

Four Stories: "They all feel successful, and they all attribute their success to Reading S.O.S."

SONIA'S STORY

"If I had only known about the **Lexia Learning Systems** program I would have used it for my daughters. They struggled at school, like me. Some of the sounds in English are not used in Spanish. We have to learn the sounds to learn the new language. In fact, it would be great for all kids who have trouble. The schools don't have enough tutors. Some kids can't keep up and they fall behind. The Lexia program they can do by themselves, to practice and drill. All kids today know how to use a computer. This program is so easy. I never used a computer, but I had no trouble from the beginning."

Sonia, who is thirty-eight years old, speaks with a strong Spanish accent. She explains that attending school in this country was always a struggle. She dropped out when she was twelve and married when she was fourteen. Both of her parents are illiterate, and education was not a priority in her home. Sonia's first daughter was born when she was sixteen, and she has since had three more daughters. In the twenty-five years she has been married, she has never held a job. She is afraid she will never be qualified to do more than "clean houses or work at McDonald's".

Sonia and her husband believe that education is the key ingredient to a successful life. Her husband learned to build houses in Puerto Rico where he was born. He wants a G.E.D so that he can become a licensed builder in this country; however, "he cannot stop working long enough to go to school. He doesn't believe in welfare," Sonia explains. In 1996, when the youngest of her four daughters was ten, Sonia went back to school and earned her G.E.D.

"But I wasn't happy," she explained. "It was just a piece of paper. It didn't mean anything. I had graduated from high school, and I couldn't really read or write. The classes went too fast. Most of the other people in them were teenagers, young kids. I couldn't do what they could do. There was nobody for me to ask for help. So I memorized! I memorized everything. I worked very hard every night to memorize the stuff I needed to get the degree. And I did it. But I didn't really earn that diploma the right way."

Sonia had been coming to Read to Succeed for only a few months. But she is now learning, "little by little". She finds she can put sounds together for the first time. She can sound out words, spell them and read them. She feels she is overcoming what she identifies as her "difficulty with sounds". Reading S.O.S., she says, is the key to her success. She uses the program every day. She would like to have it at home, so she could practice at night. She is excited by the fact that she has no problem using the software by herself. Sonia too, wants to go to college. When she assesses her progress in such a short time, she feels confident. "I can read! If I can do this, I can do anything. If I can do this, anybody can!"

DOLORIS'S STORY

"The Lexia Learning Systems, Reading S.O.S.? How do I like it? Well, I started in February with a 2.2 average and I am now at 6.4! That means I was on a second grade level less than one year ago. I wish I could have the program in my home, too."

Doloris is a 35-year old mother of four. Although she was born in New Jersey, she spent some years in Puerto Rico, and Spanish was her first language. Her family moved to Puerto Rico for a short time when she was thirteen, but she didn't move back to the United States until she was twenty-seven. Doloris' mother is illiterate and was abused throughout her married life. Doloris dropped out of school when she was fifteen to get married.

"It was the biggest mistake I ever made. I was trapped in a bad marriage for thirteen years. From the time I was sixteen until I was twenty-one, I had a baby every year. My husband abused me physically and emotionally, but I was afraid to leave him. I had four kids and never held a job. I was basically reliving my mother's life. Without an education what could I do on my own?"

Doloris finally left her husband. Friends introduced her to her second husband over the phone (she lived in Florida, he lives in Hartford, CT). She says the last four years have been the happiest of her life. Her husband came from El Salvador, obtained his G.E.D immediately, and works as a sous chef in West Hartford. He encouraged her to get her G.E.D as well. They both know that education is important. They are involved closely in her children's education. Doloris worries about her oldest daughter who is having trouble in school. They are urging their children to attend college.

Although she has her G.E.D., Doloris would also like to go to college. She recognizes that to attain her goal she needs help. She struggles with spelling and comprehension, and depends too much on memorization. With much encouragement from her teacher at Hartford Adult Ed., she has enrolled in the Read to Succeed program at the YMCA in downtown Hartford. She goes to the program every day. She works with her tutor, and she reinforces each lesson with time on **Lexia's Reading S.O.S. (Strategies for Older Students)** software on one of the computers at the center. Doloris attributes much of her difficulty with spelling, comprehension, and writing to the fact that she had no opportunity to practice her English while living in Puerto Rico. She believes that practice is essential. She loves that Lexia has many levels with different activities for practice and drill. She is excited by her dramatic improvement during the last year, and believes that college is now a realistic goal for her. She looks forward to studying culinary arts at Manchester Community College near her home. Her future plans are to get a beneficial job so that her family can move to a less urban community and begin to enjoy some of life's luxuries.

LEROY'S STORY

Leroy is a fifty-year old African- American who was born and raised in the city of Hartford. He graduated from Hartford High School. During his high school years, Leroy fathered two sons. He dropped out of school to contribute to the support of his children, but managed to get his diploma several years later. He says that although he graduated, he just “got by”, taking the easiest courses. Since then, he has moved from one moderately paying job to another. He has worked as a mail clerk, a machinist, and on a printing press. Currently, he is a custodian in a school in Hartford.

Leroy had known since high school that he was not learning. That may be partly because he is deaf in one ear. Although he was placed in special education classes, his problems were not accurately diagnosed or addressed. He explains that in his first several years of school, he learned to memorize words in order to read. He was never able to distinguish between sounds so he was unable to sound out unfamiliar words. He understands that his inability to read, write, and spell prevented him from achieving his goal to attend college and study liberal arts. Over the years, Leroy has attempted several times to learn to spell. He considered enrolling in adult education but thought that, “they would probably start out at a higher level than he could comprehend.” He thought adult education classes would not start out with the basics. Leroy knows he will not do well in college until he is able to read and take notes in classes.

Leroy is a great fan of Lexia Reading S.O.S. He has attended Read to Succeed for six months, and feels that now – twenty years after he graduated from high school – he is, “finally learning to spell [read]”. He claims that the program is “easy and helpful. I am practicing basic sounds and vowels that I never picked up on in the lower grades at school. Now I can hear more and I listen more.” Although he comes to class every day, and never misses a day with S.O.S, he wishes he could take the program home. He recognizes that he needs “repetition and consistency to maintain what I learn.” After six months, he was able to sound out unfamiliar words for the first time. “I can’t do hard words yet, but if I keep in this program, I’ll be where I need to be. If I rush I won’t get what I want to learn. I need to accomplish the basics.”

MELODY KINDER'S STORY

Deloris, Leroy and Sonia are all students at Read To Succeed, which is an adult literacy program located at the Greater Hartford YMCA. Melody Kinder, previously the Program Director, is the Academic Coordinator. Her clients are men and women twenty-one years of age or older with specific reading disabilities. They have at least low average intelligence and adequate oral language and vocabulary skills. In spite of being exposed to regular, conventional reading institutions, they have failed to learn to read beyond an early elementary level. The core deficit identified in the students is “limited phonemic awareness,” Ms. Kinder explains. “Language is made up of phonemes (speech sounds). My clients are unable to perceive these sounds auditorily, sequence them or manipulate them. And they have difficulty picking up the structure of language intuitively. Twenty percent of the population reads intuitively. They do not need any phonic instruction. Sixty percent need some phonic

instruction. One in five need a direct, systematic introduction with lots of repetition – these are my clients.”

These people can be recognized because, although they have good listening skills, they have poor decoding skills, poor spelling, and poor phonic skills. Basically, their limited phonemic awareness is the cause of their inability to read. Before reading proficiency can occur, the person must be able to pronounce speech sounds clearly and be aware of the sounds in words.

At Read to Succeed, students receive 45 minutes of multisensory, structured language instruction on a one-to-one basis four times per week. This involves visual, oral and speech muscle manipulation (kinesthetic) exercises. Skills are taught one at a time with review and drill every day. This direct instruction is followed by forty-five minutes on the appropriate level of Reading S.O.S. (Strategies for Older Students) that is correlated to the instruction of the day. The Lexia software helps students hear the individual sounds in words by using pictures and sounds. Even for the person who has never used a computer before, or who has difficulty with hand/eye coordination, the program has proved to be user-friendly. Historically, Ms. Kinder has found that her clients were not drilled enough, or were actually taught to read only through literature, in the early grades. Many may have been considered successful readers until the 3rd or 4th grade because the texts were predictable (the teacher had read them to the children numerous times). Because they have higher-level thinking skills, they could memorize the words and stories. Also, they had no problem when the work was presented orally. By third grade, however, there were too many words to memorize and too many of those words looked alike.

The key to their success now, after so many years of frustration and failure, is the method of instruction. They learn at most one or two sounds each day in phoneme awareness exercises. The order of instruction is: blending, segmenting, and then alphabet activities. The exercises are auditory with no attempt initially to match sounds to letters. Next, they are taught letter names and shapes. Not until these skills are mastered are they introduced to letter-sound correspondence, and finally to reading.

Melody Kinder is proud of her students. “They are highly motivated. The ones interviewed were chosen at random. They all feel successful, and they all attribute much of their success to Reading S.O.S. Many of them stay after class or come back to the YMCA at other times to use the program. Lexia’s job is to reinforce instruction. It does that job very well. Instructors here have trained public school teachers throughout Connecticut, in addition to teachers at the Hartford vocational schools, and Literacy Volunteers of Greater Hartford. We encourage them all to incorporate Lexia reading software into their programs.”

By Elaine Dohan