

Lessons Learned

This is perhaps the most challenging section of the book for me to write. There is such an enormous amount of information that I have learned over the past four years. How to put it all down clearly and concisely? When stepping back and surveying the whole it seems that all of my learning can be summed up into 10 lessons:

Lesson #1: Turn your anger into a passion.

Lesson #2: The lack of reading skills is a symptom not a condition.

Lesson #3: Think big and look for answers in new places.

Lesson #4: The need for engagement versus compliance.

Lesson #5: The need for quality remediation rather than accommodation.

Lesson # 6: Empowering students

Lesson#7: Shift from grade level expectations to reaching ones highest potential.

Lesson # 8: Exchange excuses for answers.

Lesson #9: Separate self from the system.

Lesson #10: Change is the only constant in our universe.

Lesson # 1 : Turn your anger into a passion.

Personally, one of the most significant opportunities I have been given throughout this process is the chance to turn my anger into a passion. When I began on this adventure I was **angry**. Angry at myself for not being able to fix my child's reading problem. Angry at a system that was failing my child and many others. Angry with the politics

embedded within the educational system that has nothing to do with what is best for children. Angry at other educators who didn't understand. Through the writing of this book I have learned that blaming others is useless and leads to many unnecessary battles. I have come to accept that where we are is simply where we are. We don't have to stay here and we certainly have an enormous amount of data and valid research to learn from in order to create something better. What is most important now is to share this knowledge and to have meaningful dialogue so that others can begin to question and learn. In doing this we may offer all children and teachers the opportunity to reach their highest potential.

Lesson #2: The lack of reading skills is a symptom not a condition.

Academically, the most important thing I have learned is that the lack of reading fluency and comprehension is a symptom, not a condition. In most cases it is a symptom of not having the knowledge and understanding of how our language is organized, not knowing the code, and a lack of decoding skills. It may also be due to a lack of higher cognitive functioning skills like auditory or visual processing. Good teaching is like being a good physician. Once teachers have a broader and more accurate knowledge of our language along with the most recent research on learning, the brain, and cognitive development, they are able to diagnose and prescribe: curing the illness. It is not impossible nor does it take years of remediation to fix a reading problem if a systematic, research based approach is used.

Lesson #3: Think big and look for answers in new places.

I have also learned that when it comes to reading, many in the educational community do not integrate or in many cases have knowledge of the most recent and *scientific* data. From my experiences, it is clear that educators need more knowledge of what is happening in other fields that are connected to human development and learning. Many educators appear to stick with their “own kind”; meaning that they look mainly within the educational community for answers. This seems very unfortunate because there is so much to learn from other sciences. When it comes to reading there seems to be a lot of theory being pushed. These ideas come with wide spread support, yet lack solid, long term evidence that they make a *significant* difference. Many strategies I have used in the past seemed like they *should* work, yet they yielded very little growth. As I read some of the research by cognitive psychologists I am surprised at how much more in depth and thorough the scientists have been with their research. When I say this I mean they look through *years* of data. Perhaps it is because they have approached things from a more scientific perspective which mandates solid data and proof. I am certain of one thing; that the studies and information that I have read concerning reading published by the scientific community have given me much more comprehensive knowledge. The information has allowed me to understand the whole child and be diagnostic and prescriptive in my teaching. Barriers must be broken between the educational community and the scientific community. The knowledge from both schools of thought must be shared and integrated to create the best systems of reading instruction. There is so much knowledge to be gained when we all share our strengths and insights.

Lesson #4: The need for engagement versus compliance.

My learning has also led me to a clearer awareness between engagement and compliance, as was briefly mentioned in the preface. Our school systems, as they are currently organized, are based on a system of compliance. Compliance is defined in Webster's dictionary as: "1. a: the act or process of complying to a desire, demand, or proposal or coercion. b: conformity in fulfilling official requirements 2. a: a disposition to yield to others" In other words, compliance is doing what you are told. While Webster defines engagement as: to hold attention of : to induce to participate: to take part. In other words being actively involved and committed to something. There is a big difference in these two principles and it does not mean that many teachers are not actively engaging students in their curriculum, although this knowledge has given me a lot to think about. Knowing and understanding the vast differences between these two ideas has forced me to take a good look at my teaching strategies and activities. Teaching reading using the EBLI strategies engages students which is another reason it produces such amazing results. I know students are engaged because there is a clear focus on the task and persistence with the task in spite of difficulties (in some cases children having to completely change their thinking of how the English language is put together). Students also continue to use the strategies even though there may be no extrinsic rewards.

Lesson #5: The need for quality remediation rather than accommodation.

I've learned the difference between remediation and accommodation. In many schools across our nation teachers are taught to accommodate rather than remediate. The thought seems to be that at a certain point, if a child has not reached a specific reading competency level and educators have tried everything they know, the child is assumed to be "just wired differently" and will never be a strong reader. In other words, the child is unable to learn what is being taught for a variety of reasons and we must make accommodations. The accommodations include things like having someone read to the student or alter their assignments so they may learn content. The problem with this concept is that once we begin believing this, the student has no opportunities to improve his or her areas of weakness and this pattern will, more than likely, continue throughout their entire educational experience. Thus never pinpointing the areas of weakness and remediating them. This to me parallels the idea of injuring a body part and never engaging in physical therapy to rebuild that part. What also surprises me is the thought that these children will always struggle to read or not be able read. If you look around any middle school across our nation many of these same students "with reading difficulties" have taught themselves an entirely new language in which they communicate (read and write) daily: instant messaging or text messaging. On their own, with no help from teachers, students have created their own language and effectively use it. I think this observation paints a pretty clear picture of the ability children have to read and comprehend if they are taught and engaged in a logical system.

Teachers do not participate in this cycle of accommodation to intentionally harm, but it is what we have been taught to believe. Although this paradigm is being

challenged with ideas like “No Child Left Behind” which is trying to force our education system to reach all students and allow them to achieve at much higher levels. Yet there is still a flaw. The responsibility of correcting this problem is then put back on the teachers to come up with a way in which to teach the child so they may reach a set expectation. Unfortunately, teachers *have* tried everything they know and are many times not exposed to research in other non-traditional (non- educational) areas. They feel immense pressure to teach these children who in pervious years may have been labeled learning disabled or a slow learner and not expected to excel. Yet they are given no new strategies or tools to complete this lofty task. From what I have seen and experienced, this is very frustrating and nearly a worthless endeavor unless there is a much larger amount of knowledge shared with teachers along with a complete restructuring of our educational system. What many government officials have not stopped to think about is that the *system* in which we have been trained in and are currently teaching within no longer serves our society. It does not and will not meet the needs or expectations of today’s society. Much has changed since the 1920’s. Today’s society is so immensely different that is it almost as if we were on an entirely different planet. As Phillip Schlechty puts it in his *Creating Great Schools* book,” Leaving no child behind is a noble sentiment, but ensuring that every child is empowered to get ahead is an even nobler goal.”

Lesson # 6: Empowering students

There is a part of remediation that has little to do with the distribution of knowledge. There is the part of building relationships, setting expectations, and

believing in self. Students must be taught different strategies in order to reach their highest potential in reading, but they also must be given opportunities to engage in meaningful text, believe in themselves, and to know that they *can* read. This sometimes will take more time than teaching the strategies. Many of the students who end up in learning centers or remediation programs have had years of believing that they cannot read along with reinforcement from external forces, like peers, and even their teachers to support that belief. One way to increase the student's confidence is for everyone to raise their expectations. Once a student has been taught the strategies immerse them in authentic text that is rich in vocabulary.

Lesson#7: Shift from grade level expectations to reaching ones highest potential.

I believe that this next bit of information may explain why it is so challenging for some educators to change the way in which they teach reading. The ideas of teaching children to reach “grade level expectations” and teaching children to reach their highest potential are two quite different philosophies. In reaching grade level expectations teachers are trained to have students accomplish a set of skills, which isn't a bad thing in itself. However, when it comes to reading in the lower elementary grades it gives teachers and parents a false sense of security. Many educators focus on teaching children lists of words which they can memorize and practice those words in regulated text, which leads to students appearing to be proficient in reading (scoring at grade level on many “tests”). Their main focus is on the test, which has been referred to as “teaching to the test”. Although many of the students who are considered “proficient” at the early grades begin to fall behind in 4th, 5th or 6th grade and are unable to accurately read and

comprehend authentic text as they progress. With the philosophy of teaching children so they may reach their highest potential, there is more emphasis on learning the building blocks of our language and creating a strong foundation so that the strategies taught early on can be continually applied and refined in all reading situations at all grade levels.

Lesson # 8: Exchange excuses for answers.

Another glitch that I think educators face is that when the teacher or school district is working very hard to reach those grade level expectations and the results from testing are not reflecting significant growth, some educators look for what I would call excuses instead of examining their methods. Believe me I have been just as guilty of this as any other teacher. It's an easy trap to fall into, especially if we believe that our training has been the most accurate and up to date. For years I believed, along with many others, that if a child couldn't learn how to read there must be something wrong with the child. After all, I had tried many different techniques, spent hours after school working with students, gone to trainings, and continued my education with more degrees. But I was wrong. There were many areas of learning that were left unknown to me until my children guided me down other paths. This idea of excuses instead of answers became very clear to me one day as I engaged in a conversation with a local administrator. We were discussing the reading data from our MEAP testing and how I interpreted our middle school data as showing that EBLLI has worked well and that it needed to be incorporated state and nation wide at the elementary level. This administrator made the statement that "we are right where we should be with our scores compared to our peer groups"; which meant that based on the socioeconomic grouping of our students we

compared equally with other schools with the same demographics. As he continued to state how socioeconomics impacts our students and their abilities I immediately thought, since when did we strive and accept mediocrity? I realized that we each had much different expectations for our students. Because he knew how hard all of our teachers were working to increase reading comprehension and fluency within our district he was under the impression that we were doing *everything* possible to enhance student's reading. Although my experiences had shown me that there was much more to do and learn and with this added knowledge came the ability to teach so that every child could reach their highest potential. He expected many of our kids to struggle and not be high achievers because of their family income, which for me was and is not a factor in a child's ability to read at high levels. Our conversation also made me realized that we are right where everyone else is because everyone else is doing exactly what we are doing. Since then I have decided I don't want to be where everyone else is anymore and I would bet our kids don't want to be there either. Our students want and expect us to give them the knowledge that will enable them to achieve all goals they set for themselves.

Lesson # 9: Separating self from the system.

In other words, who we are is not the system. We are separate, intelligent beings from the system in which we work. Just because the system is not working does not mean that we as educators are not working hard or are not intelligent. Separating ourselves from the system allows us to take an objective look at our accomplishments. Right now in America there are an estimated 40 million functionally illiterate adults. In our schools there are 40 – 60 percent of our students not performing “at grade level” in

reading by the time they hit middle school. This is not because teachers, administrators, or students are lazy. This is because they are working in an outdated system with outdated tools. Instead of looking at the students who are not reaching their highest ability in reading as being “wired differently” or socio-economically disadvantaged, why don’t we look at the way in which we teach reading and within the system which we work? Separating ourselves from the system will allow us to look at the system and make changes without feeling personally attacked. Think of it this way: If you had a physician that was only accurate in diagnosing your illness 50 – 60 percent of the time, would you continue to seek his professional opinion? Or if you had a bank that kept accurate track of your money only 60 percent of the time would you still bank there? And for all of you sports fans out there, if your favorite professional sports team only won 40-50 percent of its games year after year would that coach still be leading the team?

Our nation, our society, and many educators are demanding that all students reach their highest potential in reading. We can meet that demand but only with a big shift in the educational system of the United States, our thinking, and an enhanced knowledge.

Lesson #10: Change is the only constant.

Change is one of the only constants in our lives. Everything is always changing. You can take the opportunity to learn and grow or you may choose to fight the inevitable. The choice is yours.