



education review // reseñas educativas

a multi-lingual journal of book reviews

**editors: gustavo e. fischman /
melissa cast-brede / gene v glass**

Supported by the Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College, Arizona State University

September 16, 2015

ISSN 1094-5296

Elliott, J. G., & Grigorenko, E. L. (2014). *The dyslexia debate*. New York, NY: The Cambridge University Press.

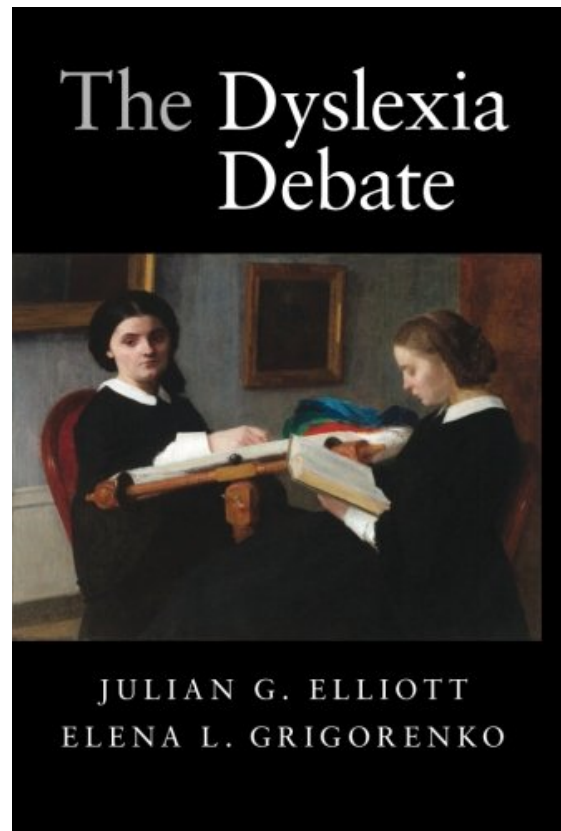
Pp. xvii + 271

ISBN: 9780521135870

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The authors of this volume state that dyslexia is essentially “a difficulty in decoding text” (p. 6). Over time, it has taken on numerous connotations, including (but not limited to) word blindness, specific reading retardation, reading difficulties, specific reading difficulties, reading disability, learning disability, unexpected reading difficulty, and specific learning difficulties. This book provides a comprehensive analysis of the definitional problems of the term, and offers a scientifically rigorous way to describe the various types of reading difficulties and discuss empirically supported forms of intervention.

The authors have excellent qualifications for dealing with this issue. Elliott is the Principal of Collingwood College in the Durham (England) School of Education, and Grigorenko is a professor in the Child Study Center at Yale University. In an effort to cover all aspects of the debate, the book includes quotations from approximately 1,000 technical papers, reports and books. This is accomplished in fewer than 200 pages (a total of over five unique technical references per page). The result is a relatively short volume that requires significant persistence and effort to read from cover to cover. Although working my way through this book was



Brown, W. L. (2015, September 16). Review of *The Dyslexia Debate* by L. Chavez. *Education Review*, 22. <http://edrev.asu.edu/index.php/ER/article/view/1891>

exhausting, I strongly recommend it for anyone interested in a comprehensive overview of the research on reading difficulties in children.

The debate over the term “dyslexia” stems from differences in establishing its nature and causes: Are they primarily hereditary or environmental? How does one distinguish a specific learning disability from a “garden variety” poor reader? In the “Reading Wars,” there is conflict over how best to teach beginning readers. Should children learn whole words (often criticized as being pictographic, much like Chinese), or letter-sound relationships (phonics, often criticized as “word-calling”)?

This debate on how best to teach children to read is not new. In an article published by an early pioneer in the study of reading disability, Orton (1929) stated, “the sight method of teaching reading ... on a restricted group of children ... proves an actual obstacle to reading progress, and moreover I believe that this group is one of considerable importance both because of its size and because here faulty teaching methods may not only prevent the acquisition of academic education by children of average capacity but may also give rise to far reaching damage to their emotional life” (p. 11).

The authors of *The Dyslexia Debate* demonstrate considerable courage by challenging “settled science” in regard to reading difficulties in children. Anyone proposing to challenge something that has become commonly accepted by virtually everyone needs powerful allies to help carry the day. It is symptomatic of our time that centralization has erected very high walls around many categories of professional practice. This effectively prevents any challenge to the received wisdom (i.e., consensus) around a given issue. Dyslexia is an excellent case in point.

Once a given condition has been defined, and a constituency has developed that is dependent on that definition, it is very difficult to convince anyone that the definition is flawed. Some examples from the field of education include autism, dyslexia, and Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder (ADHD). Over the years, as more and more children are diagnosed with a specific disorder, government aid and special programs spring up to provide for the “educational needs” of the population so identified.

When a large sum of money is involved, it is nearly impossible to bring about any meaningful change.

The authors point out how the prevalence of “dyslexia” has increased considerably over the past century. In the early 20th century, Hinshelwood (1917) estimated that one in a thousand children suffered from “word-blindness,” (common-day “dyslexia”). Orton (1939), with whom the modern dyslexia movement is frequently identified, suggested that slightly more than 10% of the school-aged population had at least one reading disability. Shaywitz’s (2005) longitudinal study in Connecticut identified approximately 17.5% of the sample as having a reading disability (defined on the basis of reading that was below age, grade or level of intellectual ability).

It seems likely that this growth in the number of children diagnosed with dyslexia is related to the lack of a well-defined description of its symptoms and causes. The authors propose revisions to the DSM. In the process, they take on a major establishment including, among others, pediatricians, special educators, and parents. This establishment strongly believes that dyslexia is meaningful and that currently-defined special programs are necessary to meet the needs of children so afflicted.

The prominent literacy experts cited in this book include Marilyn Adams, Frank Vellutino (who wrote the Foreword), Lynn and Doug Fuchs, Sally and Bennett Shaywitz, Keith Stanovich, H. L. Swanson, and Joseph Torgeson. The book’s coauthor, Elena Grigorenko, has at least 16 different works cited in the text. Although I have not read all of the works listed in the bibliography, I have read enough to know that most of these researchers have expressed skepticism regarding the nature and causes of reading difficulties.

In their “Conclusions and Recommendations” section, Elliott and Grigorenko summarize their research and propose changes to the American Psychological Association’s Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM), to better reflect the results of several decades of research into the causes of reading disability. They note that the perspectives and agendas of diverse stakeholders (i.e., geneticists, neuroscientists, pediatricians, school/educational psychologists, lobby and advocacy

groups, struggling readers and their families) need to be considered in this debate.

The book outlines interventions for those at risk of reading disability, to enable them to catch up with their peers. Key elements include:

- Phonemic awareness
- Phonics
- Spelling/writing
- Fluency
- Vocabulary
- Comprehension

The authors note that most research studies have shown the particular value of phonics-based approaches for young readers. Schemes with greater emphasis on phonics tend to have greater effects on improving reading ability.

One of the most-cited reading researchers (Stanovich) has been quoted as stating: “No term has so impeded the scientific study of reading, as well as the public’s understanding of reading disability, as the term dyslexia. The retiring of the word is long overdue” (p. 182). Elliott and Grigorenko (2014 web), the authors of this volume, state: “One thing that many parents feel that they can do is lobby for their child. In such circumstances, it is unsurprising that so many parents seek a dyslexia assessment with all the advantages that this promises. However, as *The Dyslexia Debate* demonstrates, parents are being misled by claims that such assessments are scientifically rigorous, and that a diagnosis will point to more effective forms of treatment” [Emphasis in the original].

Dyslexia is fundamentally a deficiency of decoding skills. Treating the recognition of whole words as the essence of early reading could reasonably be considered as a source of the prevalence of this condition (see Orton, 1929). Moving toward modifying the method for teaching beginning reading, rather than trying to find some deficiency in the intellectual makeup of the young reader, could well become a civil rights initiative in the future.

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About the Reviewer

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Dr. William L. Brown provides research and evaluation services for several educational agencies. Prior to retiring from full-time employment, he served five years as Coordinator of Test Development for Michigan’s Office of Educational Assessment and Accountability, leading the development of the Elementary and Middle School Michigan Educational Assessment Program (MEAP) tests, the Michigan components of the Michigan Merit Examination, and the Secondary Credit Assessments. Previously, he served seven years as Director of Institutional Research and Assessment at Lansing Community College and five years as Director of Research, Evaluation and Assessment at Minneapolis Public Schools. In the early 1990s, he was Coordinator of Test Administration for MEAP, and served on the Michigan Educational Research Association Board. He has degrees from the University of Michigan (B.S. in Aerospace Engineering), Eastern Michigan University (M.A. in Classroom Teaching) and Michigan State University (PhD in Measurement and Quantitative Methods).




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