

Reading Upside Down: Identifying and Addressing opportunity Gaps in Literacy Instruction

By. D.L Wolter

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Deborah L. Wolter has long been an educator, and elementary school teacher consultant. Even though she was born deaf, she dedicates herself as a specialist in special education. She got her BA in early childhood and elementary education and an MA in reading from Eastern Michigan University. She has also published papers on literacy and family literacy.

Some students in early childhood education in America are identified as struggling readers because they read slower, miscue pronunciation, have difficulties spelling, and are unable decoding (p.106). However, Wolter stressed that some students were falsely diagnosed, and were given inadequate interventions. Due to this concern, in order to move students from reading upside down to reading upside up, Wolter attempts to encourage teachers and educational superintendents to reconsider and scrutinize the root causes of students' reading barriers or obstacles that are overlooked or not observed.

Before the children are evaluated for reading difficulties, Wolter encourages teachers to ask themselves if they provide effective reading instruction and enough opportunities to read to students. Consequently, Wolter wrote a powerful argument that teachers should focus more on

the opportunity gap than the achievement gap as the gap in opportunities to learn is crucial and also influences the gap in achievement. Additionally, she believes reading difficulties do not result from innate, cognitive, or emotional deficit but rather a lack of reading instruction supporting and high inclusion environment for struggling young readers in the regular classroom.

Accordingly, Wolter describes various case studies of young readers who had been diagnosed as possibly being unready or at-risk, having dyslexia, learning disabilities, language impairment, or attention deficit disorder and were removed from general education curriculum to special education services. In the remedial classroom, these students were given various kinds of interventions that does not meet individual needs and can be called “one-size-fit-all” reading program by the specialists who not experts in reading instruction which, Wolter argues that this is unfair. Consequently, struggling readers would be isolated from their peers, and lag far behind others. Moreover, some students would have negative attitudes about reading, or even try to escape from reading because interventions used in special programs do not support or fulfill the missing pieces of their weaknesses.

Wolter addresses that the diagnosis of whether or not students need to be placed in the special program can be very subtle, risky, and hazardous; thus, it must be done very carefully. Some children were identified as having learning disabilities despite the fact that they do not have them. In other cases they were diagnosed correctly yet they were treated by the panacea, which does not help recovering. She points out that students should not be the victims from wrong identification or because of the negative viewpoint of teachers.

Furthermore, Wolter highlights that teachers should not infer or evaluate children for learning disabilities because the students cannot do well alongside their peers do, they do not use standard English, or have test scores below their average reading level of their grade. In the

chapter *It Looks Greek to Me*, Wolter recounts a first-grade, Portuguese boy who speaks English as a second language. The teacher was concerned and placed him in special education since he often made miscues in reading English words, added numerous vowel sounds at the end of the words, and read loudly. Wolter explains that those kinds of mistakes are caused by “language transfer or linguistic interference” (pp.52-53). In other words, the errors in English that he made resulted from how he transferred his first language features to English grammar, spelling, and pronunciation. This is not unusual for bilingual or multilingual learners and is not an indicator or symptom of a reading disability.

This book challenges teachers to turn crisis into opportunity by offering the struggling children more options for authentic engagement in reading in the classroom along with their peers. Wolter stresses that teachers have to ensure that they put themselves in students’ shoes and pay very close attention to them, provide them extra time, and give them adequate lessons; they should find that students will be able to improve their reading skills soon since student are always eager to learn to read effectively. Moreover, schools and parents will not have to waste their time and money with costly therapeutic services.

Wolter utterly believes that students who read upside down, or struggling readers, can also achieve high levels of literacy especially when teachers and specialists work collaboratively and treat them accurately. Furthermore, due to the increasing of diverse classrooms, Wolter calls for change from teachers and educators to reduce the opportunity gap before it impacts struggling young readers throughout their life.