teach students with reading difficulties, which in turn narrows students' learning opportunities to single programs implemented with fidelity.

Equitable Access to High-Quality Instruction and Intervention

To ensure equitable access to high-quality instruction and intervention, I propose two goals for responsible engagement within the current policy and advocacy context.

Create Discursive Bridges Between Conflicting Ideologies

It is the responsibility of reading researchers and teacher educators to understand the nature of debates within the field, not just to understand their own side. Teacher educators must be able to articulate how IDA standards compare to ILA standards and programs—whether they engage with these documents as part of efforts to resist policy changes, seek dual accreditation, or imagine alternatives to current realities (see IDA, 2010; ILA, 2017).

If we as literacy professionals do not directly address dyslexia and related instructional tools, we miss the opportunity to frame and contextualize them for current and future educators. Instead of allowing distrust to grow between stakeholders with different commitments, institutions of research and higher education might invite and host conversations with multiple stakeholders to highlight, humanize, and synthesize multiple perspectives on literacy development in school contexts. In my context, this community building has included hosting panel discussions and poster sessions discussing research and practices from a range of perspectives. It has also included projects that include reading and comparing standards of different professional organizations and interrogating related school programs and policies.

Describe Principles in Practice, Not Just Practices or Principles, and Certainly Not Brands

Even in the midst of efforts aimed at identifying and rehearsing “core” or “high-leverage practices” within teacher education and advanced graduate studies (e.g., Grossman, Hammerness, & McDonald, 2009), we must ensure educators know the empirical data and theoretical principles behind best practices, not just practices or sets of practices packaged as programs. For example, within graduate and undergraduate coursework at my current institution, students research, analyze, and compare programs used in their school settings. When learning specific practices, students are immediately challenged to apply them flexibly in the field rather than with strict fidelity. Graduate students may learn to take running records but have practicum or clinical experiences in

settings where students communicate in sign language, or in a spoken language other than English. So, the practice they learn in class must immediately be adjusted in the field without losing the intention of observing reading behavior. Similarly, undergraduates learn the practice of reading aloud with big books (oversized books) only to teach in an underresourced setting where alternative resources have to be improvised without losing the principle or intention of a shared reading experience.

Literacy professionals must be able to use data and theoretically sound principles to elaborate and individualize canned programs and mandates in ways that support individual learners, and they must be able to defend such instructional decisions. Therefore, now more than ever, our instruction about taken-for-granted instructional practices has to focus on the thinking, the principle and the intention of the practice, not its surface features or material resources. This emphasis on principled practice (Smagorinsky, 2001) should be what separates development from training approaches, and what inoculates educators against the pitfalls of single approaches.

Conclusion

If teacher educators want to develop literacy professionals who engage in individualized, responsive instruction rather than graduates only trained to implement a single-packaged program with fidelity, we must create practical and discursive bridges from specific programs to principled practices that engage and support all learners. If we dismiss commercial programs, we risk appearing ignorant or recalcitrant instead of aware and engaged. We cannot miss the opportunity to engage with any group or resource concerned about children learning to read, but we also cannot miss a chance to move conversations and understanding ever forward toward more equitable, inclusive, responsive opportunities to develop literacy.


Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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Manuscript submitted: 27 May 2017

Manuscript accepted: 11 February 2018

Article published online: 4 April 2018