

Exploring the Orton-Gillingham Approach to Teaching Reading from the Perspective of Tutors at the Scottish Rite Learning Centre for Children – Halifax

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Article abstract

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Exploring the Orton-Gillingham Approach to Teaching Reading from the Perspective of Tutors at the Scottish Rite Learning Centre for Children – Halifax

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Abstract

Research indicates that individuals with poor reading skills are more at risk of dropping out of school and having fewer career options than their peers who are proficient readers (Castles et al., 2018; Jamieson, 2006). The Scottish Rite Learning Centre for Children - Halifax (SRLCC-H) in Nova Scotia offers tuition-free tutoring services based on the Orton-Gillingham approach, to students with reading-based learning disabilities, such as dyslexia. Through individual interviews, this study explores the perspectives and experiences of the volunteer tutors and tutors-in-training at the SRLCC-H. The findings indicate that OG tutoring improved their students' reading abilities and increased their levels of confidence.

Keywords: reading, tutoring, Orton-Gillingham, Scottish-Rite Learning Centre, dyslexia

Introduction

The right to read is a global, national, and local issue. The Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), the Supreme Court of Canada (*Moore v. British Columbia Education*, 2012) and the Ontario Human Rights Commission (2022) have agreed that learning to read is a basic human right. The Ontario Human Rights Commission (OHRC) warranted a study on how early reading is taught in the province. This *Right to Read Inquiry Report* (OHRC, 2022) called for sweeping changes to literacy instruction. The authors found that the Ontario education system had failed to meet the needs of students who are marginalized, as well as those with reading disabilities, thus denying them the “right to read” and the “equal right to a future” (p. 2). The development of functional literacy skills is essential to individual and societal health and success. Research shows that individuals with poor reading skills are at higher risk of dropping out of school, being incarcerated, and earning less than their peers who are proficient readers (Castles et al., 2018; Jamieson, 2006).

When children struggle to learn to read in school, caregivers often seek outside tutoring. This creates a social and cultural dilemma as private tutors and programs are often expensive, restricting access to families who can afford them (OHRC, 2022). Those who cannot are forced to rely on an overburdened school system for additional supports. In Nova Scotia, where this research was conducted, the most recent assessment of Grade 6 students' reading abilities indicated that approximately 30 percent of students will need

additional support to meet grade level expectations (Nova Scotia Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2022). One charitable organization that was created to support students who are not meeting grade level reading outcomes is the Scottish Rite Learning Centre for Children – Halifax (SRLCC-H). The Centre sponsors a 3-year training program for tutors in the Orton-Gillingham (OG) approach to reading and these individuals, supervised by a certified OG trainer, provide free tutoring to students with reading-based learning disabilities, such as dyslexia. This study explores the perspectives and experiences of the Centre’s executive director (ED), who is a certified OG Trainer, and the tutors and tutors-in-training at the Centre. With the written permission of the ED, Thelma Gegan, their comments are identified within the findings; the other participants have been assigned pseudonyms. The participants share their experience of tutoring children and youth with reading difficulties using the OG approach, as well as their thoughts and opinions on reading education.

Literature Review

Advances in brain research have demonstrated that learning spoken language and learning how to read are two very different processes. One (speech) is natural, while the other (reading) is not. Reading is a learned skill that requires years of instruction and practice (Castles et al., 2018; Seidenberg, 2017). It is widely accepted that strong literacy skills are vital to all aspects of adult achievement, including social, educational, and economical success. Research has demonstrated the importance of learning to read at an early age (Statistics Canada, 2006). Longitudinal studies have shown that students who have difficulty reading in Grade 3 often fall further behind with grade progression (Francis et al., 1996; Juel, 1988; Shaywitz, 2003), and the gap between proficient and non-proficient readers increases (Stanovich, 1986; 1994). The importance of early detection and intervention are well-referenced in the literature (Castles et al., 2018; Dev et al., 2002; Juel, 1988; Seidenberg, 2017).

While teaching phonemic awareness and phonological understanding benefits all children, it is essential for those who struggle to read (Buckingham & Castles, 2019; Double et al., 2019; Foorman et al., 1998; Moats, 1998). Children with a reading-based learning disability, such as dyslexia, have difficulty developing these skills without specific intervention, explicit instruction, and teaching targeted to their challenges. Despite the evidence that this instruction is vital in early grades, it is often not implemented in the classroom (Washburn et al., 2011). The results of this can be devastating for students.

Past estimates have found that while three in 10 children struggle to read (and that rate has grown higher since the pandemic), research indicates that more than 90% of all students could learn to read if they had access to teachers who employed scientifically based reading instruction (National Council on Teacher Quality (NCTQ), 2023, para 3)

Unfortunately, many teachers are not trained in evidence-based reading instruction during their teacher preparation programs. The NCTQ studied more than 700 teacher preparation programs in the United States and found that only 28 percent reported fully including all five components (phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, composition) of

scientifically based reading instruction (Ellis et al., 2023). When educators lack this information, they risk falling back on outdated notions and pedagogy.

One dilemma in formulating an approach to teacher training is how to challenge the established schemas of educators who believe that learning to read should be easy or natural, and who are ready to blame parents, cultures, poverty, or laziness for students' failure to read. (Moats, 2014, p. 85)

Teacher preparation programs are pivotal in ensuring that teachers receive an education that is built on evidence-based research practices, so that they can take that knowledge with them into the classroom and ensure their students receive the best possible reading instruction.

The Reading Wars

While a significant body of research, known as the science of reading, has demonstrated that an explicit approach to teaching reading is essential for all children to learn how to read there continues to be divide amongst educators as to how reading should be taught. This division has been dubbed the Reading Wars and involves proponents of code-based instruction facing off against advocates for meaning-based instruction (Connor et al., 2004). The difference between these two types of instruction has been described simply as follows.

Code-based instruction focuses on explicit and systematic teaching of decoding including letter recognition, letter–sound correspondence, phonics, and phonological awareness. Meaning-based instruction views learning to read as a more natural process (Goodman, 1970) that requires consistent experience with meaningful text within a literature-rich environment. (Dahl & Freppon, 1995) (p. 306)

Research has demonstrated that “most children appear to develop stronger reading skills when provided explicit decoding instruction in combination with meaningful reading activities” (Connor et al., 2004, p. 306). The OG model that is used by the tutors in this study falls under the umbrella of structured literacy. Their instructional strategies focus on phoneme awareness, morphology, orthography, semantics, syntax, and text structure as means of improving a student's reading skills.

Approximately 20 – 40 percent of children in Canada (Jamieson, 2006; O'Sullivan, 2020) experience reading delays. From a social perspective, it is important to note that low literacy skills disproportionately affect children who are raised in poverty. In Nova Scotia, approximately one in five children live in poverty (Frank & Saulnier, 2024), making it the province with the fourth highest rate of child poverty in Canada. The results of standardized reading tests in 2015-16 and 2016-17 in Nova Scotia showed that more than 30 percent of Grade 3 students scored below their minimum grade level reading expectations (Nova Scotia Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, n.d.-a). For students of African descent and Mi'kmaq or other Indigenous heritage, that number is disproportionately higher (Nova Scotia Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, n.d.-b).

If students are identified prior to Grade 3, only 2% to 5% have been reported to “not respond to explicit core and supplemental reading instruction” (Miciak & Fletcher, 2020, p. 348). Beswick and Sloat (2006) stress that early intervention has been shown to positively impact the decoding skills of students with dyslexia. While reading intervention support is usually offered at school, some families choose to access after-school tutoring centres, such as the SRLCC-H; unfortunately, not all families are able to access these programs leading to inequities.

The Orton-Gillingham (OG) Approach to Reading

The Orton-Gillingham approach is based on the research of the late Dr. Samuel Orton, a neuropsychiatrist and pathologist (Orton Academy, n.d.). He theorized that dyslexia is a brain-based learning disability, a definition which stands today (Georgetown University Medical Center, 2003; Norton et al., 2014). In 1936, Anna Gillingham, an educator-psychologist, along with teacher Bessie Stillman, created *The Gillingham Manual – Remedial Training for Children with Specific Disability in Reading, Spelling and Penmanship* (Gillingham & Stillman, 1997), whose 8th edition was published in 1997. Their work was based on Dr. Orton’s research and introduced the language triangle: a multi-sensory approach to teaching the phonics of reading through auditory, visual, and kinesthetic inputs. The manual describes, in detail, how to teach a daily lesson; however, the three-year training program for tutors is necessary for its proper usage.

Over the past decade, parent advocacy groups have pushed most US states to adopt dyslexia-specific legislation; several states have even mandated that teachers use the OG approach to teaching reading (Stevens et al., 2021). These regulations have been put in place, despite the meta-analyses demonstrating that the research with the OG approach is, while promising, insufficient. Some studies have clearly demonstrated gains in student reading. A study by Joshi and colleagues (2002) used a multisensory teaching approach incorporating the OG-based Alphabetic Phonics Model. The treatment group made statistically significant gains in phonological awareness, decoding, and reading comprehension, while the control group profited in comprehension alone. Hwee and Houghton’s study (2011) with dyslexic participants yielded mixed results: OG-based instruction significantly improved participants’ word recognition and expression, but not their sentence reading.

In 2006, Ritchey and Goeke conducted a literature review on OG-based classroom instruction. Believing that OG support was built on anecdotal, non-research-based evidence, their review used only studies with quasi-experimental or experimental designs, in line with the guidelines of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (2008). Only 10 articles and 2 dissertations met this criterion, but they provided a “preliminary evidence base of the effectiveness of OG and OG-based programs in comparison to other instructional approaches” (p.180), with further scientific research recommended.

In 2021, Stevens and colleagues conducted meta-analysis research involving a full-text review of 109 articles, inclusive of those used by Ritchey and Goeke (2006). Only 24 articles met their inclusion criteria of “experimental, quasi-experimental, or single-case design” (p. 402) usage. Like Ritchey and Goeke (2006), they concluded that “OG interventions do not statistically significantly improve foundational skill outcomes or vocabulary and reading comprehension outcomes for students with or at risk for WLRD

over and above comparison condition instruction,” (p. 408) but noted their “promise” and recommended more high-quality research. Solari and colleagues (2021) also came to a similar conclusion in their meta-analysis.

Despite the valid research that has been done in this area, many studies to date are problematic, as they do not fully explore the different types of teacher/tutor training nor the instructional approaches and/or programs. Training for instructors and/or tutors ranged from a two-week session to the three-year, certified OG approach. Branded programs’ findings were conflated with the certified OG approaches and the range and type of teacher training. They also failed to recognize and value the significant contributions of qualitative studies exploring the perspectives of teachers and/or tutors, parents, and students.

This study adds to the body of research on the OG approach using a qualitative study which includes the first-hand experiences and observations of certified OG tutors and tutors-in-training. First voices in the research can identify the strengths and challenges of reading instruction on students’ learning of functional reading skills, and their impact on student well-being and engagement.

Given the need for future research on the OG approach for students who are struggling to learn to read, this study explores an OG, three-year, certified tutoring program from the perspective of an OG-certified trainer (the ED), the volunteer tutors, and the tutors-in-training at a specific tutoring centre. The three principal goals of this research study were:

1. To explore the perspectives and experiences of the executive director and volunteer tutors and tutors-in-training implementing the OG method.
2. To identify the strengths and challenges of learning and implementing the OG approach to teaching reading and writing to students with reading disabilities.
3. To elicit recommendations of how students with reading disabilities can be taught to read within a public-school setting, thus ensuring equitable access for students to an explicit, systematic and structured approach to teaching reading.

Design of the Study

Theoretical Framework

To study this issue deeply, we have chosen a theoretical framework that incorporates Bronfenbrenner’s theory of bioecological systems (1977). This theory posits that child development is influenced by a complex system of relationships ranging from the immediate, which includes family, friends, and school, to more wide-ranging stimuli, such as major life events and worldwide phenomena, such as the Covid pandemic (Guy-Evans, 2020). Bronfenbrenner felt that the five separate systems that influenced the child were: the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem. By placing the child at the centre of these systems, Bronfenbrenner demonstrated their effect on the child’s development. Schools, alongside families, peers, and neighbourhoods, inhabit the microsystem, which most powerfully influences the child. One cannot underestimate the role that teachers, schools and education play in a child’s life and future (Lippard et al., 2018). The mesosystem involves the relationships between the child and the individuals in the microsystem, such as parents and teachers. The exosystem encompasses a range of influences, including social media, extended family, and government agencies, like school boards. More broadly, the macrosystem includes

societies and cultures, while the chronosystem refers to environmental changes. The interactions within and among the systems provide support, scaffolding, and information to enhance children's growth in the classroom (Lippard et al., 2018).

Methodology

This study explores the participants' general perceptions of how to teach reading, particularly to students who are struggling, based on their everyday experiences in a tutoring setting. All participants are either in an OG tutor training program or have completed the program and are volunteering or working for the SRLCC-H.

To tell the story of the Centre, we chose to use a narrative inquiry approach. Connelly and Clandinin (1990) described narrative inquiry as both a "narrative and a method" (p. 2), referring to the phenomenon as "story" and the inquiry as "narrative." "Thus, we say that people by nature lead storied lives and tell stories of those lives, whereas narrative researchers describe such lives, collect and tell stories of them, and write narratives of experience" (p. 2). Clandinin and colleagues (2007) expressed that educators are often drawn to "the comfort that comes from thinking about telling and listening to stories" (p. 21), causing some to consider narrative inquiry as simple research. The authors warn, however, that narrative inquiry is more than storytelling, and can be a complex endeavor.

Recruitment, Data Collection and Data Analysis

The executive director (ED) of the SRLCC-H, Thelma Gregan, distributed a letter of invitation from the researchers to all tutors and tutors-in-training, encouraging interested individuals to contact the researchers. Participants who met the project's qualifications were contacted to gain informed consent for an interview. There were 10 participants in the study, including the ED, seven tutors, and two tutors-in-training. The tutors and tutors-in-training identified themselves in different ways, including as teachers or other school staff, parents, or private tutors. Individual interviews were held on the Teams video platform following COVID-19 protocols, and were based on semi-structured, guiding questions.

Participants were asked how they started volunteering with the Scottish-Rite LCC-H, why they made the decision to take on this three-year-plus commitment, what they learned, and their overall perspectives on the OG approach. They were also asked their recommendations for supporting classroom teachers who may not have knowledge of structured literacy or evidence-based early reading instruction. The interviews ranged in length from 20 to 58 minutes.

Each participant was given a pseudonym, and any possible identifying information was changed or removed. The only exception to this was the Executive Director, who is identified by name throughout. Her identity is readily available online and she signed a consent form to allow her name to be used. The transcripts were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed. The coding followed an inductive approach to the interviews (Reinharz & Davidman, 1992; Ristock & Pennell, 1996), based in context analysis, to identify shared experiences, commonalities, differences and repetitive responses and form. Emerging patterns were formed into categories which were then developed into themes as outlined in the Findings section.

The Scottish-Rite Learning Centre for Children – Halifax

The Scottish-Rite Charitable Foundation Learning Centre (SRLCC) program started in Canada in London, Ontario in 2003, establishing a focus on supporting children and youth with dyslexia through one-on-one tutoring. By the end of 2018, there were nine not-for-profit centres established in Canada. Each centre employs a structured literacy approach to teaching reading through the use of the Orton-Gillingham approach. This approach is direct, explicit, structured, sequential, and cumulative, and employs a multisensory method of instruction. The components of the OG approach include phonology, sound/symbol association, syllable instruction, morphology, syntax – grammar, semantics, vocabulary/comprehension, and orthography.

This study is based on the OG approach to reading as implemented at the SRLCC-H in Nova Scotia, Canada. Funding is provided to these centres by several charitable foundations, private donors and through fundraising. The SRLCC-H offers tuition-free, individualized tutoring for children with reading disabilities, utilizing the OG-approach to reading. To become OG tutors, adult volunteers are trained at the Centre through a program which involves 45 hours of formal training with a certified OG trainer, and a 100-hour supervised practicum. Tutor trainees are supported through the practicum process through observations, coaching and feedback. Since the Centre makes a three-year tutoring commitment to each family, each tutor trainee is expected to work with their child over the course of those three years. To become a certified OG tutor, the volunteer also needs to complete an additional 50 hours with a second child. The expectation is that the tutor trainee will make the commitment to working with this second child until the child has completed their time at the Centre.

The Nova Scotia program has grown exponentially since opening in 2006. To illustrate, when Thelma started her position as the Centre ED, she was working with seven tutors and seven students; the program now requires scheduling for 56 tutors and 69 students.

Findings

The participants in this study were seven tutors, two tutors-in-training and the ED of the SRLCC-H. The ED's comments are identified separately, as she brings a different perspective to the research. When the tutors and tutors-in-training all agreed on a particular theme, we referred to the group as "they" or "them." All participants are referred to by the pronouns her/she and all were asked the same questions. The interviewer started by asking how and why the participant got involved with the program. During the interviews, participants were asked about their levels of self-efficacy in teaching reading, both before and after training and their recommendations for the education system, as whole, in terms of teacher training in reading instruction. Since the study took place during the Covid pandemic, participants were also asked about how this affected their training and tutoring. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and coded using a line-by-line analysis of the data. Following the strong tradition in qualitative research of developing code directly from the data (Skjott Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019), the researchers used the words, phrases, and sentences taken directly from the participant interviews. This allowed the codes to mirror the voices of the participants, their experiences, ideas, and feelings. The following five themes emerged:

1. Discovering the Instructional Gap Through the Whispers
2. The “Life-Changing” Missing Piece
3. Valuing the Content and the Pedagogy
4. Addressing the Gaps in Teacher Education
5. Tutoring During Covid – 19.

Discovering the Instructional Gap Through the Whispers

Upon opening in 2007, the Board of the SRLCC scrambled to find tutors and children; today it has a waiting list of over 300 children. Thelma learned about the Charitable Foundation and the Learning Centre program through some of its members. She had received professional development in literacy throughout her 20 years of classroom teaching, yet she “*had no clue how to teach children how to read and write.*”

Thelma and the tutors share a common desire to help and work with children. Most became involved with the Centre through other tutors or parents. Jean, a resource teacher, was asked to get involved by the mother of a student who “*had been accepted into the Orton Gillingham program.*” Daria learned of the SRLCC-H through a work colleague. After 30 years' experience in the school system, she had seen “*children who couldn't read no matter what people did*” so she entered training to better help these students. She currently works with struggling junior high readers by referral, using the OG approach, because “*it works.*” Many junior high students “*have given up on themselves,*” assuming that they are the problem. Daria says that they are relieved by the hope that they can still learn, and they “*start to see a future.*”

It was through the whispers of a learning centre teacher that Tracy discovered the SRLCC-H. Talking openly about the OG approach was not encouraged at the school; in fact, she had heard of teachers being openly reprimanded for it and having their materials removed from the classroom if they tried to use them for instruction. Despite her concerns, she felt strongly that she needed to learn more about this method. She describes her training was “*empowering,*” as it helped her better understand the construction of the English language. Danielle also learned of the Centre from other teachers. She pursued training because she felt the provincial curriculum was inadequate to effectively teach reading to her ELA students, who lacked the word meaning necessary for the balanced literacy approach. She has since incorporated her OG approach into her early elementary classroom, and many of her students have made progress with their reading.

The “Life-Changing” Missing Piece

The overarching belief of participants was that the tutoring provided at the SRLCC-H positively impacts the lives of children and their families. Many participants stated that being trained in the OG approach to reading had also benefited their own lives, with the Centre being a “*place of comfort*” (Carla) and support. Students experience progress, which reaffirms the tutors' commitment to the OG approach and structured literacy. To illustrate, Jenna shared the experience of one her students who said, three-quarters of the way through the school year, “*I look at words and now I can read them*”. The OG approach feels magical to her, though she knows “*it's evidence- and science-based.*” Jenna added, “*I wish every kid could have*” this experience.

Many tutors said they wished they had undergone the OG training sooner. It was the “*missing piece*” in Jean’s understanding of early reading instruction as a specialist teacher. Carla felt that her whole language training “*failed a great many kids*” and did not give her a starting point when students struggled; if they could not read, it was viewed as the student’s problem. Parents of children with dyslexia also regretted not starting the program sooner as “*it was life changing*” (Lorna). Their children gained confidence thanks to their tutoring and carried it back to their classrooms and everyday lives. Thelma commented that although the intent of the Centre is to help children to read, it has also been “*absolutely transformational*” for their self-esteem. Lorna said that by studying “*letters, sounds, and words,*” students “*learn that they can control their language*” rather than the reverse. Daria also noted that she had gained the confidence to assure students that the program will work, even if past tutoring had not.

Valuing the Content and the Pedagogy

The training to become a certified Orton-Gillingham tutor is rigorous. It requires class attendance, the completion of assignments and a supervised 100-hour practicum (although the tutor-in-training commits to working with a child for the duration of their 3-year enrollment). Additionally, for certification through the Scottish Rite Charitable Foundation of Canada, tutors must complete an additional 50 hours with a second student. Lesson planning is particularly strenuous. For Pam, drafts took up to 4 hours to complete; these then had to be adapted with corrections less than 24 hours before tutoring following review by her mentor. Though the time and energy investment in certification is immense, all participants deemed it worthwhile and critical to the training.

Danielle acknowledged the time-commitment but confessed that she was left energized and hopeful from her work on students’ early reading skills. She referenced Grade 7 students who “*were written off as never, ever going to be able to read and they are now reading*” (Danielle). Lorna also found the commitment worthwhile; because of her desire to help children who currently cannot receive support she “*also [has] a private practice... in response to the growing waitlist that the Centre was having.*”

Jean remarked on the importance of proper training in the OG approach, rather than its implementation via commercially available OG lesson plans. She felt that teachers could “go off the rails” without in-depth training. The greatest strengths of the program, in her opinion, are in helping students decode (read) and encode (spell).

One of the main strengths of the OG approach identified by the participants was that it provided them new strategies and approaches for teaching reading. As Thelma explained:

Orton-Gillingham delivery uses guided discovery, or Socratic learning, and that is really what Anita Archer made so famous to everybody - I do, we do, you do. Guiding your children, constantly going back to review what they already know, and build on that knowledge to add one more piece.

In response to the critique that OG’s focus on phonological awareness is tedious, old fashioned and leads to rote learning (Hanford, 2018; Schwartz, 2020; Sohn, 2020), Thelma instead describes the OG approach as “*logical*” and “*predictable*” and, at the

Centre, individualized to each student. Thelma stated that *“one of the whole purposes of working this way is to develop curiosity.”* She added that OG’s multi-sensory component was valuable for learning and heightened student engagement, a sentiment echoed by Danielle when speaking about her students.

The structure of the OG approach appealed to most of the participants, including Carla. She appreciated the progression from simple to more complex concepts, building on prior knowledge, and *“knowing that you’re always going to be continuing to cycle through every concept.”* She added that she continues to write *“incredibly detailed”* lesson plans for the security it affords her of ensuring student success in case lessons *“go awry”*.

Several participants gained self-confidence in their teaching by using a structured approach. Danielle commented that, before her OG training, she knew what she was *“supposed to be doing, but [she] didn’t feel confident [...] because it was just not working for all of the kids.”* By incorporating the OG approach into her early elementary teaching, she has seen huge improvements in her students’ reading abilities. As she progresses in her training, she notices her increased confidence, saying, *“the more you do it, you know, you feel a lot better at it.”* She credits her administration for supporting her implementation of this approach in her classroom, since she knows that this is not the case at all schools.

Many participants singled out the multisensory aspect of the OG approach as a key to its success. Daria noted that finding the *“right sensory fit for [a] particular child [...] is just like fireworks.”* Anna, a teacher trained in resource, early literacy, and some reading recovery, also appreciated its systematic and *“multi-faceted approach”* to working with kids with dyslexia profiles. They and others have taken these tools back to their classrooms.

Some of the tutors quoted Thelma when they discussed the systematic delivery of an Orton-Gillingham lesson: *“we go as fast as we can, and as slow as we must.”* Lorna found that the predictability of lessons, in that they are explicit, systematic, and cumulative, helped ease students’ anxieties that they would be unable to understand or complete them. Knowing that each lesson would *“start with the cards, and [...] end with the reading”*, with spelling and sounds in between, allowed students to *“get involved with what the lesson is about”* rather than worrying about what might come up.

Lorna also remarked on the necessity of individualizing lesson plans to each student since sometimes those with dyslexia have additional diagnoses. She would adjust her plans to best suit her students’ needs. One of her students was so shy and anxious that she would deliver the lesson *“with him lying on the table, because he had to be that close to me.”*

Thelma noted the common thread of wanting to help children among all tutors; however, she stated that they all came to the Centre after recommendations by different people for different reasons. Some wish to volunteer, while others have been able to leave dissatisfying jobs to start their own tutoring service. In terms of who can access the training, Thelma confirmed, *“Our manual talks about having some postgraduate education, so having a university degree is preferred.”* However, she shared that she values passion above previous education and considers that as well, when selecting volunteers for a training cohort.

Despite her 30 years of teaching experience, Carla was surprised by how much she had to learn. She originally thought, *“You know, this can’t be rocket-science. I quickly realized it was rocket-science and that I had an awful lot of backtracking to do.”* Moats (2020) refers to teaching reading as ‘rocket science’ and adds, “But it is also established

science, with clear, specific, practical instructional strategies that all teachers should be taught and supported in using” (p. 5).

Addressing the Gaps in Teacher Education

One recommendation that came up repeatedly in interviews was the need to use the OG approach in Tier 1 (general classroom) and Tier 2 (small group) reading instruction in the public schools. Some respondents believed that teaching all students using a systematic approach, like OG, would greatly reduce the need for outside tutoring, but that its use was sometimes frowned upon in their schools, boards, and Provincial education department. Carla admitted to quietly “*spreading the science of reading*” to avoid resistance. Likewise, Jenna felt compelled to share her OG knowledge with colleagues for their students’ sakes and has given “*Orton-Gillingham-type lessons to large classrooms*,” simultaneously benefiting teachers and students. In her experience, it was a “*whisper campaign*” rather than outright resistance that she encountered, but that she would “*feel out the school, and the principal and teachers*” before speaking openly.

Jenna stated that some teachers in her district were recently introduced to the *Wilson* program –an OG-based classroom program - and that they were then sent to train some elementary resource teachers. Due to the slow pace of implementation in public schools, Jenna thought it would be much easier to teach preservice teachers a structured literacy approach during their undergraduate education degree.

Danielle concurred and recommended that teacher education programs stop teaching approaches that research has shown not to be effective. “*Stop teaching them the [three] cueing system!*” she advised. Jean acknowledged that teachers are adept in other components of language arts instruction, such as reading and writing workshops; but when students are told to “*sound it out and we’ll figure that out later*” rather than taught how to spell, they limit their reading and writing vocabulary. Adding content on the structure of the English language would also benefit preservice teachers, offered Lorna. For example, she felt that if teachers were able to describe aspects such as “*why there are short vowels [and] what you would call that kind of syllable*,” they could teach reading more confidently.

Daria, a junior high school educator, shared her belief that teachers at all levels need training in the structured approach to reading. Upper-grade level teachers struggle to teach subject matter when students cannot read or write independently and are “*barely coping*.” She says teachers at her school now identify students needing help, and she provides support at the principal’s request; however, she wishes that people in higher positions would also acknowledge this need.

Frustration was a key theme among participants. At the SRLCC-H, some students have been waiting more than three years to access its tuition-free tutoring services, said Tracy, and she found it “*immoral*” that schools are not providing this support. Parents are also frustrated with the education system, according to Lorna. They question why their children cannot learn through structured literacy in the classroom and instead must travel to the Centre twice weekly or pay for private tutoring. As Tracy states: “*It would be better for everybody if it was the [public] schools that taught children how to read.*”

Resource and learning centres are overburdened with students requiring additional reading support. Daria disclosed that one resource teacher at her school has a caseload of

70 students, too many to ensure that they get “*real support.*” Struggles with reading affect other subject areas, she says, requiring “*vast resources of people trained in structured literacy,*” which are not available. She believes that immediate use of a structured literacy approach upon entry into school would mean only about 5% of students would need more intensive instruction. While Daria does not know what the solution is, she maintains that “[*public education*] *have to accept and admit that there’s a problem, which they don’t,*” despite provincial test results which demonstrate that approximately 30% of grade 6 students are unable to meet grade level outcomes in reading. Anna insisted that increased teacher use of a structured literacy approach would mean more students would learn to read in the early grades. This would decrease the number of students who “*fall through the cracks or struggle or hate school*” and who enter middle school feeling frustrated.

Classroom teachers need to be offered structured literacy training for their Tier 1 instruction, believes Jean. They must be able to “*assess their own students*” with “*quick and easy*” screening to effectively determine their needs, so that they can act. To this end, years ago, Anna said she helped coordinate an introduction to the OG approach during a PD session at her school. Teachers reacted with shock: “*I’ve been teaching for 5 years,*” Anna quoted one teacher, “*I didn’t know what I was doing in terms of teaching them how to read.*” Follow-up PD was planned due to teachers’ desire for more information but was unfortunately cancelled by [the administrative system]. Since this was 6 years ago, things may have changed, and Anna knows that some schools are now piloting the *Heggerty* and *Wilson* programs. She believes that while PD is essential, a course in reading at the Bachelor of Education level would benefit many more students: “*Even though only 20% may need it, the rest will benefit from having gained a better understanding of language.*”

Thelma reiterated that student reading success will ultimately be determined by Tier 1 (full class) teaching, necessitating teacher education on structured literacy. By identifying children with reading difficulties in the early grades, she says, the deficit with which some students later present, could be avoided. “*Good, solid teaching from the get-go*” could be the key. She supports structured literacy programs, like *Heggerty*, being piloted in certain schools, and thinks they are helping. They make the approach accessible “*without having a ton of training,*” and teachers “*talk with great excitement about what they’re able to do with their children.*”

As for her long-term vision of the SRLCC-H, Thelma has considered expansion to other parts of the province as a possibility, but there are challenges. The current location could be used as a base for these satellite operations; however, she conceded that this expansion would require strong “*energy*” from the volunteers behind the desks, as well as new locations for students and tutors to gather. She adds, “*I think that is our challenge for the next 5 to 10 years.*”

Tutoring During Covid-19

Like other institutions across the globe, the SRLCC-H closed several times during the pandemic. This affected both the training of the tutors and the education of the students. When the Centre finally permanently reopened, they established safety precautions to allow for in-person tutoring and training. Lorna praised the Centre’s Board of Directors, saying they did an excellent job of ensuring the Centre was set up for pandemic learning.

With the protection of masking, sanitizing, and plexiglass barriers, she felt it was a safe working environment for her and the students.

Anna believed that Covid restrictions affected her ability to tutor, both at the centre and in her private practice. She tutored online with the latter during the first lockdown but then stopped, citing a lack of tech savviness and a dislike of virtual tutoring. When it was safe to tutor in person, she adopted clear plastic masks to enable students to see her mouth and she theirs and installed a plexiglass barrier between her and the students she tutored privately.

Meanwhile, with the Centre closed, Jean continued private tutoring through an online program; however, she noted that Covid affected her ability to use the multisensory aspect of OG, thereby making it more difficult for her students to learn. She predicted that the effects of Covid restrictions on student learning will be long-lasting: *“There’s going to be a lot of catch up here.”*

Daria was likewise hindered by an inability to employ a multisensory approach. She had students trace letters in trays of rice or cornmeal but found this adaptation to be “slower and more awkward.” Therefore, she was pleasantly surprised, even “*shocked*”, to find that her students retained their pre-lockdown learning. *“Even the kids at school who were deemed unable to ever learn to read, learned and didn’t lose what they had learned.”*

Thelma presented an optimistic view of the future based on her Covid experience:

Look at what we’ve done in Nova Scotia in these last two years, with how we’ve managed COVID in this province. And it wasn’t that we started with one idea, and we just kept plowing forward. We responded to the science, and we adjusted our practice based on the science. And imagine if we could do that with teaching children to read and write and spell.

Discussion

This study provides valuable insight into the lived experiences of tutors, tutors-in-training, and an executive director, including their perspectives on the Orton Gillingham approach to teaching reading, and the outcomes of their students’ academic achievements and personal well-being. They powerfully voice the need for a structured literacy program for all students.

A prominent thread throughout the interviews was the impact of the outside world on students’ academic and emotional lives. As Bronfenbrenner (1977) noted, schools have a great deal of influence on a child’s present and future life. Some tutors shared that defeatism accompanied their students to their tutoring sessions (OHRC, 2022). With little to no success learning to read in school, these students blamed themselves for lacking this ability. One of the strongest observations made by the participants was the improvement that the OG approach made to their students’ confidence in both their ability to read and their overall self-worth. This finding is supported in other research (Child Mind Institute, 2023). As their reading abilities improved, so did their belief in their capacity for learning. Research has demonstrated that when students receive effective, evidence-based literacy instruction, both their reading skills and their mental health improve significantly. The President of the Pediatricians Alliance of Ontario spoke to this in the *Right to Read Report*:

Many years ago, I had a patient who was being seen for mood and anxiety problems and suicidal threats. Eventually she received a diagnosis of dyslexia and spent a very long time on the waiting list for the Orton Gillingham evidenced based reading and language program. After one year, her reading and language skills had improved so significantly that her self-confidence, mood symptoms improved and suicidal threats abated (ONHC, p. 97).

According to Bronfenbrenner's theory, the meso-and exosystems are the next levels of influence on a child's development. These include the effect of school boards and governments on a child's ability to be a successful reader. The tutors, tutors-in-training, and ED agreed that reading instruction in schools must shift to be explicit, structured, and systematic. They called for: the government to mandate this into the curriculum; universities to include it in pre-service teacher instruction; and for schools to support teachers who use it. Some teachers stated that the OG approach is shared via a 'whisper campaign' due to a fear of repercussions from representatives of the school administration, and central governing bodies. Subsequent to these interviews, the Provincial governing organization announced its intention to increase its focus on phonics and phonological awareness in grades P-2, with full implementation by 2024 (Druhan, 2023; Nova Scotia Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2024).

Next, Bronfenbrenner acknowledged the effect of the culture and attitudes surrounding children (macrosystem). Research demonstrates that public attitudes and opinions are shifting from balanced to more structured literacy, like the Orton Gillingham approach (Matte, 2023; OHRC, 2022). Some researchers and families of struggling readers are lobbying schools to implement a structured literacy approach in Tier 1 instruction, so that all children, not just those with reading difficulties, can learn to read and write in a successful manner (Mervosh, 2023; Stevens et al., 2021).

Large-scale events that shape a child's world belong to Bronfenbrenner's final level of influence: the chronosystem. The Covid-19 pandemic demonstrated the worldwide impact of a global event on children's learning (Gray et al., 2023; Ludewig et al., 2022; Molnár & Hermann, 2023; Whitley et al., 2021). Participants discussed Covid's effect on tutoring and student learning. The SRLCC-H closed several times during the pandemic's first year; however, some of the tutors who had private practices continued to teach their own students virtually. It is noteworthy that the students tended to retain their pre-lockdown learning, and tutors could proceed with new concepts and lessons upon reopening.

Overall, this project's findings reveal that the volunteer tutors and executive director at the Scottish-Rite Learning Centre for Children – Halifax have witnessed the development and improvement of student reading skills through one-on-one tutoring with the OG approach. They strongly believe in the program and give firsthand accounts of its benefits to children who struggle to read. The findings from this study also suggest the participants feel a commitment to training, like that they have undertaken through the SRLCC, is essential for all early literacy teachers.

The demand for both tutor training and services has exceeded the means of the SRLCC-H, as their waitlist now exceeds 300 and they have stopped taking applications for services. As of March 2022, there were also 40 adults waiting to train as tutors, despite the

considerable time commitment. Because of the demand for additional reading support across North America, parents of children with reading difficulties, such as dyslexia, are advocating for the OG approach to be taught in public schools, despite the limited, yet promising, research in this area.

From the perspective of tutors, the OG approach demonstrates many positives for students. It is important to note that neither of the meta-analyses quoted here included qualitative research studies, such as this, in their data analysis. Their decision on the effectiveness of the OG approach required the results of quantitative studies only. By ignoring the first-hand accounts of tutors, their conclusions are lacking a rich source of data. It is clear from conversations with the tutors, tutors-in-training, and the ED, that they are passionate about the OG approach. They provided direct evidence that teaching students to read using this approach is changing their students' lives for the better.

Conclusion

The participants in this study recommend that the Orton Gillingham (OG) approach be used in public schools starting in kindergarten to reduce the number of children who would later require intensive reading interventions. They acknowledged this would require training for teachers during their pre- and in-service years. They asserted that universities offering education degrees must instruct pre-service teachers to teach early reading using evidence-based research methods. This includes using an explicit, structured, and sequential instructional process. Participants admitted that universities could not be solely responsible for this training; the public education system must offer regular professional development to keep teachers up to date and engaged with the latest research in instructional methods and pedagogical development. Many of these trained tutors from the SRLCC-H share their knowledge with their colleagues through whispers, rather than organized sessions. The consensus among participants was that the OG approach to reading must be shared immediately with all teachers, as they have observed firsthand how it has improved students' reading.

The findings of this study demonstrate that evidence-based reading instruction can change the lives of students who are struggling to become proficient readers by providing them with the tools and confidence they need to succeed. The participants in this study stated that the children they tutor who experience reading success, also experience positive changes to their social and emotional well-being. The importance of this growth cannot be understated. Understanding how students and families feel when success is experienced is necessary, yet rarely discussed in the literature. Therefore, it is recommended that future research on the Orton-Gillingham approach to reading include interviews with OG certified tutors and trainers as well as interviews with parents and students. The recommendations made in this report are vital to ensuring that all public-school teachers understand and can instruct reading using an evidence-based approach. This will allow them to confidently implement reading instruction built on a language-based, multisensory, structured, sequential, and cumulative approach in their classrooms, starting in the earliest grades. This way, all children will be given an equitable opportunity to become proficient readers.

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