

Dykstra: We all need to advocate for better reading instruction for children

Today's column is a direct response to University of Wyoming assistant professor Dr. Todd Reynold's column that appeared in the Wyoming Tribune Eagle on October 1, 2020.

Imagine that 20% or more of all children struggled to walk. They just couldn't figure it out. While other children were walking just fine, these children stood out from their peers. Something wasn't right. Now imagine that there were a number of reasons these children struggled to walk, among them, a condition we will call "dyswalkia". If your child doesn't walk because they have dyswalkia they are legally defined as disabled, and entitled not only to services and accommodations, but they may also gain access to treatment which can successfully teach them to walk, if we give it soon enough, often before dyswalkia can be easily diagnosed. Finally, imagine that the same treatment also works quite well for many other children who struggle to walk, but unless you're diagnosed with dyswalkia you're not disabled, and you don't have the legal protections to help you get the services that you need. You're just a bad walker and you'll have to learn to live with it. No one would be surprised to find the definition of dyswalkia, which is admittedly vague and somewhat arbitrary, begin to expand to include more and more of the 20% who struggled to walk. After all, if we can say they have dyswalkia, they have a better chance of getting help.

Such is the situation with dyslexia. A sizable proportion of children struggle to learn to read, and the law says that if they struggle because of dyslexia they are entitled not only to accommodations, but may be entitled to particular instruction. That same instruction is highly beneficial to many children who struggle to read for other reasons. In fact, it's the best way to teach children to read whether they struggle or not, delivered at a faster pace and a lower intensity. So why is Prof. Reynolds, or anyone else in education, surprised that parents of dyslexic children are stretching the definition of dyslexia to cover as many children as possible, or that those who can afford it are hiring doctors and

lawyers to use that diagnosis to pry necessary treatment from the reluctant hands of stubborn school districts? Why would we blame parents and advocates for playing by the rules others made?

Keep in mind, even after they get the diagnosis skilled instruction is hard to come by. So, the same parents are the ones who are fighting for everybody's child, fighting to get the best instruction possible for everyone, whether they struggle or not. Because the best way to teach children to read isn't just the best way for some children, and you shouldn't have to struggle enough, or fail enough to get it.

Remarkably, that's the recommendation of Prof. Julian Elliott, a noted scholar that Prof. Reynolds cited but did not understand. Elliott recommends, and I agree, that we should stop worrying so much about who is dyslexic and who isn't and simply provide the kind of instruction that works best for everybody, but is too often unavailable. Which leads us to the central issue: what is that instruction and why is it so unavailable? The answer to that requires us to wrestle with a different question, "what should a child do when they come to a word they don't immediately recognize?" An abundance of science, everything from brain imaging to classroom studies, says we should encourage the child to use knowledge of sounds and letters to solve the unknown word.

Unfortunately, in most classrooms and most colleges of education using sounds and letters to solve the word is only one strategy of many, and often seen as the least desirable option. This disconnect between the science of reading, and the way reading is taught, is known as the reading wars.

Let me be clear, there is vastly more to skilled reading than solving unknown words using letters and sounds. But difficulty with this task, often referred to as decoding, is the most common struggle amongst children learning to read. They may struggle for other reasons later on, but in the beginning, matching sounds to letters to solve unfamiliar words is the central task, and the most common challenge. It is also important to realize that being good at decoding is essential to becoming a skilled reader who almost never needs to decode. That's because getting to the point that a word is recognized automatically, a small miracle known as "orthographic mapping", depends heavily on skillfully associating letters with sounds when you're learning to read. The most important researcher on this topic is Linea Ehri, another scholar Prof. Reynolds cited but did not understand.

We know a great deal about how reading works and how it develops in the brain. Unfortunately, not every bit of that knowledge translates directly to how we teach. Prof. Reynolds cites Timothy Shanahan to make that point without understanding it. While each detail of how brains read will not translate directly to how we teach, the overall picture of the reading brain does a great deal to guide instruction if we pay attention. We can literally watch while brains convert letters into sounds, sounds into words, and words into meaning, in an elegant neurological dance that is so fast and so complex it should be impossible. Every skilled reader dances very much the same steps, in the same order, using the same parts of their brain. In broad strokes, this dance matches up very well with the kind of teaching we know is most effective, and with the kinds of problems we know are most common. Rather than complaining about parents, Prof. Reynolds would do a service to the state of Wyoming, his students, and their students by learning more about it. He could start by rereading Elliott, Ehri, and Shanahan. I think he'll find they're on the side of better instruction for children. I know I am.

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Dr. Steve Dykstra is a psychologist with over 25 years of experience serving some of the most challenging mental health cases involving children. Through his work he has come to recognize the role of reading difficulties in the complex stories of the children and families he serves. Dr. Dykstra is particularly interested in the failure of most Universities and schools of education to properly teach the known science of reading, and how that impacts school systems and, ultimately, children. He believes that we must always favor the best interests of children over the feelings and preferences of adults.