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"FINGERS, EYES AND EARS TO WORDS": LESLLA TEACHERS LEARN FROM DYSLEXIA EDUCATORS

Patsy Vinogradov, Hamline University

Abstract
In LESLLA classrooms all over the world, teachers focus much attention on reading instruction. Their students are beginning readers, tackling this challenging task in a new language. In the absence of a wide research base for LESLLA, teachers turn to related fields for guidance on the complexities of teaching struggling readers. In this study, several LESLLA teachers explored the field of dyslexia education, searching for insights to improve their literacy instruction. Both LESLLA learners and dyslexic children are grappling with reading an alphabetic print language. Both groups of students work on building phonological skills, recognizing word patterns, and applying reading strategies to more complicated texts. While they struggle with reading for different reasons, LESLLA learners may benefit from the multisensory, systematic, and direct approach to reading used with dyslexic children. In the following case, several LESLLA teachers examined dyslexia education through a facilitated study circle and found a number of classroom practices worthy of applying to their learners.

Keywords: LESLLA, study circle, professional development, dyslexia

1. Introduction

Reading instruction is often center-stage in the LESLLA classroom. Low first-language literacy is a defining characteristic of LESLLA learners, and the challenges around acquiring the alphabetic principle and gaining even basic literacy in a second language are tremendous for LESLLA students. While teachers are well aware of the high level of literacy required to thrive in students' new communities, the LESLLA research base is still limited, and direct guidance for teaching LESLLA students to read is sparse. Some LESLLA educators have responded with innovation, reaching to related fields for insight, resources, and inspiration. One such example is a study of LESLLA teachers

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'crossing contexts' to improve their LESLLA teaching practice provided by Vinogradov (2013; 2015). Vinogradov brought LESLLA teachers into kindergarten, first, and second grade classrooms to investigate early literacy instruction for young children. From that study, an additional idea for LESLLA teacher-learning emerged: the knowledge and practice of teachers who work with dyslexic children. *What does the field of dyslexia education offer LESLLA teachers, both of whom work with struggling readers?* A group of LESLLA teachers in Minnesota, USA, decided to find out; this question is the basis of their inquiry. The following article shares the insights gained by reaching into the related field of dyslexia education to improve reading instruction for LESLLA learners.

2. Dyslexia and LESLLA: Why compare these two types of learners?

What exactly is dyslexia? The International Dyslexia Association provides this definition:

> Dyslexia is 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. (International Dyslexia Association n.d.)

To paraphrase, students who are dyslexic have a great deal of difficulty learning to decode and recognize words in print, which in turn affects every other aspect of reading: fluency, comprehension, vocabulary, and the building of background knowledge. To be clear, dyslexia is <u>not</u> a result of low intelligence or poor instruction, but rather a result of impeded phonological processing. Dyslexia, at its core, is a *sound* issue, an auditory processing challenge. It makes decoding of print laborious at best, shaking students' interest in reading and interrupting their ability to easily access meaning from printed texts. One dyslexic child captures his feelings about reading: "I would rather clean the mold around the bathtub than read" (in Wolf 2007: 165).

LESLLA students, as shown in the limited but growing LESLLA research base, also encounter a great deal of trouble with phonological skills of reading

an alphabetic print language (Young-Scholten & Strom 2006). Acquiring the alphabetic principle, decoding, and gaining meaning from print are foundational to reading fluently, and yet those are especially challenging tasks for LESLLA learners (Kurvers, 2007; Young-Scholten & Strom 2006). As they did not acquire the abstract phonological skills related to alphabetic print literacy as children (such as segmentation, blending, and substitution of sounds and letters), LESLLA learners are now acquiring these skills as adults. To complicate matters further, they are learning to read in a language they do not yet speak well. However, as Shaywitz optimistically states, "There is no deadline or age limit for when a person can learn to read…adults face a serious challenge but one that can be met successfully" (2003: 288). The participants in the current inquiry share this optimism and were eager to learn more from dyslexia education to improve their LESLLA instruction.

To be clear, LESLLA learners are not dyslexic by definition, and the participants in this study made no such assumption. However, participants did notice that, as a group, LESLLA learners are struggling with reading in a number of similar ways to dyslexic children. Specifically, observations and conversations revealed ten main characteristics that many LESLLA students have in common with dyslexic learners, outlined in Figure 1. After articulating these commonalities and learning about the nature of instruction typical for dyslexic learners, it became clear to this study's participants that there was much more to investigate and a great deal to learn from the field of reading disabilities that could enhance our work teaching reading of an alphabetic print language to LESLLA learners.

1. Trouble with print/page orientation
2. Guessing at words, not decoding
3. Difficulty blending phonemes
4. Savvy – acquisition of many 'work around' and coping strategies
5. Lack of transfer of skills learned in routine activities to other reading applications
6. Confusion of similar symbols b/d, g/q
7. Difficulty processing oral instructions
8. Decoding so strained, comprehension is often lost
9. Struggling more than others, despite persistence, common instruction, and excellence in other areas
10. Memorizing and other coping strategies are maximized, students have "hit wall" of what those strategies can do for them

Figure 1: *Commonalities among dyslexic learners and LESLLA learners*

A LESLLA teacher colleague had completed extensive training in working with dyslexic children, and together we[1] began to consider how to explore this connection further and what these common characteristics might mean for LESLLA, and for reading instruction in particular. Three additional LESLLA teachers joined us to form a study circle around these topics.

Our rationale for exploring dyslexia to inform our LESLLA work was a simple one:

- Both dyslexic learners and LESLLA learners appear to struggle with reading in similar ways.
- Dyslexia educators in our context (United States) know how to break down English reading into small, teachable parts using engaging, systematic, multisensory instruction.
- While English as a second language (ESL) teachers know a great deal about language development, many have not received specific training in reading instruction, particularly for emergent and struggling readers.
- There exists a rich resource of knowledge and pedagogy around teaching dyslexic children, one we can access and adapt for LESLLA classrooms.

In this article, our dyslexia study circle is summarized, as well as the main insights gained from crossing contexts via this professional learning activity.

3. Investigating dyslexia: A LESLLA teacher study circle as professional learning

To examine the overlap of our work and to glean wisdom for reading instruction of LESLLA learners from dyslexia education, four LESLLA teachers and the researcher formed a study circle in fall 2013. Study circles are small learning groups of practitioners who meet to discuss issues of relevance to their classroom practice. They are organized around a specific topic and represent professional learning in the form of collaborative inquiry (Yorks & Kasl 2002). Study circles generally meet for three to five sessions and are often guided by a facilitator. NCSALL (National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy) names three key elements to study circles: professional wisdom, research, and their application to practice (NSCALL 2006: 11). Prior to each session, participants read a selection of relevant research on the study circle topic, and they may have written or classroom-based reflection tasks to complete as well. During meetings, study circle participants actively discuss the readings and tasks and explore together how research can inform their

classroom practice. In the present study, our "dyslexia study circle," as we called it, was created using the NCSALL guidelines, and readings and tasks were chosen to best serve teachers of LESLLA learners. Through collaborative inquiry, our aim was to reach out across contexts to this related field of dyslexia education to inform our work with adult ESL struggling readers.

Participants

The study circle participants were all women and all native speakers of English. All participants were practicing LESLLA teachers in programs at least partially funded by state adult basic education funds, and they all volunteered to participate in response to a personal invitation. Two LESLLA schools were represented, both located in a large Midwestern city in Minnesota, USA, and both schools were part of community-based organizations. Participants agreed not only to participate but to give ongoing feedback and reflection on their experiences with the study circle. The study circle was created and facilitated by me, the researcher, and my co-facilitator, Kristin Perry, the co-creator of this professional learning activity. Ms. Perry assisted in the design, planning, and delivering of the study circle. Her expertise in dyslexia education and Orton-Gillingham specifically was critical to this work (Orton-Gillingham n.d.). All participants were given continuing education units (CEUs) needed for state teacher re-licensure requirements, a small stipend, and also payment for substitute teachers as needed, all funded by a grant from the Commission on Adult Basic Education (COABE), a professional organization for adult educators in the United States (COABE n.d.). The study circle met five times for approximately three hours each meeting, spread over ten weeks. At least one-two weeks was allotted between each meeting to give participants adequate time to read, prepare for discussion, and complete assigned tasks.

Role of the researcher

As the co-creator of this professional learning activity and also the researcher, I had a dual role in this project. It should be noted that while I was the co-facilitator of the study circle, Ms. Perry nor I were in any way in a position of authority at the participants' workplaces nor were we in any position to evaluate their teaching. Our study circle was a voluntary gathering of colleagues who wished to explore this topic together.

Data collection and analysis

As a professional learning activity in the form of a study circle, all data came directly from our work together. The research question was simple: *What will a group of LESLLA teachers glean from the field of dyslexia education to inform their work?*

All data was qualitative in nature. Data indicated what the participants were learning and the reported impact of this professional learning on their LESLLA teaching practice. Detailed notes were taken at our five study circle meetings, including our visits to a local school for dyslexic students. Participants completed a written reflection at the close of each meeting with open ended responses, and these writings were collected and compiled. An online discussion space was established, and participants posted questions, assignments, and comments throughout (and beyond) the ten week study circle to this website. Analysis occurred cyclically by the researcher and co-facilitator, and at times by the participants themselves as we reviewed all field notes and reflections and grouped common comments into themes and patterns to better understand our learning and the impact of the study circle. The data was all typed and reviewed immediately after collection, as recommended by Erickson (1986). All data was coded and analyzed for emerging themes. The notes and written reflections were used to both plan and improve the next meetings and also to understand what the participants were learning and applying to their LESLLA contexts.

3.1. Content of the dyslexia study circle

First, before commencing our study circle, we came together in spring 2013 to plan and articulate the purpose for this work. Three guiding questions emerged that grounded our collaborative inquiry, detailed in Figure 2. From here, Ms. Perry and I found readings, created outside tasks, and reached out to a local school for dyslexic children in order to design a comprehensive exploration of dyslexia education for these LESLLA teachers, but also one that was accessible to busy full-time teachers.

1. How are our low-literacy adult ESL learners' reading skills different from and similar to the skills of learners (typically native English speakers) receiving dyslexia/reading disability interventions?
2. What knowledge and practices used in K-12 (kindergarten – 12th grade schooling for children) dyslexia/reading disability instruction might have promise for LESLLA?
3. Of those practices identified as worthy of consideration for LESLLA learners, how would they first need to be adapted for our context?

Figure 2: *Guiding Questions for our Study Circle*

To bring our readings and conversations to life and to better envision dyslexia education for young people, a local school for dyslexic children was located and contact was made to visit two times during our study circle. The school's Director of Curriculum and Instruction welcomed us to visit the elementary grades and alerted her staff to our visits. It should be noted that the Director also graciously spent time debriefing our visits with us and answered our questions about the classroom observations, reading instruction, and the school itself both in person and electronically. A visual representation of the study circle meetings is found in Figure 3.

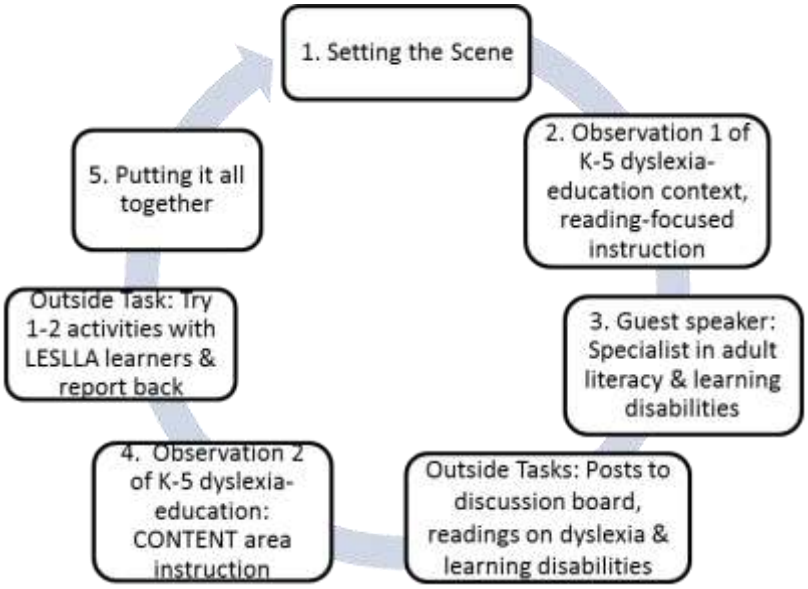

Figure 3: *Dyslexia study circle meetings overview*

Objectives were identified for each of the five meetings. Detailed below, these objectives framed our time together and shaped our professional learning. For each meeting, readings and additional tasks were assigned. A complete list of our readings can be found in the Appendix, and tasks ranged from posting to our online discussion space to choosing a dyslexia-education inspired activity and trying it out in the LESLLA classroom, followed by a reflection.

***Meeting one**:*
- Articulate study circle format and the nature and purpose of our collaborative inquiry
- Calibrate our definitions of dyslexia, learning disability, reading difficulty, etc.

- Review main elements of reading struggles and possible overlaps and distinctions between LESLLA learners and dyslexic children
- Review main components of early literacy and its instruction for the typical reader (not dyslexic)

Meeting two:

- Observe in 2-3 classrooms during literacy-focused time with young struggling readers.
- Use observation protocol (created collaboratively) to guide our time in classrooms.

Meeting three:

- Identify characteristics of adults as struggling readers
- Identify assessments & tools used to diagnose dyslexia in adults.
- Identify interventions commonly used to teach literacy to adult dyslexic learners.
- Compare and contrast ways of assessing and teaching dyslexic *adults* and what we've learned about how *children* are served.
- Articulate the role of L1 instruction- how does serving limited English students affect the strategies, interventions, activities we've identified as useful for LESLLA? How to transform for our L2 learners?
- Ask an adult literacy and LD (learning disabilities) specialist our burning questions.

Meeting four:

- Observe instruction of a core subject matter class (social studies, science) with struggling readers.
- Identify ways that the young struggling readers are tackling difficult content-area reading, and ways the teachers are supporting them.
- Continue identifying 'essentials' of dyslexia instruction and how to make it applicable to LESLLA learners. *What is transferable? What isn't? Of what's transferable, what needs to happen first?*

Meeting five:

- Collaboratively identify the literacy-building practices from our dyslexia education exploration that seem most important for LESLLA students, and discuss why we believe so.
- Compile a list of 'rules of thumb' for transferring a practice from L1 dyslexia-education for children to our LESLLA classrooms. *(What's critical to remember about our students when considering a practice inspired by this new context?)*
- Consider Next Steps. What can this group offer to the field as a result of this experience?
- Complete a final reflection/evaluation about what we've learned from crossing into this new context.

Figure 4: *Dyslexia study circle meeting objectives*

3.2. Findings: What did the LESLLA teachers deem valuable from dyslexia education?

The study circle participants engaged actively with the readings, conversations, classroom observations, and the outside tasks assigned in our collaborative inquiry. Our online discussion board was a busy place of sharing and brainstorming, and our in-person meetings often ran over our scheduled times as we continued to process all that we were learning. The response to the central question to this inquiry (*What will a group of LESLLA teachers glean from the field of dyslexia education to inform their work?)* can be summarized into three main themes, each detailed below.

Transparency about language and how it works

Throughout our study of dyslexia and instruction for dyslexic students, the LESLLA teachers were struck by the idea that as native speakers and literate adults, we have very much 'internalized' the English sound system; we do not always notice nor can we easily explain many of the sound patterns and rules that prove challenging for our learners. Dyslexia educators and curriculum they employed (Wilson Reading System n.d.) demonstrated an extraordinary depth of knowledge of English reading. With this depth of understanding around English sound and spelling patterns, dyslexia-trained teachers make English decoding *transparent* to their learners. This level of comfort with the intricacies of language allows them to explain even the most complex alphabetic patterns with ease to the children in their classes. The dyslexia educators we observed, acutely aware that dyslexia is an auditory processing disorder, focused attention on English *sounds* and very carefully built instruction systematically and incrementally, making an otherwise opaque and internalized sound and spelling system visible and accessible to their students. One LESLLA teacher noted in an online discussion:

> What may have value for LESLLA [from dyslexia education]? The tapping, the very systematic, intense approach done by VERY knowledgeable instructors (what if our teachers knew this much about reading!), and the focus on AUDITORY skills were all fascinating and could help us, I think. The teacher who asked "what did you hear" during dictation made a real impression on me - it's not about what the teacher said, it's about what the learner HEARD. A-ha moment! (Online post, 10/12/2013)

The LESLLA teachers took away new appreciation for instruction that focuses on the sound patterns of language as well as the importance of explaining

multiple meanings and spellings carefully and clearly. Alphabetics instruction for the dyslexic learners we observed centered on the six syllable types of English. These syllable types were new information to some of the LESLLA teachers but is common in the training of elementary school teachers and quite uncommon in the training of adult ESL teachers. We noted that teachers we observed at the dyslexic school were transparent about the rules of English reading and shared a common language about these rules with their learners. In one class of 2nd graders, we overheard a child ask another child, "Is that a welded sound?" and another asked the teacher, "Is that an r-colored vowel?" Such questions were impressive to hear among such young learners! While such conversations sent us to our notes to look up definitions, these dyslexic children were using such terms with each other during class to unravel the complex English sound system.

One participant reflects below on the dyslexia educators' use of word marking and explicit instruction around syllable types and vowel types:

> The observation at [school name withheld] gave me some good ideas for how I can expand my work... For example, having them break the word into syllables with marks. I liked what I saw about "scooping" and "marking" the words according to their syllables and the type of vowel that they are (long, short, schwa, etc.). I think that my level 3-4 students could do that and that they would get a lot out of it. I've been struggling with how to explain long and short vowels to my students, and I think that at the level I have, we could maybe use marks. I also really liked the finger/thumb tapping and wonder if I could use that in my classroom. (Online post, 10/10/2013)

In response to this study circle, the LESLLA teachers began using more common language with their students about English sounds and rules, actively asking them if a syllable is open or closed, for example. Even in the lowest levels teachers began more carefully distinguishing vowels and consonants and teaching these terms. The participants found that teaching and using common terminology with students and being transparent about the rules of English reading are dyslexia education practices that are worth adapting for LESLLA.

Multisensory practice with words and word parts

One of our main topics of reading and discussion throughout the study circle was *multisensory instruction.* This tenet of dyslexia education has six key characteristics 1) simultaneous/multisensory (visual, auditory, kinesthetic, tactile), 2) systematic and cumulative, 3) direct, 4) diagnostic, and 5) synthetic and analytic, and 6) comprehensive and inclusive (International Dyslexia

Association 2009). In our readings and observations, we noted that teachers were 'finger tapping' the sounds of words and having students do the same. This simple, tactile activity allowed teachers to segment and blend words with their learners. When a child was having trouble spelling a word, a teacher often asked him or her to 'tap it out', to use their fingers to break down the sounds in a word or syllable. One LESLLA teacher's online post captures her thinking as she considers trying finger tapping in class:

> I've tried the finger tapping recently with some of my students and think this could be a really useful technique for linking decoding and encoding. When I did a spelling assessment recently, it seemed to show that a lot of learners either couldn't hear some of the phonemes in these 3-5 phonemes words or they were forgetting about some of the phonemes when it came time to write them down. I'm interested to see if phoneme tapping could help with this.
>
> (Online post, 10/21/2013)

Each of the LESLLA teachers in the study circle began finger tapping with their learners, and we created videotapes of this practice to share with each other and our colleagues.

In addition to finger tapping, other multisensory practices made a strong impression on the LESLLA teachers. In keeping with dyslexia education practices we were exploring, letter and syllable cards and tiles became a frequent activity among the LESLLA classrooms. These tangible materials allow students to manipulate word parts and to build real words in a tactile way. We realized that handwriting itself is a multisensory activity worth spending time on, and we noted kinesthetic ways to decode and encode cyclically, while connecting oral and written sounds. More detail on the specific multisensory instructional techniques mentioned in this section can be found on a website our study circle established to store our findings and supporting materials for colleagues: www.englishcodecrackers.com.

Time, patience, and access to success

In learning about teaching reading to dyslexic students, we came to understand what a slow and difficult process learning to read can be for these learners. Through the study circle, we saw that teachers of such struggling readers exhibit great patience and give students the time they need to process and think in class. We learned about the high priority of a calm learning environment for students who are easily distracted away from the chore of reading. One participant commented after our first observation at the school for dyslexic learners:

> All the classrooms were calm and welcoming. The students had a variety of seating options (yoga balls, hard seats, bean bags, personal desks) and they were allowed the option of moving between the different kinds of seating. The rooms had sections for different activities, which I assume provides the students with structure and brings down their affective filters. Many of my students display symptoms of PTSD [post- traumatic stress disorder], and I think creating a calm environment is key for them to relax, so that they can start to learn.
>
> (Online post, 10/10/2013)

In addition to a relaxed atmosphere, we noticed that the dyslexic students were given ample time to retrieve a word from memory in class, and units were spread over time to allow everyone the ability to complete a task. One observation was at the end of a two-week unit:

> Perhaps my biggest take-away from the visit was less about word-level reading instruction and more about extensive modeling of reading and writing skills. I watched a teacher complete what had been a 2-week process of modeling and collaboratively writing a summary of a social studies textbook chapter. It was impressive and reminded me that I often take the "training wheels" off too soon, expecting learners to do it on their own when they may need multiple opportunities to see a complex task (and complex thinking) modeled first!
>
> (Online post, 12/2/2013)

This comment demonstrates a major take-away for the LESLLA teachers: the value of slowing down and providing sufficient scaffolding and time for students learn.

Beyond the pace and atmosphere of instruction, additional strategies stood out to us that enabled struggling readers to gain access to knowledge and to successfully complete tasks. One LESLLA teachers describes some of these strategies:

> I was really taken with the use of reading a paragraph from the textbook aloud, frequent pausing for clarification, and the systematic way of doing 2-column notes. The use of assistive technology was impressive too – the teacher took the notes on the smartboard, made them quite large for a student with vision trouble, and the students copied at their own pace. Those who couldn't write fast enough would be given a print out of the same notes. Content wasn't dumbed down or avoided – just made accessible.
>
> (Online post, 11/12/2013)

Instead of using simpler material, teachers found ways to make the content available to all learners. We observed one science lesson that made extensive use of graphic organizers to support learning:

> My main take away was graphic organizers, graphic organizers, graphic organizers! The two column notes were interesting and another teacher was using an inverted pyramid. There were also posters of animal classifications in the back of the room where students had sorted pictures into groups. Even students who can't write yet can sort pictures into a graphic organizer.
>
> (Online post, 11/12/2013)

In summary, in observing and learning about dyslexia education, it became clear that this field offers a great deal of pedagogical knowledge around reading and making the difficult sound system of English comprehensible to students. Dyslexia educators have a remarkable grasp of how English works and how to convey it to learners with specific learning challenges. We learned about multisensory reading instruction, and we began trying many of these strategies in LESLLA classrooms. However, our dyslexia study circle also revealed a great deal of care for the learning environment itself. We came to understand that teaching struggling readers is much more than teaching decoding skills, it also involves making knowledge accessible when reading well is not among your students' strengths, and how time, patience, and many ways to build and demonstrate one's understanding of content are critical for students' success.

3.3. Discussion: Impact of collaborative teacher inquiry

Powerful things can happen when teachers come together around a topic they are genuinely curious about and are given the time and space to investigate (Vinogradov 2013). As Fullan writes, "There is a ceiling effect to how much we can learn if we keep to ourselves…Personal mastery and group mastery feed on each other in learning organizations. People need one other to learn and to accomplish things" (Fullan 1995: 257). The nature of this study circle was collaborative and inquisitive. As evidenced by the concrete and lasting changes to their LESLLA instruction, this professional learning experience had a tangible impact. When contacted a year later on another matter, one participant shared the following:

> I'm still actively using the techniques I picked up from the circle, even a year later. One thing I picked up from those teachers was that they used their computers and projectors to do graphic organizers (charts) on the board. It's better because the type is easy to read, the lines are easy to follow, and the information is more

> organized. So instead of scribbling on the board, I make neat little charts in front of the students. I also do the spelling activity with moveable letters every day.
> (Email correspondence, 1/26/2015)

From teacher learning to teacher education

Beyond the lasting impact on their teaching routines, this study circle resulted in 'giving back' to our fellow adult educators in a number of ways. Upon hearing about our work together, the group was asked by the state adult basic education office to share our findings at a regional professional development event in the form of a short workshop. We videotaped each other using our new techniques and synthesized our learning into a 90 minute session for our colleagues. A couple of months later, we were asked to create and deliver a six-hour workshop for over 50 adult educators based on our study circle. This workshop, *Cracking the Code: De-mystifying English Reading,* resulted in a website where we continue to store our workshop materials, videos, and favorite readings: www.englishcodecrackers.com. Study Circle co-facilitator Kristin Perry and I have repeated this workshop in other states by invitation since our initial study circle. We continue to discuss our classrooms together and share our insights and questions regularly.

Six Word Summaries

At the final meeting of our study circle, the participants were asked to reflect on our time together, to flip through their notes, and to describe our work with only six words. This article concludes with their poetic summaries of this collaborative inquiry into dyslexia education and what it means for us as LESLLA educators.

Colleagues unraveling reading
It's all connected.

Finding overlap
Consulting expertise
Practicing mindfulness

Chunking, tapping,
categorizing,
Breaking down whole

Systematic chaos,
reading, watching, tapping,
learning

Fingers, eyes and ears to words.

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Note

1 Moving now into this study circle specifically, first person is used to accurately represent that the researcher was also a participant in the inquiry.

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