



Answering Why: Looking at Processing With Dr. Steven Feifer

Lauren Clouser:

Welcome to the LDA Podcast, a series by the Learning Disabilities Association of America. Our podcast is dedicated to exploring topics of interest to educators, individuals with learning disabilities, parents and professionals to work towards our goal of creating a more equitable world. Hi, everyone. Welcome to the LDA Podcast. I'm here today with Dr. Steven Feifer. Dr. Feifer has more than 20 years of experience as a school psychologist and is duly trained in school neuropsychology with research stints at the National Institute of Health.

He's authored eight books on learning and emotional disorders in children and has authored three different assessments. We're also very excited to welcome him as a keynote speaker at our 63rd Annual International Conference in February. Dr. Feifer, thank you so much for being here.

Dr. Steven Feifer:

Well, good morning, Lauren, and thank you for having me. And 63rd Annual Conference. You are to be congratulated.

Lauren Clouser:

We're very excited. So, to kick us off, would you be able to tell us a little bit about your background?

Dr. Steven Feifer:

Well, your kind introduction pretty much summed it up, but I started my career as a school psychologist. I still consider myself a school psychologist, but was in the public schools, three different systems in West Virginia, in Virginia, and also in Maryland for more than 20 years. Early in my career, I recognized that giving a student an IQ test and walking into a meeting and saying: 'Billy's full scale is 96. Do we have any other questions here today?' wasn't quite answering the ultimate question of why a particular student may struggle. I felt very confined being a traditional school psychologist early in my career and made a decision that I needed to go in a bit of a different direction. And I sought out the field of neuropsychology. And that is when I had the aha moment that we can take what's going on in the neurosciences and apply them into classroom learning. And for no other reason than for my own selfish purposes, I felt I could better explain learning not by throwing out a bunch of crazy brain terms, but by going beyond just what a student's IQ is and answer the real question: why is Billy struggling to read, and answering a better question, what should we do about it? So I decided to really dedicate my

career to bridging neuroscience with classroom learning and found myself doing my school systems neuropsychological evaluations, which I found very satisfying.

And a lot of people say, well, what the heck is the difference between a psychological evaluation and a neuropsych besides these strange tests that you give, and at the end of the day, it's just how you interpret the information, really. So I continued on that journey for many years. And along the way, as you mentioned in the introduction, I wrote a few books that, unbeknownst to me, sort of elevated my status a bit in the field and I started to do more and more speaking engagements. And not just school psychologists. I felt that really every bit, classroom teachers, special education teachers, and general educators were really benefiting from the information and were attending my talks more and more, which was quite satisfying. I did stay in the schools for about 20 years.

And then career change number two happened, and that is when I had the opportunity to...I was approached by PAR: Psychological Assessment Resources, a testing company, about the opportunity to author a reading and a math test at the time, and knowing a good opportunity when I hear it, my initial response was: I have no interest. I don't want to do this. But they were persistent. And the more we talked, the more intrigued I became. And once I signed the dotted line, my life changed completely. I went into the direction of test development, and two things happened. Number one, I absolutely loved it. The creative expression.

I mean, it's one thing to sit around and to say, oh, that Woodcock-Johnson. What were they thinking about on that test? Oh, that WIAT-4. What were they thinking about on that test? It's a very humbling experience when someone says, okay, big guy, let's see if you can do it better. It's extraordinarily humbling. But it was quite the challenge, such that I ended up leaving the schools to devote more time to test development. Most don't know that from start to finish, these tests take between four and five years to get to the market. And so I eased into...I still love testing students.

So I went into more of a private practice here in my hometown in Frederick, Maryland. We're just outside of Washington, D.C. That way I could continue to test students, but at my own pace, at a little slower pace, and also divide my time with test development. And that has led me to this moment in time. And that's what I continue to do and continue to love.

Lauren Clouser:

Well, I'm excited to talk a little bit more about those tests as well. But I wanted to ask, what led you to become interested in learning disabilities?

Dr. Steven Feifer:

Well, I think the initial interest was in school psychology, and I liked the idea. My running joke is to school psychologists. We're not really school psychologists, we're cognitive detectives, and a crime has been committed. And that crime is student underachievement. And our job is to be a sleuth and to try to figure out why these particular students are struggling with their learning. I

love the intrigue of the why question. When I became a school psychologist, it was quite apparent that the vast majority of the referrals were for students with potential learning disabilities. And you probably know this more than me, the exact figure, Lauren, but I want to say somewhere in the 38-39% of all students who qualify for special ed are there because of a learning disability.

So very early on in my career I realized for me to really get a hang of this job, I better figure out what this learning disability stuff is all about, because it really makes up the lion's share of the referrals that I receive.

Lauren Clouser:

That makes a lot of sense. That is the largest population served under IDEA. So you had mentioned earlier that you had started as a psychologist and expanded into neuropsychology because it was able to give you a more in-depth look at some of the causes of these issues. Could you talk a little bit about how neuropsychology lends itself to that?

Dr. Steven Feifer:

Yeah, so when I entered the field, and now I'm going to date myself, way back in the early 1990s, there were a thousand and one different definitions of what is a learning disability. And most of them centered around a discrepancy between your IQ and your achievement. But living in Maryland, which is a relatively small state, I mean, I can drive 30 minutes south, I'm in Washington D.C. 30 minutes to the southwest, I'm in the state of Virginia, 30 minutes to the west, I'm in West Virginia, 30 minutes north, I'm in Pennsylvania. They all had different definitions of a learning disability. And the running joke is, you know, what is a learning disability? It depends on what side of the Potomac River you live on, based on the number of points needed for a discrepancy. And none of that made sense to me.

It seemed like it was a very arbitrary sort of quasi-political legal definitions that were a little too far removed from science from my end. But as I dug deeper into the world of learning disabilities, at the end of the day, there was a phrase that always stuck with me. It's a disorder of a basic psychological process. Now, you and I might differ on what that process is, but at least that advances us to the next step. And I felt that neuropsychology put me in the best position to understand what those processes are. So when again, when I first started, I asked the question, shouldn't we be assessing processing? And the answer, I said, well, we're giving BMIs and Bender Gestalts, that's processing. Drawing a picture of a figure has nothing to do with decoding skills. What am I doing here? So I really focused on trying to learn which psychological processes were important in what academic skills.

And we all know now, it might sound very common sense now, but it wasn't back then, that reading involved phonemic awareness, phonological processing, orthographic processing. What in the world is that? That comprehension is a blend of working memory and executive functioning skills. It allows us to strategically self-organize the information to facilitate recall at a later date. These were really important processes we needed to zero in on and target to better

understand reading. But maybe not so for mathematics. Certainly working memory, certainly executive functioning. But the last time I checked, decoding and phonological skills were not the most important process when it comes to math. So what neuropsychology enabled me to determine, and really figure out and understand, is which processes are most important for a particular academic skill.

If one of those processes is down, then that's going to help us not only understand why a student struggles on the skill, but maybe it puts us in a better position to figure out what to do about it. And then one final point along that same line. I think it's so important nowadays to understand processing learning, because we're in a post-pandemic world, so we know that students missed out on a lot of instruction during the pandemic. I might be working with little Jimmy, who's in fourth grade, and reading on a late second grade level. We have a big question to ask. Is Jimmy's reading down because, well, disruption of education may be during the pandemic. Or could this possibly be a learning disability? The answer to those questions lies in three areas. Processing, processing, and processing.

And if Jimmy's underlying processing is pretty much intact, I think he was watching a little too much Netflix over the pandemic. I don't think it's a disability. But pandemic or no pandemic, if we see deficits in processing, to me it's kind of a red flag. This could be a possible learning disability.

Lauren Clouser:

Definitely. Well, and to build off of that too, your assessments that you've authored...there have been reading, writing, and math assessments already. Did this emphasis on processing, did that shape the way that you wrote these assessments? Why did you feel that these assessments needed to be written?

Dr. Steven Feifer:

Yeah, what a great question. I mean, why does the world need another reading test? I mean, don't we know? Let's list them all out now. We don't have enough time, Lauren. But there's the Woodcock-Johnson. There's the WIAT-4. There's the KTEA-3. There's the GORT-5. You and I could go on and on listing national tests of reading.

Why does the world need a Feifer test to that pile? Well, all of those tests that we've talked about, and I think are very good tests, and I use them in my own practice, are traditional reading tests. They were designed to say where a student is reading. And that's important. I mean, I think the teachers already know that, but at least it validates what teachers are saying. So when a referral comes and we know a student is reading below grade level, and now we can quantify and document that their standard score in the Woodcock-Johnson is an 80, and that's at the 9th percentile. That's important to know where they're reading. For many years, we also wanted that overarching score to compare to an IQ. It could be because we were stuck in the discrepancy model.

My tests are not traditional reading tests. I don't really care where you're reading. I want to know why. These tests are a new brand which we call not traditional educational testing, but diagnostic achievement tests. And they are Qualification B instruments. That means everyone, everyone who will be attending our LDA conference, you are qualified to use the instrument. It's going to answer the why question. So if I have a student score 110 on the Woodcock-Johnson reading, I'm probably not going to administer the FAR, because 110 is a really strong reading score.

I'm good with that. But if they score an 80, that's an issue. That's a low score. Now I want to know why. So what the FAR would do is try to answer the all important 'why' question. And it takes a neuropsychological approach that most third grade teachers already know. There's different types of reading problems kids can have. Is it because of the coding issues? Is it because of phonemic awareness issues? Do they struggle because of orthographic processing issues that impact our ability to automatically look at a word and figure it out without having to decode each and every part? Where's the problem? 'Hey, I can read the words fine.

I just struggle answering the 10 questions in the back of my social studies chapters.' are more of a comprehension issue. So the goal of the FAR is not to measure where you are in reading, but to answer the why question. And the philosophy is simply this. I'm really proud of the team at PAR in that, and I could be wrong, you guys can correct me if I'm wrong here. These were the first group of educational instruments directly tied to interventions. So when you score the FAR on the digital platform called Par iConnect, not only will an interpreter report be written, but it will be linked to specific interventions based on those particular processes that might be weaker.

So the short answer would be these are diagnostic achievement tests, not traditional ones.

Lauren Clouser:

Well, that connection to interventions, too, is really good to help bridge that science to practice gap. Thanks so much for sharing those. And we're so excited to have you at our conference in St. Louis in February. Would you be able to give us a sneak peek of what you're planning to speak about?

Dr. Steven Feifer:

Absolutely not. No, of course. That's part of our discussion today. So very much. First of all, I'm extremely flattered and honored to be in this position to keynote such a prestigious event. And what I'd like to talk about is something that I've noticed the last few years. And I will also ask you, Lauren, if you've noticed this. No matter why a student might be referred because of academic difficulties, maybe they struggle with spelling. Maybe it's math, maybe it's reading. Maybe they're not paying attention and focusing as well as they should. No matter what the reason, there is an element of anxiety in almost all students I seem to be working with. And I'll pause and ask, is that something that you're seeing as well, that anxiety seems to be a big factor permeating learning?

Lauren Clouser:

Definitely, yes.

Dr. Steven Feifer:

So what I'd like to do is talk about the anxious brain in my workshop, in my keynote. And I want to talk about how anxiety can interfere with learning, but also create the appearance or an illusion that the student has a learning disability, when in fact it's more anxiety that is getting in the way of their learning. So with the case of reading, and I want to do this not just for reading, but I want to discuss how to distinguish and differentiate anxiety with reading disorders, with writing disorders, and with math disorders. And I know what you're saying. Good luck. We're all anxious when it comes to math, and we'll talk about that.

But as a little snippet, one of the things we're going to look at is we'll dive into the brain and look at the relationship between anxiety and working memory, and why anxiety wreaks havoc on working memory. Look, we've all been there. We've all taken a big test. Maybe it's for our license, for our master's, for our doctorate. Whatever the certification, we've had such a big test. We know what's on the line. We're so nervous before that test we can't remember our first names, let alone the information on the test. But when anxiety begins to recede, then the cognitive machinations of the brain start picking up and you develop a test taking rhythm with reading, for example.

I would expect the dominoes to fall this way: If we are anxious, it's going to affect more the back end of reading than the front end. When I say the front end, I'm talking about mechanically crashing through the words, accurately decoding and figuring out what the words are in print. When I say the back end, I'm talking more about passage comprehension and deriving meaning from print. I don't know about you, Lauren, but sometimes we get worried about maybe we have a big event coming up tomorrow, concern about our kids, or in this case, my dog is having dental surgery today. Believe it or not, I'm very concerned about little Scooter. Whatever the concern is, you might read something in front of you. And I read the text. I mechanically get through the words.

I know I've read it. I have no earthly clue what I just read, but I know I've read it. So we'll talk about why and how anxiety, for example, tends to impact more the back end of reading than the front. In other words, wreaking havoc on passage comprehension.

Lauren Clouser:

That sounds really fascinating, and I know it's going to be a great talk, and I can't think of a more relevant topic right now. Dr. Feifer, is there anything else that you wanted to say before I let you go?

Dr. Steven Feifer:

I want to encourage everybody listening to please consider coming out to...is it St. Louis this year? Yes, for our 63rd Annual LDA Conference. And playing along the same theme, there's lots

of reasons why not just kids, but I think we're all a little bit anxious these days. We can talk about the impact of the pandemic, the political chaos that this world is under, but there's something more directly that I think has really influenced children the last 10 years, and that's called social media. And I know the intent is wonderful, and the intent is to bring us together, but on some level the discussion does warrant: has it done that or perhaps pushed us even further apart? No matter when we say that kids are more anxious these days or adults are more anxious these days, and there's plenty of data, by the way, that will show to back that up, especially over the last 10 years. It does seem to be a manifestation of our culture, and not just in this particular country, but almost worldwide. And that certainly points to a lot of factors we don't have...at least I don't have, the power to change that.

But what we do have the power to do is to work with kids to better adapt and cope to this ever-changing world in front of us. So, you know, we are going to really get into and talk about learning challenges for children and interventions for them. But I don't want it to be so mechanical and cognitive. I want us to look at the whole child and think about the affective component. Because at the end of the day, what this organization is about, and I think what I'm about as well, is how do we make kids more successful in school? And it starts with being more comfortable in school, definitely.

Lauren Clouser:

Dr. Feifer, thank you so much for being with us here today. We can't wait to see you in St. Louis.

Dr. Steven Feifer:

And neither can I. Thank you, Lauren. I look forward to seeing you there. And I hope everyone listening you'll consider coming out to St. Louis this year.

Lauren Clouser:

Thank you for listening to the LDA podcast. To learn more about LDA and to get valuable resources and support, visit LDAAmerica.org.