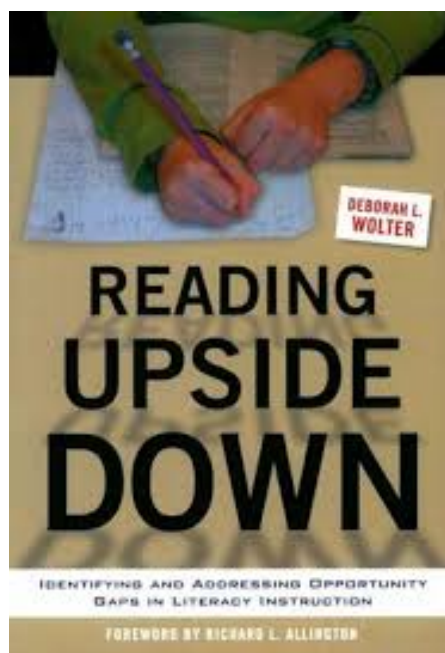


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## *Review of Reading Upside Down: Identifying and Addressing Opportunity Gaps in Literacy Instruction*

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In the midst of noisy debates and concerns around achievement gaps in literacy instruction, Deborah L. Wolter's work offers distinctive ways of looking at and assessing literacy problems. The author uses scholarly research on literacy practices and interventions on struggling beginning readers as well as data from credible agencies such as the U.S. Department of Education and the National Center for Education Statistics to back her claims on common practices of literacy instruction. She argues that they tend to focus more on the achievement gaps that label young readers disproportionately as being deficient. She identifies that the labeling practices such as "unready," "at risk," "ESL," and "learning disability" to diagnose students with reading challenges have done more harm than good. These labeling practices have been recognized since the 1950s to be detrimental to the label carrier because they cause "the individuals to become that which he is labeled as being" (Rist, 2016, p. 77). In other words, labeling practice could become self-fulfilling prophecies that diminish young readers' potential to grow. Therefore, Wolter invites us to understand that the achievement gaps are largely caused by the lack of opportunity for quality literacy instruction, rather than cognitive problems.

Based on years of experience as an elementary teacher consultant at Ann Arbor Michigan public schools and her own experiences and challenges that she faced as a deaf student herself, Wolter questions the practices of partial, non-inclusive interventions provided to these students. Working one-on-one with challenged early readers for many years, Wolter shows that these practices have been proven to not only perpetuate the negative stigma attached to the label carriers, but also to work poorly in helping students thrive in their literacy abilities. According to Boykin and Noguera (2011), mechanisms and procedures used in schools to identify talent and potential in students are "not precise and deeply flawed" (p. ix). In many cases, students who possess the capacity to achieve are denied opportunities because such potential is not readily apparent or in accordance with the "manuals" provided by the administrations.

Driven by this concern, Wolter proposes a paradigm shift from focusing on achievement gaps toward opportunity gaps to create more space for inclusive, quality, individualized, and meaningful literacy instruction. Wolter is well aware that the changes she is advocating involve many stakeholders at multiple levels of the educational system: teachers, administrators, policy makers, consultants, and families of struggling early readers as well as the general public troubled by this situation. It is important to note that she is not theoretical in her approach; she emphasizes the practical aspects on "a much smaller, but certainly valuable, scale: how individual students are successfully taught to read and write." (p. xxi).

The book is organized around the different reading problems traditionally identified by general education teachers, schools and district administrations. For each chapter, Wolter presents case studies of students with different reading challenges and shows how the existing programs perpetuate the problems and even make them worse from the point of view of the students and their families. In addressing the issues, Wolter includes discussions attempting to "bring responsibility, professional judgment, and decision making back to the educators where it belongs" (p. xxiii). Wolter prefaces the book by bringing forward a case of a student named Jenna labeled with ADD and dyslexia. The "specialized" phonic program Jenna initially participated in did not seem to solve her problem: she hardly passed the kindergarten reading level as a 4<sup>th</sup> grade student. The targeted and specialized holistic approach Wolter used to help Jenna proved that in several months, Jenna was able to catch up with her reading skills. Using Jenna's case, Wolter points out despite the slogans of quality and fair education for all of our children, reality sketches different stories. In various places she shows discontent with the remote policies and regulations, our misinformed decisions, as well as the ready-made private programs that fail to understand the problems of the education system in the U.S. These, she demonstrates, are some of the root causes of the mistreatment and poor

instruction students receive, hence her argument for providing natural all-inclusive environments, where students benefit from positive social support.

### **Chapter 1: 'Tis the Good Reader that Makes the Good Book.**

This chapter presents the tensions around school readiness where students may start schooling with literacy abilities that are not validated by the schools, resulting in students being labeled as “at risk” or “unready.” Wolter observes that, because literacy encompasses vast range of abilities, our educational system should not impose a rigid and limited definition of literacy. Treating the struggling students who are not ready for school literacy as pathological symptoms of cognitive deficiencies and removing them from their classroom to be placed in separate and specialized program is an overreaction to a misunderstood situation. Instead, Wolter suggests that educators and policy makers develop a more flexible and responsive curriculum that connects school and home literacies with strong community involvement.

### **Chapter 2: Checking the Weather.**

In this chapter, Wolter addresses the issue of seeing the students as “struggling readers,” those who do not achieve proficiency, fluency, and/or comprehension in a well-rounded manner. Using the weather as a metaphor to symbolize the social and political circumstances that tend to create one-size-fits-all programs and approaches that do not work for the struggling readers, Wolter proposes that teachers utilize more individualized, short-term, and intensive interventions that are closely aligned with their general education. A word of advice at the end of this chapter is that teachers should be critical of these social and political circumstances in the school district that often times does not serve the best interests of struggling readers.

### **Chapter 3: The Gift of Reading**

Here Wolter presents various cases that relate to ableism – a set of beliefs, attitudes and practices that devalue and limit the potential of persons with disabilities. Wolter challenges the current practices that often use the umbrella term ableism in placing the students in the “special education” category. She criticizes the practices of assigning students with different cognitive, physical, emotional and social disabilities into special education programs where they generally focus more on the disabilities and try to “fix” them. By so doing, they dismiss the opportunities for the students to catch up with their peers in general education. The U.S. Department of Education reminds us that the purpose of special education is “to meet the needs of students with disabilities as well as to educate them along side nondisabled peers to the maximum extend appropriate” (as cited in Wolter, 2015, p. 31). In this respect, Wolter suggests that opportunity gaps can be reduced by shifting the focus away from their disabilities and placing the students in mainstream classrooms with the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) approach (Rose & Meyer, 2002) where the curriculum is intentionally and systematically designed to address individual differences.

### **Chapter 4: It Looks Greek to Me**

This chapter is concerned with students for whom English is not their first language, or those who use “nonstandard English” as their primary mode of communication. In the review of emergent bilingual in pre-K-12 settings, Garcia, Kleifgen, and Falchi (2008) also argue that one of the most misunderstood issues is how to teach the children who are not proficient in “standard” English. In tackling this matter, Wolter asserts that schools should respect and cherish the students’ rich linguistic and cultural backgrounds, something that is severely lacking in the school environment. Therefore, she emphatically suggests that these students be presented with multilingual literacy instruction that is individualized, connected, and meaningful and that provides adequate social and emotionally safe support for effective literacy development.

### Chapter 5: You can't Judge a Book by Its Cover

This chapter deals with the issues of race in literacy instruction. In multiple cases, some students of color are disproportionately associated with the issues of disabilities, poverties, language, and family values that subject them to harsh exclusionary school disciplinary practices. McDermott, Raley, and Seyer-Ochi (2009) in their review of race, class, and disabilities in education posit that these are relational terms; they are not stand-alone phenomena. The authors further argue that a more egalitarian approach is sorely needed in our educational system where social and cultural resources and support are afforded to racially minoritized students. In this regard, Wolter advocates for minimizing the impacts of racial labels by listening to the voices of race, balancing race and colorblindness, handling public judgment, and creating a culturally and linguistically safe environment.

### Chapter 6: Reading as an Escape?

Wolter describes in this chapter how young readers with mental, emotional and behavioral difficulties such as the inability to focus; having high anxiety; showing reluctance, anger, or disengagement; and other impulsive behaviors are often subject to “tough-love” disciplinary approaches. Teachers sometimes find that the young students are “acting out” or “being difficult,” which prevents them from accelerating in their literacy development. In handling these issues, the schools typically demand that the young students in distress “should behave before they can access literacy instruction” (p. 83), without taking a closer look at the causes of these behaviors. These practices are immensely detrimental to the young students. Wolter argues that instead of quickly judging the behaviors as a form of intentional noncompliance, schools should create and foster a more inclusive, trusting, safe, warm, and accepting atmosphere, where students with emotional disturbances can feel loved and appreciated. That, in turn, will strengthen their literacy development.

### Chapter 7: Reading the Fine Print of Tests

In this final chapter of identifying opportunity gaps, Wolter examines issues around tests in literacy education. For many students, tests create more questions than answers where the nature and the structure of the tests work against the students' unique strengths and serve as a poor measure for instructional quality. Wolter calls for more comprehensive, individually tailored assessment where students are given well-rounded evaluation. In accordance with Stiggins et al. (2004), they propose an assessment *for* learning, instead of assessment *of* learning.

### Conclusion

In the light of current concerns over the achievement gaps, Wolter's work serves as a powerful wake up call for all of us who are troubled with problematic literacy practices and hope to rethink the ways we see and treat our young students and the systems that perpetuate these practices. Instead of focusing on what is wrong with students on how “they *can't* or *won't* learn to read and write” (p. xvii, *emphases are original*), Wolter invites us to appreciate and help students with “what they *can* and *will* do is one step toward ensuring opportunities for literacy instruction” (p. 110, *emphases are original*).

Throughout the book, there is ample space given for reflection and deep thought about how things are done in our education system in treating early struggling readers. She believes that more literacy opportunities can be created through a solid foundation of ownership, expertise, inclusion, universal design, and authentic and engaging reading practices. Her message is to not let ableism be the sole factor in determining the students' failure to learn to read and write. Readers will benefit from the illustrations and examples of alternative instruction that is supported by research. However, Wolter leaves it open for educators to decide based on their own unique situations. One point worth mentioning here is that this book is pleasant to read but hard to implement, especially in

the neoliberal era where economic rationality rules, “efficiency and an ‘ethic’ of cost-benefit are the dominant norms” (Apple, 2016, p. 258). It would be beneficial if Wolter could anticipate more of the struggles teachers face and provide insights on how to deal with them. Overall, the book calls for change

and hope, and at the same time offers inspirational stories from real cases that are eye-opening and insightful for teachers, administrators, parents, and general readers who care about improving literacy instruction in our educational systems to change from reading upside down to reading right side up.

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