

Q and A with ... Linda Siegel



Linda Siegel

In this second in a series of interviews with leading authorities in the field of reading and related skills, Kevin Wheldall talks to Linda Siegel.

About Linda

Linda Siegel is the former Dorothy C. Lam Chair in Special Education and an Emeritus Professor in the Department of Educational and Counselling Psychology and Special Education at the University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada. She has over 200 publications on early identification and intervention to prevent reading problems, dyslexia, reading and language development, mathematical concept learning, mathematical learning disabilities, and children learning English as a second language.

She has been the President of the Division of Learning Disabilities of the Council on Exceptional Children. In 2004, she was awarded an honorary doctorate from Goteborg University in Sweden. In 2010, she was awarded the Gold Medal for Excellence in Psychological Research by the Canadian Psychological Association. In 2012, she was awarded the Eminent Researcher Award by the Learning Difficulties Association of Australia. She has recently published a book entitled *Not Stupid, Not Lazy: Understanding dyslexia and other learning disabilities*. This book is published by the International Dyslexia Association.

Linda, how did you first become interested in research in reading?

I became interested in reading and reading, spelling and mathematics difficulties when I worked with Bill Feldman, a paediatrician, on cases of students struggling with academics and/or behaviour in school. It was the early 1980s and it was intriguing to me that there could be intelligent children who struggled with reading, spelling, and mathematics. I started a research career to find out more about these children.

Who has most influenced your thinking about reading and why?

The logical positivists and the neopositivists and their emphasis on empirical verification and the importance of definition influenced my thinking about reading and learning disabilities. I worked with Keith Stanovich, and his clear and logical analysis and intriguing analyses of our data were quite enlightening. Max Coltheart and the dual route theory were influential in my thinking about reading and spelling.

What do you consider to be the most important contribution you have made to the scientific study of reading?

In 1989, I published paper documenting the fact that IQ is irrelevant to the definition of learning disabilities. It was quite controversial. However, in addition to examining faulty logic of some assumptions, for example, the discrepancy

definition of dyslexia, the validity of the IQ test, and how we conceptualise reading and reading disabilities, I hoped that it would make services accessible for more children, adolescents and adults.

Could you recommend one of your own books or papers that you consider to be particularly important?

My recent book, *Not Stupid, Not Lazy: Understanding dyslexia and other learning disabilities*, which is written for parents, teachers, and the general public, describes the major learning disabilities, how to identify them, and what to do about them. I use stories of people who have struggled with learning disabilities to illustrate the main points. I show how writers such as Jane Austen, George Eliot, Thomas Mann, Ruth Rendell, and J.K. Rowling, with remarkable insight, have developed characters with dyslexia, although Eliot and Austen wrote before dyslexia was identified and given a label.

I write about what I call an educational tragedy. Our educational system has failed to identify many children with learning disabilities and I advocate the adoption of straightforward diagnostic techniques so that treatment options can be implemented at a young age. I challenge the use of complex and time-consuming testing that is currently used to diagnose learning disabilities. In their place, I outline simple and pragmatic techniques for testing for disabilities in reading, mathematics, spelling and writing.

Many children who struggle with learning become discouraged in the classroom and isolated from their peers. Many adults whose learning disabilities were not recognised in school suffer from deep feelings of inadequacy that often prevent them from developing close relationships, finding rewarding employment, or living happily.

I include accounts of people living with learning disabilities, case studies from literature, and profiles of highly accomplished individuals who have

achieved success despite their learning disabilities. Their stories encourage people with learning challenges and those who support them to recognise and nurture each person's special talents.

What do you consider to be the next frontier in reading research?

Intervention research, especially classroom based intervention research and research on techniques to remediate learning difficulties in adolescents and adults should be given the highest priority.

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– Linda Siegel

What do you consider to be the barriers to improved reading instruction in your national and/or state school systems?

There are a number of barriers. Here are some of them:

- Many teachers are not properly instructed in teaching reading and mathematic skills. Often they are not taught the importance of phonics and phonological awareness.
- Dyslexia and other learning differences are not properly recognised.
- The reliance on the IQ test is a barrier. IQ tests are expensive and time consuming and do not yield helpful suggestions for helping the person with learning these skills.
- Failure to identify difficulties early, when it is much easier to treat them.
- Failure to identify students who are struggling with academic work. Inadequate individual testing of reading spelling mathematics and writing and reliance on group tests of questionable validity.
- Schools and individuals adopting reading programs and 'miracle cures' when there is no empirical evidence of their validity.

What sorts of books do you like to read for pleasure?

I love to read biographies and mysteries for pleasure.

What is your favourite novel and why?

My favourite keeps changing with every book that I read. My all-time favourite is *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen. I love the subtle, understated humour and being transported to a world (18th and 19th English aristocracy) that is so foreign to my own 21st century middle-class world.