Reading and Writing[1]

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Rudolf Steiner set the teaching of language arts in an overall sense of the structure of language and the wisdom of language.

M.C. Richards (1980)

Reading is "the art of entering with one's whole soul into an experience outside oneself. It is a gleaning of the sunlight hidden in the hard kernel of the word."

Henry Barnes (1969)

Learning to read and write is a long but magical journey, but how do we support students who might need to take a slightly different route?

What are the Stages of Reading?

Waldorf educators will find commonality with Dr. Jeanne Chall's "Stages of Reading."[2] The renowned Harvard professor developed these stages by keenly observing children during her clinical work and then combining her observations with developmental theories. She intended the stages to be connected, overlapping, and continuous sequences, and she hesitated to link them to specific grade levels. Dr. Chall emphasized that learning to read takes a lifetime, and in her introduction to *Stages of Reading Development*, she reports that when Goethe was very old someone asked him when he had learned to read, and he responded that he spent a lifetime learning and was still learning.

Like Waldorf education's early childhood approach:

Stage 0 focuses on oral language development.

Stage 1 (grades 1-2) emphasizes alphabetic-phonics where children learn to associate sounds to letters and letters to sounds. According to Dr. Chall, "*in a sense, it is as if the child has recapitulated history from… the discovery of picture writing…*" (Chall, p. 16).

The focus of **Stage 2** (grades 2- 3) is fluency. Students read what is already familiar to develop automaticity and confidence. "*What kind of environment fosters the development of Stage 2? Essentially, it requires an opportunity for reading many familiar books – familiar because the subjects are familiar, or the structure is familiar, as in fairy tales or folktales*" (Chall, p. 19).

Stage 3 (grades 4-8) begins the transition to "reading to learn," but it is also about "learning how to read to learn," isn't it?

Stage 4 (high school) requires dealing with more than one viewpoint, and

Stage 5 (ages 18 and above) may be characterized as constructive reading: the reader builds his or her own knowledge through reading.

> "*Reading is an extremely complex matter which plays itself out on various levels. It is not merely decoding; it is not a one-to-one transfer of symbols into information. Reading must involve the inner activity of the reader. It is never, in terms of its true character, mere intake of information. To understand the contexts of meaning within a text, I always add something of my own, something of my current knowledge of the world, my own will and my own experience*."
>
> *(Martina Maria Sam)*

Learning to Read, Write, and Spell

Young children learn best when their feelings are engaged in a warm and enthusiastic manner. Rudolf Steiner reminded educators: "*It is not only important what a teacher does, but who the teacher is, the attitude in his or her soul*" (Steiner, 1998, p. 237). "*What we need is a certain kind of enthusiasm, a kind of inner activity…*" (Steiner, 1998, p. 400). So, let us kindle our enthusiasm as we consider ways to support students on this remarkable journey learning to read, write, and spell.

Human beings come to earth prepared to learn to speak through interactions with other human beings: their family members and caregivers. Waldorf early childhood educators know this well! Although formal reading instruction comes later, learning to read really does begin in early childhood with its emphasis on oral language and bodily development. Stories, warm conversations, poems, songs, nursery rhymes, and circle games—all these lay a strong foundation for oral language. Children learn so much: the meanings of

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2 Jeanne S. Chall, *Stages of Reading Development* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1983).

words; recognizing that some words begin and end the same; that there is rhythm, tone, and pitch involved in reading; and that stories and books are entertaining and informative and can be a shared experience.

Since reading is fairly new for human beings, it takes time to become ready for formal reading instruction. What is the best teaching approach? We might ponder Steiner's indications in *The Child's Changing Consciousness and Waldorf Education* (1983). He discusses three methods as they were described in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (not to be confused with modern definitions): the spelling method (making words by adding single letters), the phonetic method (developing a feeling for the quality of sounds), and the whole word method (progressing from sentences to words to single sounds), but he goes on to say that "*everything needs to be considered from different angles*" (Steiner, 1983, pp. 88-89).

"*If the letter forms have been gained through painting, drawing, and drawing-painting, and if one has gone on to a kind of phonetic or whole word method, which is now appropriate because it leads the child to an appreciation of wholeness, and prevents it from becoming too fixed in details—if all this has been done, there is as yet something else which has been overlooked… It is this—the single sound by itself, the separate M or P...*" (Steiner, 1983, p. 90).

In Grade 1, children learn to write their letters first. The symbols for the consonants emerge from drawing picture elements connected to stories. Steiner indicated that we should begin with the whole word: King. Then, a drawing of the "kind king" evolves into an artistic representation of the letter K. The letters are introduced imaginatively, and they artistically connect movement and shape through a word to the sound. Today, explicit instruction is considered a best practice for teaching early literacy skills to all children (The National Reading Panel Report, 2003). "The hallmark of programs of systematic phonics instruction is the direct teaching of a set of letter-sound relationships" (Put Reading First, 2003). Class teachers explicitly link a key word with its sound and its letter: king k /k/.

Dyslexia

It is estimated that as many as one in five students in every class is apt to struggle to learn to read, write, and spell. For these students, being ready to read and write takes longer and requires an explicit, sequential, multisensory, structured language approach. It also takes soul warmth! Further, dyslexic students benefit from lots of practice and may spend a longer time in Stage 1 and Stage 2.

The word *dyslexia* came into English from the German word *dyslexie* through combining the Greek morpheme *dys* "difficulty with" and *lex* "having to do with words" or *difficulty with words*. The National Institute for Children's Health and Development (NICHD) and the International Dyslexia Association (IDA) define dyslexia as

> *a specific learning disability that is neurological in origin. It is characterized by difficulties with accurate and or fluent word recognition and by poor spelling and decoding abilities. These difficulties typically result from a deficit in the phonological component of language that is often unexpected in relation to other cognitive abilities and the provision of effective classroom instruction. Secondary consequences may include problems in reading comprehension and reduced reading experience that can impede growth of vocabulary and background knowledge. (IDA, 2002)*

According to the Academy of Orton-Gillingham Practitioners and Educators (AOGPE), the certifying body for Orton-Gillingham practitioners,

> *Dyslexia has its genesis in human biology. While not the result of neurological damage, it is the product of neurological development. Dyslexia commonly runs in families and varies from mild to severe. Most importantly, the use of the Orton-Gillingham approach by a skilled and experienced teacher can significantly moderate the language learning and processing problems that arise from dyslexia. Indeed, the approach, used early enough and by qualified practitioners, has every likelihood of eliminating the emergence of notable reading and writing problems.*
>
> *(Academy of O-G Practitioners and Educators)*

What might signal dyslexia?

No two dyslexic students are exactly alike, but they demonstrate some common characteristics that "persist over time and interfere with learning" (IDA Dyslexia Handbook: What Every Family Should Know). In addition, some dyslexic individuals may have related challenges like ADHD – attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder, dysgraphia (writing), dyscalculia (math), dyspraxia (motor skills), or executive dysfunctions (e.g., planning and organizing). The list below is guided in part by Dr. Sally Shaywitz from her book *Overcoming*

Dyslexia[1] and from *IDA Dyslexia Handbook: What Every Family Should Know.*[2]

In the preschool years, a student with dyslexia

Finds it challenging to

- Learn new words
- Retrieve known words for expressive language (rapid automatized naming)
- Remember nursery rhymes and songs, recognize rhyme or generate rhyme (phonological awareness)

Shows signs of:

- Mixing up sounds or syllables in longer words (e.g., "pasketti" for "spaghetti") (phonological memory)

In the early grade school years, a student with dyslexia

Finds it challenging to

- Blend sounds to make words or segment sounds to spell words (phonemic awareness)
- Associate sounds with letters (phonics)
- Spell words (orthography)
- Produce consistent work

Show signs of:

- Transposing sounds when reading
- Omitting or misreading short words
- Reading slowly and choppily (fluency)
- Needing lots of repetition to learn skills and concepts

In the later grade school years and high school, a student with dyslexia, in addition to the items above:

Finds it challenging to

- Learn a second language

Show signs of

- A wide discrepancy between verbal and written expression
- Avoiding literacy tasks or not wanting to attend school
- Complaining of headaches and stomach aches
- Expressing feelings of failure

How is dyslexia diagnosed?

An evaluation process begins with conversations at parent/teacher conferences as early as kindergarten. Of course, children should be assessed for vision and hearing. There will be further conversations if the child shows signs of dyslexia in grade one and/or two. There may be a remedial consultation and/or the care group may take up the question. When parents and teachers work together, much can be accomplished. Before too long, the student will need a formal psycho-educational or neuropsychological evaluation done by a highly qualified individual or group. Some families begin with their public school district. Others opt for an independent evaluation. The evaluation will culminate with a guiding document that will usually confirm what parents and teachers already noticed. But the document will also present the results of formal testing. A *Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children, Fifth Edition* (WISC-V), which does not involve reading, will reveal specific cognitive strengths and challenges within the areas of Verbal Comprehension, Visual-Spatial, Fluid Reasoning, Working Memory, and Processing Speed. Additionally, a full-scale score will usually be reported. In addition to the WISC-V, evaluators will use other standard assessment tools to examine academic achievement or may look further at areas like memory, phonological awareness, etc. Sometimes evaluators will recommend further assessments by a speech and language pathologist or an occupational therapist to attain additional insight. The document usually ends with specific recommendations. For a dyslexic student, this usually includes explicit, multisensory *structured literacy* instruction, like Orton-Gillingham, with plenty of opportunity for practice.

What type of instruction supports dyslexic students?

Dyslexic students benefit from instruction taught by a highly trained teacher or tutor. The following components should be included: phonological awareness, phonics, handwriting, spelling, and fluency. Later the focus will shift towards vocabulary, comprehension, and written expression, as well as study skills and learning strategies.

Orton-Gillingham is a *structured literacy* "approach" to teaching students of all ages to read, write, and spell. It is not a method or program, though there are many commercial programs that are based on Orton-Gillingham such as the Wilson programs and the Slingerland Approach. These programs and trainings are widely used in schools with good results.

The Orton-Gillingham approach is considered the gold standard; it requires rigorous training and practicum experience taught and supervised by a Fellow of the Academy. There are several levels.

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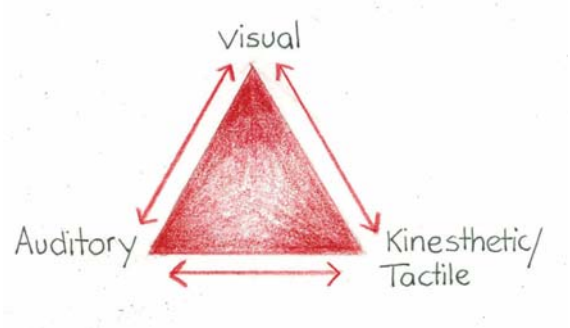
1 Sally E. Shaywitz, *Overcoming Dyslexia: A New and Complete Science-based Program for Reading Problems at Any Level* (New York: A. A. Knopf, 2003).

2 IDA *Dyslexia Handbook: What Every Family Should Know*, International Dyslexia Association, Accessed February 24, 2016. http://eida.org

1. Parents and teachers may get a general overview through a *Subscriber* level course (available for a minimal fee online at the Academy website: www.ortonacademy.org).
2. The *Classroom Educator* level**,** developed for teachers or specialists who provide whole class and/or small group instruction within a school setting, involves 30 hours of instruction and a 50-hour supervised practicum.
3. The *Associate* level is step one on the track towards certification as an Orton-Gillingham practitioner. This level includes a 60-hour course and a 100-hour supervised practicum.
4. The *Certified* level involves another 100 hours of instruction and another 200-hour supervised practicum. After successful completion of the *Certified* level, teachers may apply to the Academy to become certified Orton-Gillingham practitioners.
5. The *Fellow* level qualifies individuals to provide Orton-Gillingham training to teachers and interventionists.

Orton-Gillingham remedial language specialists learn the structure of the language and how to break it down to create a personalized program that leads to success for each student. Every Orton-Gillingham lesson approaches instruction by combining a synthetic and analytic approach; students go from the whole to the parts and the parts to the whole. Students read, write, and spell in an integrated lesson. Throughout the 40 to 60-minutes teacher-created lesson, taught from two to five times per week, students follow a routine in which they receive simultaneous feedback through the visual, auditory, and kinesthetic-tactile modalities based on Dr. Orton's Language Triangle (Gillingham & Stillman,1997). The approach is sequential, structured, systematic, and multisensory. Lessons are cumulative; skills are not taught in isolation. New information is connected to previously taught information and practice continues until skills become automatic.



> *"A great part of educational method depends on finding the most rational way of linking the new things we have to teach the children to what we can draw from their store of memories."*
>
> *(Steiner, 1983)*

When should students be diagnosed and provided with intervention?

In her book, *Overcoming Dyslexia*, Dr. Sally Shaywitz, warns

> *…underidentification of reading disabled children is particularly worrisome because even when school identification does take place, it occurs relatively late – often past the optimal age for intervention… Reading disabilities diagnosed after third grade are much more difficult to remediate… Moreover, once a child falls behind, he must make up thousands of unread words to catch up to his peers who are continuing to move ahead. Equally important, once a pattern of reading failure sets in, many children become defeated, lose interest in reading and develop what often evolves into a lifelong loss of their own sense of self-worth.*
>
> *(Shaywitz, 2003, pp. 30-31)*

Waldorf teachers employ the oral tradition as an essential teaching approach; therefore, it may be possible for dyslexic students to feel successful during the first few grades. But before long, their peers will read books, and the sense of failure will set in quickly if they do not receive the support that they need. And even if they are exposed to sophisticated text, by being read to or listening to audio books, they are still not seeing the words that they are hearing.

It is essential to the wellbeing of children that Waldorf Schools find ways to support children as soon as possible. Waldorf schools can forge a path that is unique to their curriculum and understanding of child development. There is an opportunity for parents, teachers, care groups, remedial teachers, school doctors, and tutors to work together to support students within the Waldorf School environment.

Phonological Awareness, Phonemic Awareness, and Phonics

Connecting the shape to the sound

> "Picture, movement and sound- all these lie behind the letters…. Most teachers find that children differ very much in their abilities to grasp what they learn. Some more readily relate themselves to the picture element, while others are more aware

> of the sound. A few can form their letters very beautifully without waking to any consciousness of either picture or sound…We should bear all these in mind, and in the teaching of the letters, pictures, movement and sound must all play their part so that the different children become harmonized."
>
> (Eileen Hutchins, "The Teaching of Writing")

In a Waldorf School, first grade children learn their letters joyfully – in fact, they often have favorite letters. Through a multisensory approach, they recognize the shape of the letter while they feel the formation as they move it in space, skywrite it, and form it with beautiful colors. At the same time, they learn that the letter "K" makes the sound they hear at the beginning of king: /k/. They recite alliterative verses that reinforce the sound: "Kickamore, kackamore, on the king's kitchen door…" They may even clap or stamp their foot each time they speak the sound /k/.

Reading must involve the inner activity of the reader. It is never, in terms of its true character, mere intake of information.

We know that children learn at different rates and in different ways. Dyslexic students have a more difficult time recognizing the phonemes or separate sounds of their language. They may have trouble blending sounds to read and segmenting them to spell. They may even have trouble with broader phonological awareness: recognizing and generating rhyme and understanding that certain words begin the same or end the same. They may change the sequence of syllables in words or omit syllables in their speech. They not only take longer to gain this awareness but they do so only through explicit instruction with an opportunity to practice over time. They don't usually infer knowledge from exposure; they learn best through direct instruction with guided practice.

[…]

Reading Fluency

Waldorf teachers model fluent speaking and reading. Students need to read fluently to comprehend what they read and to find reading an enjoyable or useful activity. According to Hasbrouck and Glaser, fluent reading is "reasonably accurate reading at an appropriate rate with suitable prosody that leads to accurate and deep comprehension and motivation to read" (Hasbrouck and Glaser).

Besides modeling fluent reading so students can imitate it, teachers can provide opportunities for repeated reading of what is familiar. This is the best way for students to become fluent readers. Students might reread their main lesson books. Since we know that repeated reading – to simply memorize words – is not the best approach for students, we need to provide them with practice reading decodable text. Teachers can create decodable text for main lesson books and underline words that are not decodable: "*The* king *was* sitting on *the* throne.' This sentence, for example, is decodable for a student who knows short vowels, the –ng family, closed syllable type, vowel – consonant-e syllable type, and VC/CV syllable division pattern. After a dyslexic student I worked with was provided some Orton-Gillingham instruction and was practicing reading decodable text, he told me that he used to memorize books so he could "read" them. He wondered why he had not been taught to "break the code" earlier, and he felt he had been cheated or tricked into thinking that reading meant memorizing. Schools need to create and purchase decodable text. Flyleaf Publishing offers two sets of beautiful books that are decodable. Other sets of decodable text are available for sale through various vendors.

If students lose their place, which will affect fluency, guide them to hold a line marker *above* what they are reading. Readers need to see the words and punctuation marks that are coming, so they shouldn't hold their line marker below what they are reading.

Dyslexic students can reread their main lesson books and decodable books in small reading groups at school as well as to their families at home. This will provide them with the safe practice they need; it will boost their confidence and lead to success. Once their peers are reading real "books", a service such as *Learning Ally* (formerly *Recordings for the Blind*), can provide assistive technology so students can see and hear text at their interest level. This assistive technology allows dyslexic students, who need more time to learn how to read, to gain access to the same books their friends are reading. This accommodation supports their souls! We wouldn't deny eyeglasses for a student who needs them. Thoughtful use of technology to accommodate dyslexic students is worth considering.

All Waldorf schools serve dyslexic students, and these children, like all children, are eager to learn. It just takes leading them along a slightly different route.

Handwriting

> "*If we turn now to the act of writing, we will find that it is one of the most complicated and hidden of all human activities*."
>
> Dr. Karl König

What are some ways to provide practice with handwriting?

Teaching correct letter formation is a first goal. But it must be followed by opportunities for guided practice in order to achieve fluency and automaticity.

Class teachers can focus on teaching and reinforcing proper letter formation. Steiner reminded us: "Children will not improve much when you want to make them learn to write better by improving their writing. You need to improve their dexterity; then they will learn to write better" (Steiner, 1998, pp. 99-100).

Beginning in early childhood and extending into the grades, Waldorf education supports the development of dexterity throughout the curriculum. Extra Lesson or remedial work in the grades also provides extra work on dexterity and the bodily foundation that are essential. Improving dexterity, however, won't improve accurate letter formation; that relies on *direct instruction* and *practice* with *corrective feedback*.

First, teachers need to make sure they know how to form the letters correctly themselves. They also need to pay attention to children's posture and pencil grasp. Children should be seated with their feet flat on the floor and should hold their paper stable with their non-dominant "helping" hand. They should hold their writing tool with a proper tripod grasp. Desk and chair heights matter. According to Audrey E. McAllen, "The desk height should not push the arm upward so that one shoulder is higher than the other. The chair should be 10 inches lower than the desk height. The child should sit so that both feet are firmly on the floor with the knees higher than the hips. This angle between knee and hip joint is vital. The child should really be sitting in his hips so that the movement of the hand-arm can flow to the base of the spine" (McAllen, 1977). She recommends presenting this as a picture to the children of a king signing a kingly decree.

Every Orton-Gillingham lesson approaches instruction by combining a synthetic and analytic approach; students go from the whole to the parts and the parts to the whole.

Whole Class Practice

Children can wear their royal crowns during handwriting practice as a gentle imaginative reminder to hold their heads aloft so their heavy jeweled crowns won't slip off.

To begin, use unlined paper and focus on correct letter formation. Use imaginative, pictorial language cues to guide children through the correct formation. 'Start at the king's crown and straight down to his boot. Then, pick up your crayon and start at the king's hand and move to his belt buckle and then down to his other boot.'

For practice, group letters with similar motor movements. For example, the letters that begin like r: r, n, m, h, and b.

Sand: Provide each student with a large, sturdy red paper plate. Good quality plates can last for years. Sprinkle in some fine sand. Model the proper letter formation for the group on the blackboard and then move from desk to desk as the children practice forming the letter correctly. Three is a magic number so children should practice each letter correctly at least three times. Writing in sand is forgiving, especially for a child who has trouble; a little shake and the mistake will disappear. The teacher can even model the shape in the child's sand and leave a path for the child to follow. Walk about and provide help as needed. This is a wonderful way to practice the letters that have been introduced and to informally assess children as they progress.

Main Lesson book: After the children know how to form a letter correctly, the work in main lesson books can take place with size and space considered. Some children benefit from target lines: the sky line, the bird line, the grass line, and the worm line (adapted from the Wilson Language Trainings' *Foundations*) or the image of a house with the basement, first, and second floors. This kind of guided practice sets children up for success. It is also easy to slip a paper with the guidelines under the main lesson book page as a support for children who need it.

Some schools teach uppercase and lowercase print letters in the first grade and then teach cursive in second grade.

There are common pedagogical practices that may need to be considered further. For example, is it a good idea to write words with all capital letters when this will need to be unlearned? Or is it better to write words only after the lowercase letters have been taught?

Writing Difficulties

There are children in each school who have difficulties with the art of handwriting. For these children, writing can be a chore, at best, and, at worst, an activity that can cause real frustration. It can take them a lot of effort and time and it can result in fatigue and frustration. Children who experience these challenges need the teacher's attention and understanding, as well as intervention and possible classroom accommodations.

What is dysgraphia?

Some students are diagnosed as dysgraphic during their formal evaluation.

Dysgraphia is another Greek word. The suffix "ia" suggests "a condition." The prefix "dys-" indicates that there is a difficulty, while the base "graph" refers to both the role of the hand in letter formation and to the letters that are formed. According to IDA, dysgraphia is disabled handwriting, in which impaired handwriting can also interfere with the speed and spelling of written text.

According to IDA, "children with dysgraphia do not have primary developmental motor disorder, another cause of poor handwriting, but may have difficulty planning sequential finger movements such as the touching of the thumb to successive fingers on the same hand without visual feedback."

Every child can succeed when guided by understanding, support, and, most importantly, soul warmth.

In addition, there may be a challenge with orthographic coding linked to working memory. "Orthographic coding refers to the ability to store written words in working memory while the letters in the word are analyzed or the ability to create permanent memory of written words linked to their pronunciation and meaning" (IDA). Therefore, dysgraphia can result in poor spelling. In fact, dysgraphia can impair handwriting (alone), spelling (alone), or both handwriting and spelling.

The causes and diagnosis of writing difficulties

Writing is a highly complex process that involves several senses, muscles, and areas of the brain. When there are problems with any of the areas connecting and functioning effectively, writing difficulties may arise. These may not all fall under the mainstream label of dysgraphia. For example, there may be retained reflexes that are hindering the child from writing fluently.

As the teacher observes children during early form drawing and handwriting lessons, it is important to recognize when children may need help beyond regular instruction in the classroom. Much can be done through correct identification and intervention. Effective handwriting instruction with guided practice that includes corrective feedback is critical. It is possible to teach most students, including many dysgraphic students, to write by hand through effective instruction and intervention. And, it is never too late to begin.

When not served early enough, children will struggle more during the later grades. By the time a student is in grade four and is assigned to write an animal report, it can become very apparent that writing is not going as well as it should. Instead of focusing on the expression of ideas, the student will be hindered by his/her lack of writing fluency. By sixth grade, frustration can mount to high levels as the writing workload increases and becomes ever more important in all the studies. Hopefully, through early identification and explicit instruction, these challenges can be minimized. In any case, even when a struggling student has learned to form letters correctly and can write accurately, the hindrances may still interfere with fluid and legible written output.

What else can be done in the classroom?

Some students will benefit from extra handwriting intervention. They might begin with practice that includes painting the letters with a wet paintbrush on a chalkboard. Or their tutor might use Dr. Orton's folded paper technique: An unlined paper is folded into thirds. In the first column, the child traces a teacher's large colorful model; in the second column, the child makes his or her own letters with the original model in view. Column one is folded over column two, and in column three, the child next makes the letter without a model. If needed, the paper can be unfolded to reveal the model. Finally, the paper is folded over so a fourth column appears from the back. Here, the child closes his or her eyes and makes the letter without looking. This enhances the kinesthetic and tactile reinforcement of the letter formation (Gillingham-Stillman, 1997).

Explicit instruction and remediation are the most important responses. But additional classroom accommodations may be needed to support students for success within the classroom setting.

- Reduce the writing workload for assignments (for homework and class work).
- Provide the student with a copy of notes or blackboard text.
- Provide speech to text software, when deemed necessary. Few students will require this accommodation.

- Provide a word processor as an important accommodation for written expression, especially for lengthy writing assignments. This also requires providing proper keyboarding instruction.

In any event, today's graduating high school students all need to be able to write in print (labeling diagrams or maps), cursive (note-taking), and keyboarding (written expression of essays and reports).

Successful reading and writing relies, at a minimum, on the creation of a strong bridge between reading, writing, and spelling. Every child can succeed when guided by understanding, support, and, most importantly, soul warmth. Then the child will be able to make the journey needed to "glean the sunlight hidden in the hard kernel of the word."

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