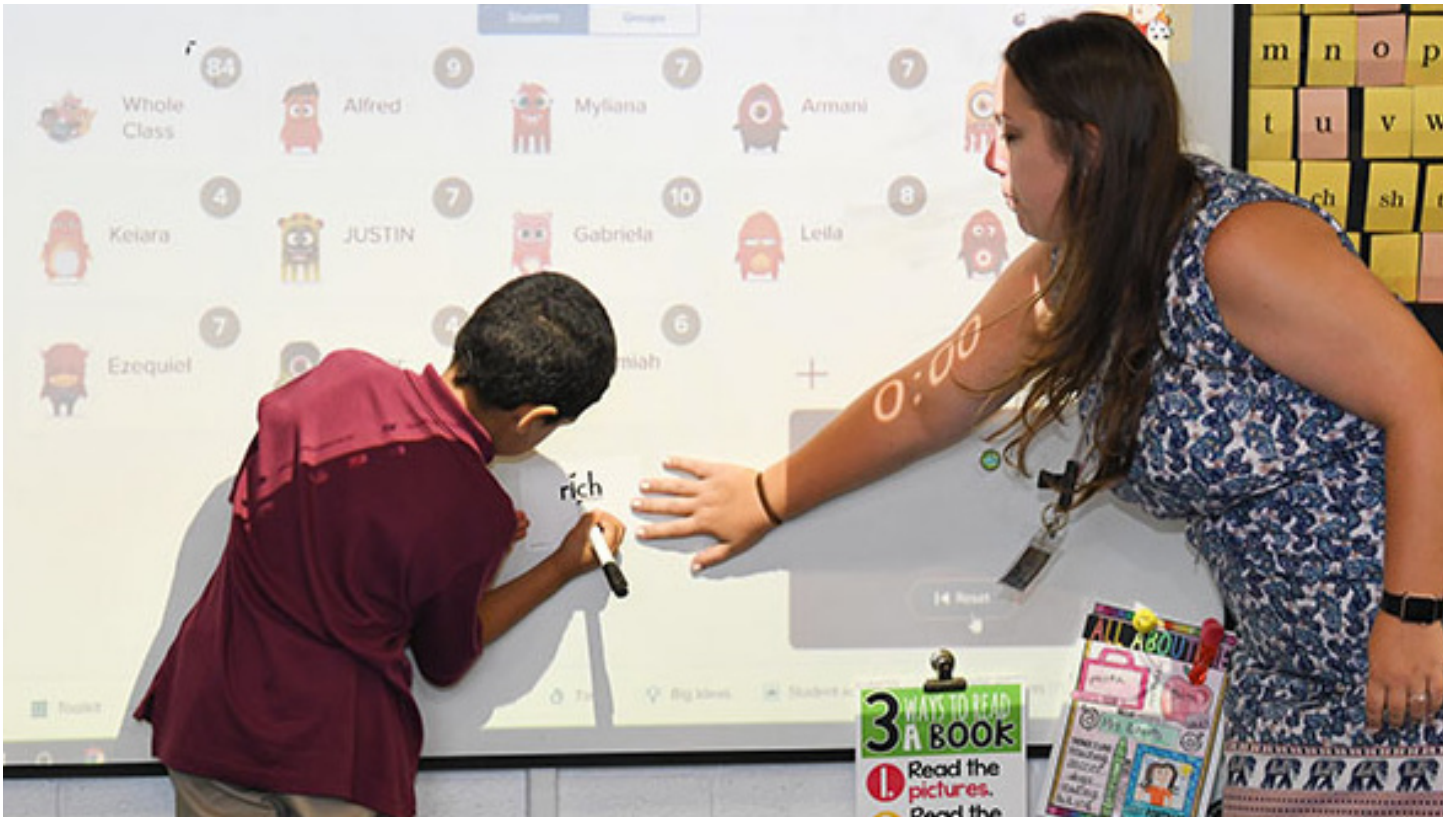
EDUCATION WEEK
2019

SPOTLIGHT



—Bradley E. Clift for Education Week

Teacher Rebecca Tabak Roberts works with a 2nd grader at Strong 21st Century Communications Magnet School in New Haven, Conn. Tabak Roberts, who is dyslexic herself, supports the genetics research in her school.

DYSLEXIA

EDITOR'S NOTE

Parents and educators are leading efforts to transform learning for dyslexic students. In this Spotlight, discover how prepared teachers are to support students with disabilities, how parents are advocating for new reading curriculum, and how specialized instruction is helping students decode words.

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Commentary

Published May 1, 2019, in Education Week's Curriculum Matters Blog

Battle Over Reading: Parents of Children With Dyslexia Wage Curriculum War

By Lisa Stark

—Getty

Kim Head's kindergarten son, Noah, would do anything to avoid school. Hide under tables. Complain of a stomach ache. Cry.

For Noah, going to school was painful and he didn't understand why. But, his mom figured it out. It turns out Noah has dyslexia, a learning disability that makes it difficult to read and spell.

Dyslexia affects 1 in 5 individuals, and is the most commonly diagnosed learning disability, said Sarah Sayko, the deputy director of the National Center on Improving Literacy. The group is federally funded and works to give educators and parents evidence-based information to help all children, including those with learning disabilities, learn to read.

Head began looking for curriculum geared toward helping dyslexic students, lessons to teach the brain how to process the written word. She began working with him at home and saw improvement right away.

"The biggest difference I saw immediately was not just in his academic skills, but in his self-esteem," said Head, "He stopped crying and he stopped saying he was stupid and started believing he was a normal kid."

That was more than six years ago. Head's anguish led her to join forces with other families in her state of Arkansas who have lived through similar experiences. They faced down an education establishment over reading instruction in the state.

"There's no need for any family to suffer what families have suffered through," said Audie Alumbaugh, who has a niece with dyslexia. Alumbaugh has led the group's effort to change reading instruction for every child in Arkansas. They pushed for laws to support reading instruction based on the science behind how the brain learns to read. It involves explicit, systematic instruction in phonics, teaching students all of the patterns of how sounds and letters go together.

"We absolutely know that this is the best way to teach students to read," said Sayko. Comprehensive phonics instruction was supported by a federally appointed National Reading Panel nearly two decades ago.

"So there's actual scientific evidence about how students learn to read, and it's largely been ignored," said Stacy Smith, an assistant commissioner at the Arkansas Department of Education. Smith said Arkansas is now wholeheartedly embracing this change in reading instruction for all students, not just those with learning disabilities. "I'm gonna tell you it's been a battle and an uphill climb," she said.

Around the country, parents with children who have dyslexia have been pushing for this kind of reading instruction. In Arkansas, lawmakers have passed at least eight laws in the past seven years. The state is changing everything, including dyslexia screening, reading instruction, and teacher training and licensing. It hopes to have all the pieces in place by the 2021-2022 school year.

The fight over reading instruction has been underway for decades. Some experts support this science-based approach, while others support what's called 'balanced literacy,' an approach that emphasizes exposure to books. Students get some phonics instruction, but not in the same systematic way.

The families behind the science-based instruction are convinced it will make a huge difference in Arkansas, which ranks in the bottom third of states nationwide in terms of reading levels.

"They've been doing it wrong all this time," said Alumbaugh, a former teacher herself. "We need to get this right for kids." ■

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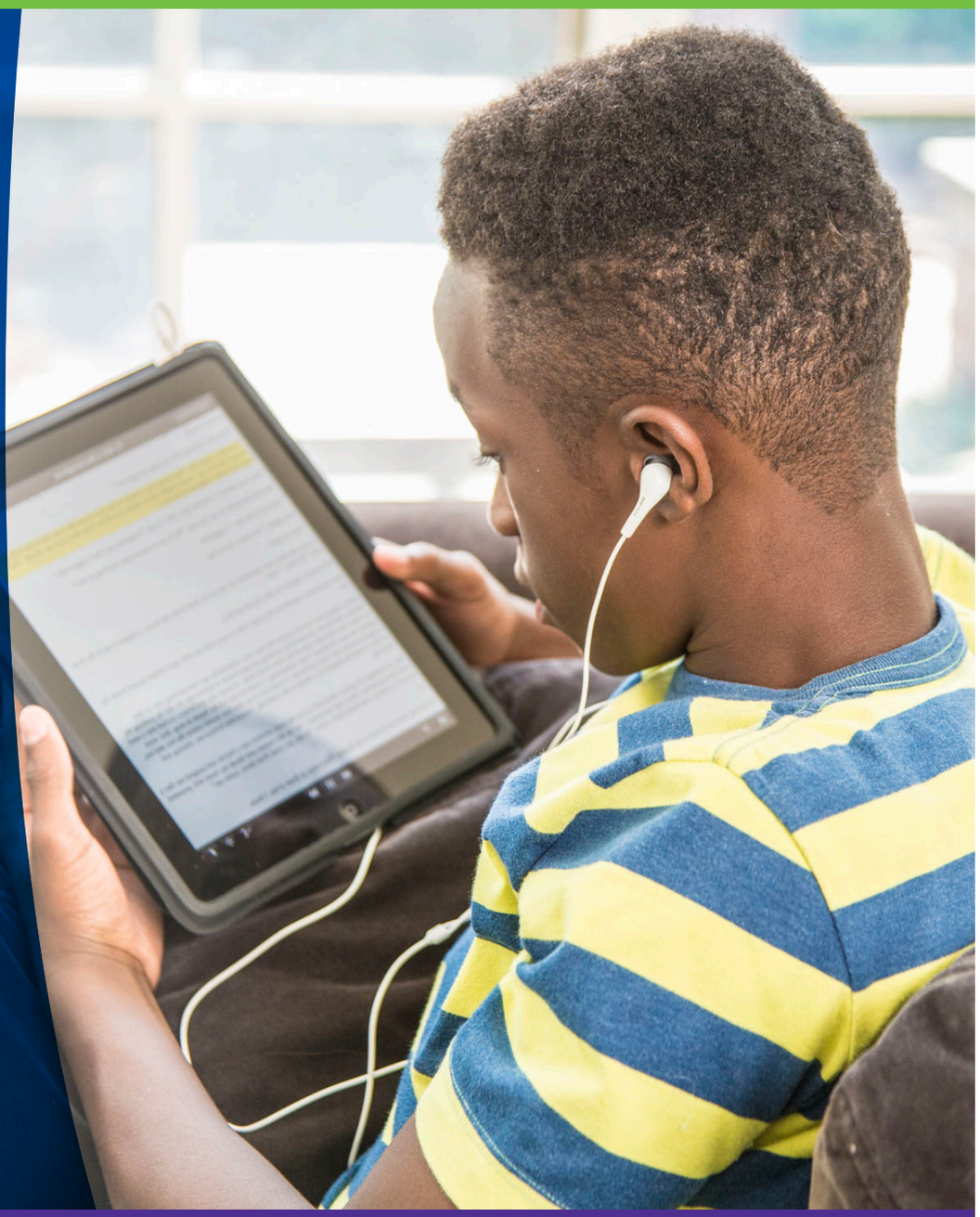

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Published May 29, 2019 in Education Week's On Special Education Blog

Most Classroom Teachers Feel Unprepared to Support Students With Disabilities

By Corey Mitchell

Less than 1 in 5 general education teachers feel "very well prepared" to teach students with mild to moderate learning disabilities, including ADHD and dyslexia, according to a new survey from two national advocacy groups.

The survey found that only 30 percent of general education teachers feel "strongly" that they can successfully teach students with learning disabilities—and only 50 percent believe those students can reach grade-level standards.

Overall, the findings depict a teaching corps that considers itself ill-equipped to meet the needs of millions of children with disabilities in the nation's public K-12 schools and clings to misconceptions about student learning and attention issues.

In compiling their report, the two groups—National Center for Learning Disabilities and Understood.org—surveyed a nationally representative sample of 1,350 teachers; convened teacher focus groups in California, Ohio, and North Carolina; researched teacher certification requirements in all 50 states; and distilled the findings from 150 academic articles to learn more about effective teaching methods for students with disabilities.

At least one-third of the respondents reported that they have not participated in professional development on serving the students with disabilities in their classrooms. (*Education Week* wrote about how many teachers lack training in how to meet the needs of students with disabilities for a special report on blind spots in professional development.)

In one of the more surprising findings, a quarter of the survey respondents indicated that they believe ADD/ADHD diagnoses result from poor parenting, evidence that "some teachers express beliefs suggesting they are unaware of scientific findings showing that learning disabilities and ADHD are based on differences in brain structure and function."

Overall, the survey respondents indicated the problems begin in teacher preparation programs, well before education students lead a classroom: Many teachers reported they were not required to take courses in working with students with disabilities or found that the courses they did take left them unprepared to work with all students. The work also details how states' policies for educator certification have set a "low bar" for preparing general educators to teach students with disabilities. According to the National Center for Learning Disabilities research, fewer than 10 states have specific coursework requirements for teaching students with mild to moderate learning disabilities.

—Getty

"In effect, almost every state has failed to bring their licensure or certification standards in line with our new reality: Every general education teacher will surely have students with these high-incidence disabilities in their classroom," the report finds.

The report's definition of mild to moderate learning disabilities includes: dyslexia, dysgraphia, dyscalculia, ADD, ADHD, processing disorders, or other language-based learning disabilities. The definition does not include students with autism spectrum disorders, oppositional defiant disorders, or unrelated emotional issues.

In an attempt to address some of the concerns general education teachers have, the report authors outline steps that teachers, school leaders, district leaders, families, and policymakers can take to improve education for students with learning disabilities and a glossary to help readers understand key terms. The recommendations include creating more time for collaboration among teachers and education specialists, focusing on family engagement, advocating for dual certifications in general education and special education, and prioritizing professional development opportunities for teachers and principals. The report also identifies eight key practices, including targeted instruction and universal design for learning, that educators can use in classrooms to boost the achievement of all students.

Differing Opinions on IEPs

The findings square with the conclusions of a survey released by the Council for Exceptional Children earlier this year. That survey found that special education teachers are concerned about the ability of general education teachers and supervisors to work with students who have disabilities.

Of the special education teachers who participated in the Council for Excep-

tional Children's survey, fewer than 15 percent thought their general education colleagues were highly prepared to work with students with disabilities.

Both sets of teachers felt they weren't given ample time to plan with peers and had questions about their ability to co-teach with colleagues.

The two surveys do highlight a key difference in how special education and general education teachers view IEPs: the special education teachers see the individualized education plans as essential documents that play a large role in determining student and teacher success; their general education colleagues are more likely to view IEPs as mere paperwork.

Of the general education teachers who participated in the National Center for Learning Disabilities and Understood survey, just 56 percent of teachers believed IEPs provide value to students, and just 38 percent believe IEPs improve their teaching.

"Focus groups and teachers surveyed both point to the challenges of remembering accommodations for each child and to the perception that IEPs and 504 plans often include accommodations or services that are not necessary," the report found.

That clashes with the findings from the Council for Exceptional Children survey, where respondents indicated that having adequate resources to meet student IEP requirements and the support of administrators during the IEP process were among the top three things that special education teachers need to be successful.

While general education teachers were pessimistic about their ability to work with students with disabilities, many of the survey respondents expressed an interest in learning how to better support them.

"When teachers felt negatively about inclusion, the feelings were driven by concerns and frustrations about their own ability to meet the students' needs," the report concludes. ■

Published September 10, 2018, in Education Week

What If a DNA Test Could Show How to Teach A Student With Dyslexia?

But some worry students could become stigmatized by results

By Sarah D. Sparks

There's personalized education. And then there's precision education.

The use of genetic information in health has opened vast new areas for medical research and treatments in the past decade, along with questions about how personal genetic information will be used and who will benefit. And debates over those potential benefits and concerns are starting to enter the education field.

The New Haven, Conn., school district is working with a team of education, genetics, and neuroscience researchers from Yale University in what may be the first attempt to design so-called "precision" gene-based education help for an academic disorder, dyslexia.

The controversial $20 million project is supported by the nonprofit Manton Foundation. As part of the project, more than 450 New Haven students who entered school with literacy scores in the bottom 20 percent were given four years of two intensive, widely used reading programs, Reading Recovery and Empower, to provide at least an hour of supplemental support five days a week each school year. But the researchers are not evaluating Reading Recovery or Empower. Instead, near the end of the study, the students spit into a test tube, and researchers sequence the students' full genome to look for differences between the students who responded to the intervention over the years, and those who continued to struggle in reading.

In the longer term, studying phenotypes—the interactions between genetic variations and environmental influences—may allow scientists to find the underlying mechanisms that cause dyslexia and develop more tailored approaches to correct it. In the nearer term, identifying specific variations of genes associated with a disorder may be used to create a tool to screen children for potential risk of developing dyslexia long before they start school, and allow for earlier reading interventions.

"Twenty-five percent of children don't respond to high-quality interventions now," said Yale pediatric geneticist Jeffrey Gruen, who leads the New Haven study. "The idea is that if you could come up with a panel that could identify a child at risk [of dyslexia] long before they got to school, you could track them and intervene at a very early age."

—Getty

That timing is important. Many schools already use behavioral screening tools for dyslexia—including a well-known one developed by fellow Yale dyslexia researcher Sally Shaywitz—yet only 18 states require universal screening for the disorder. An estimated 1 in 5 school-age children have the reading disability, but federal education statistics note that little more than 3 percent of such children receive special education services for any specific learning disability (including dyslexia).

An Earlier Red Flag

A significant percentage of students with dyslexia go undiagnosed until the late elementary or secondary grades—a challenge, Gruen said, because earlier intervention seems to be key. Prior studies have found about 25 percent of students below 4th grade still don't respond to otherwise highly effective reading interventions, and that ratio flips to 75 percent for students who are not identified until later grades.

Rebecca Tabak Roberts, a 2nd grade teacher at the Strong 21st Century Communications Magnet School in New Haven, was one of those students as a young child. She was bright and found teachers reluctant to refer her for testing even after her mother repeatedly raised concerns; she was finally diagnosed in late 4th grade.

Tabak Roberts' school is participating in the study, and in the past two years she has seen students in her class improve as a result of the interventions, but she said she hoped the genetic research would also bear fruit.

"I think that this can end up helping students in the long run. I really do," she said. "If this comes out to have a valid test to link our DNA and dyslexia, you better believe my children are going to end up taking that test before they go to preschool so they can get the attention they deserve."

Risk and Reward

Dyslexia, the most common learning disability, affects how students process and link spoken and written language. Educators and researchers have known for nearly a century that the reading disorder can run in families, but in the last 15 years, scientists have uncovered much more of the physical evidence for such a link.

"We are several steps behind where precision medicine is," Gruen said. "We've found maybe a dozen or so genes associated with reading, but ... we're just now starting to identify the variants [of those genes] that confer risk and starting to see enough fluid readers and non-fluid readers to estimate those risks" of developing dyslexia.

In part, genomics has been applied to education more slowly because it's more difficult to get access to genetic material for education studies than for cancer research, and there can be even more complex interactions between genetic and environmental influences in education than in medicine. But Gruen said, "probably the bigger barrier is we're all sensitized to the idea of using genetics [in education], because people have misused these terms in ways that are totally inappropriate."

In particular, such research raises the specter of eugenics-based racial discrimination in schools and stories like those of Henrietta Lacks, a black woman in Baltimore whose cancer cells were used without her consent to create HeLa, one of the foundational stem-cell lines in research.

While the New Haven study includes students of different racial groups, it draws students from the overwhelmingly black and Latino New Haven public schools. Gruen said parents explicitly opted to participate in the study after detailed explanations in English or Spanish. But one of the study's most powerful benefits for parents or the district itself—the opportunity for free, intensive, one-on-one reading support for the district's most struggling young students—also may make it difficult for potential participants to refuse.

Moreover, applying genetics to problems in health or education requires a very long view. Understanding the ways genes and environment enhance or inhibit each other remains incredibly tricky and complex, requiring massive (and often expensive) studies that may or may not improve on existing interventions. In a 2017 article in the Harvard Medical School's *Bioethics Journal*, researchers in precision medicine cautioned that it's easy to raise hopes prematurely, and argued that practitioners should not use "precision" in the form of genetic indicators to replace a more holistic view of people's background, contexts, and behavior.

Fear of Stigmatization

Susanne Haga, a bioethicist and associate professor of medicine at Duke University's Center for Applied Genomics and Precision Medicine said any potential genetic screening for dyslexia will have to balance the benefit of early identification with the potential harms; if early interventions don't keep pace with identification, for example, toddlers could be labeled as at-risk readers without much earlier recourse for parents.

Earlier this summer, some of those concerns bubbled up in New Haven, as incoming school board members expressed concern over the project during an annual renewal of the district's participation in the project. "If we have a strong research base [for existing reading interventions] ... are we setting up, with the DNA knowledge, a self-fulfilling prophesy that this person is going to have difficulty learning to read because he's genetically limited?" asked Ed Joyner, a school board member, during the meeting, adding, "I'm at a loss to understand why our district isn't utilizing those practices without the possibility of stigmatizing kids with DNA analysis."

The discussion also led to a blizzard of questions from parents and the public: Does testing change students' DNA? Can it be used to create independent stem-cell lines? Can the researchers sell the data after the study? Do researchers explain exactly what will happen to parents and get their explicit consent? (No, no, no, and yes.)

The board ultimately voted to continue its partnership with the project—which has provided about $1.5 million to the district in salary and benefits for six teachers trained in the interventions—but it added a new committee to brief all district parents, in addition to the researchers' briefing, before they decide to participate. It also updated data-privacy protections and asked Gruen's team to try to increase compensation for participating students, which is now $10 per reading assessment.

New Haven's mayor, superintendent, and school board did not respond to requests for comment.

At the end of the current seven-year study, the researchers will destroy the key that links the genetic data to individual students, but the anonymous data will continue to be used in follow-up studies on dyslexia—and potentially other research, if parents opt to allow that.

Olena Lennon's son Evan participated in both the intervention study and a smaller related brain-imaging study from 1st through 4th grades.

Researchers explained that her child's DNA would be collected as part of the study, but Lennon said, "It's never been an issue."

"I had no problem with the DNA [collection]," Lennon said. "I know that's sort of controversial, not just in this context but in general. But I still feel, you know, those risks must be taken, and we have to look at radical ways of doing research to come up with effective interventions."

Her son enjoyed the interventions—and even the often awkward brain-scanning sessions—and she said the study team sent regular updates on test results. Ultimately, Evan was never diagnosed with a formal reading disability, but Lennon said she saw progress while her son was participating in the interventions. "There are certain areas where he's had weaknesses ... but by the time he entered 3rd grade he was reading at grade level," she said.

Expanding Field

The debate is likely to grow. While school board members were debating whether to keep New Haven schools in the research study, the journal *Nature Genetics* was publishing the most massive study to date on how genes affect how long people will stay in school. International research teams from the Social Science Genetic Association Consortium and the commercial genetics site 23andMe analyzed the full genomes of more than 1.1 million people, including about 300,000 from the commercial site. While all people share more than 99 percent of their DNA, researchers found what they described as a "treasure trove" of more than 1,200 differences in that last 1 percent that are associated with educational attainment.

The genetic differences affected an array of functions, many involving how the brain communicates, but the study could not predict schooling trajectories for any individual child. However, it opened hundreds of new avenues to explore not just genes, but how home and school environments might exaggerate or reduce genetic differences. All that suggests the New Haven study could be just the tip of the iceberg to come in research.

Other, similar studies are also exploring genetic links to autism, attention deficit disorders, and Down syndrome, among other learning-related conditions. ■

—Emily Brunner Photography. Used with permission.

Kate Mayer (left) and Jamie Lynch (right) pose with another mother, Wendy Brooks.

Published April 3, 2019, in Education Week's Curriculum Matters Blog

Meet the Moms Pushing for A Reading Overhaul in Their District

By Stephen Sawchuk

Research on how kids learn to read has not always penetrated the teaching profession, though that's generally no fault of the teachers: It's that approaches to reading based on the mechanics of language don't appear to be consistently taught in teacher-preparation programs or in early reading professional-development opportunities.

While this has been a long-standing problem, it's entered the national agenda again ever since journalist Emily Hanford wrote a hard-hitting piece on the lack of systematic phonics instruction in the early grades.

But there's one thing that's changed since the last skirmish in the reading wars: The social-media revolution.

Now, platforms like Twitter and Facebook have exploded with parents, researchers, and educators advocating for a systematic approach to teaching reading. Among the most successful pushes has come from the dyslexia community: Grassroots groups like Decoding Dyslexia now claim chapters in all 50 states. And as of March 2018, 42 states have laws supporting dyslexic students that have put an emphasis on early screening for dyslexia and teaching that includes phonics instruction and phonemic awareness, according to the International Dyslexia Association.

One of the key points advocates for these approaches make is that, while phonics and phonemic awareness are mandatory for dyslexic students, they're also best practice for teaching all students.

But what does this kind of advocacy look like on the ground? Today we're featuring two mothers in the Tredyffrin/Easttown district in Pennsylvania who have started a local group, Everyone Reads, that has been urging their district to overhaul its literacy program. Whether you're inspired by their work—or view them as the "crazy moms" with an axe to grind—*Education Week* thought readers would find it enlightening to hear about their journey from worrying about their own kids' reading to advocating for a broad-based look at district literacy.

While parents advocating on behalf of their kids isn't new, doing so with such a specific idea in mind of what instruction should look like is rarer.

Jamie Lynch knew nothing about the "whole language" vs. phonics debate when her son started struggling to read. As she tried to figure out what to do to help, she found a lifeline when she discovered research on dyslexic students. Kate Mayer, a former elementary education teacher, came to the district with two children who struggled with reading, including one who had received an individualized education program for dyslexia. (Whole language is an approach that emphasizes learning through context and picture clues, while phonics focuses on the explicit teaching of sound-letter correspondences.)

The women's advocacy has been a bit of a thorn in the side of their district. They've written several open letters asking the district to rethink its curriculum and provide more classroom-level data on reading outcomes. Some parents are really supportive, and others see this as an attack on the district. The district, for its part, says it adheres to quality instructional practices, and it's also training a number of teachers in a longstanding reading approach that emphasizes systematic phonics and decoding.

This Q&A has been condensed and lightly edited for clarity.

Stephen Sawchuk: You both mentioned that there was this immediate sort of visceral discomfort with the word dyslexia when you approached the school about your kids' reading problems. Why do you think that is?

Kate: I think the uncomfortableness around the word from the professionals in the school was around resources. I think that there were some directives around using the word because then if it was used, the evidence, the research shows that there's a specific type of instruction that should be used and while they might provide that, they didn't want to commit to providing that officially.

The telling thing that happened to me, and I think this is when I moved here and I came in with my IEPs from Wilmette (Ill.) and I put them down on the table, and I had been through a big fight to get these beautiful documents. And I just looked at everyone and I said, "It's so nice to meet you. I just want to make sure that we're on the same page. And before we start, I want to use the word dysgraphia and dyslexia so that we know that we're talking about the same thing." And the school psychologist—who was a smart lady, she knew her stuff and does a very good job in terms of her analyses—she looked at me and she said, "Mrs. Mayer, you would not want us to use the word autism if your child had autism, would you? We don't use the word dyslexia. It doesn't help us. We want to talk about your child individually." And at that moment I was like, "Heck yes, I would want you to tell me my child has autism!"

Jamie: I was asking as innocently because I had a friend in high school that I helped who was dyslexic. So it was the only thing I knew about reading that could, you know, be a problem. So I asked, "Could it be dyslexia, what is dyslexia?" And I was immediately dismissed by the reading specialist: "We do not call it that anymore." And it was clear that there were going to be no more conversations about that. So that really, that was the impetus for me to think there was something else I needed to know. And I went home and started doing all the online research and found all the great places that had tons of information about dyslexia. [*The district rejects the claim that it is uncomfortable with the term dyslexia.]*

What kinds of resources did you look for and compile as you put together this group of parents that were struggling with these issues? How did you gather as much information as possible?

Kate: Well, I think that that was a journey, right? So both of us have been at this for five-plus years. And so there were several stops on the resource path and the first one was digging into all those online dyslexia resources that give you some of the evidence base, the research behind why kids respond to the type of instruction—the systematic, explicit instruction. And then as I moved through it, I started looking for communities of people who I could connect with. Because I think this is true for almost everyone who encounters a struggling reader: Every parent, there's this isolation you feel when you find out about it because the information coming from the school is not aligning with what you're learning outside of the school. And you're not always aware of other people who are going through it.

As you dig deeper and you're trying to understand the instructional piece in school, you start to encounter professional resources. That for me was an 'aha' moment because I was trying to reconcile the parent piece and the teacher piece, and came to the conclusion that I really had been a crappy reading teacher. And then, in the middle of the night when I was on Facebook searching for something, I encountered the Reading League. The Reading League is a group of teachers and other professionals, and they put together these videos of teachers talking about the moment they realized that they hadn't been taught the evidence base on early reading.

When did you tumble to the conclusion that your district was using balanced literacy and that it was not particularly effective for decoding for your kids?

Jamie: The fall of 2017 for sure, because we were digging and looking and reading. Like, why isn't this working? Why are 20 percent of our kids in general education reading support?

Kate: I was excited when we moved here because there was an actual program, and I came out of the [federal] Reading First era where we did a marriage of Open Court and Readers and Writers Workshop [*respectively, a phonics-based basal reading program and a balanced-literacy program*], and I was like, "Oh, we're going to come in and there's going to be some structure and all the teachers are going to be teaching similar things." And I quickly learned that for my 3rd grader there was no real phonics, phonemic awareness, or structure. Even in writing. I would say that was the other piece that was really telling to me—that there was no true writing curriculum.

Once you had this body of knowledge that you hadn't had before, how did you start looking at the specific curriculum? What was that process like?

Jamie: There was a group of teachers that came from the Mad River School district, in Ohio, and they had been teachers on assignment and were particularly interested in solving this problem. So they did a presentation on how they brought the right types of curriculum that supported all of the areas of development for readers and they talked about using this source, EdReports. So then we started looking at our curriculum on there. We found out that our curriculum is one of the [ones that was] all red [*signalling a poor rating.*]

Kate: It reconciled something for us, because all along the way we're supporting parents, we're meeting more and more parents going to meetings, all that kind of stuff. But many of the kids that we were meeting, including our own, have these discrepancies where they were super strong in terms of their comprehension

and their verbal ability, but their reading skills, their decoding, encoding, phonemic awareness, were not strong. And we heard often from our administration that, you know, we can't just give these kids this structured literacy [*which is phonics-based*] 'cause they'll all get bored. Everyone in the district will get bored. They're too high [performing].

And when we heard Mad River talk and we heard about the content-rich curriculum, that it was an 'aha' moment. It was like, holy moly, all kids are given access to content and high-level text or grade-level text at the same time as they're receiving the skill-based instruction. And it married those two things for us. And we were like, why the heck aren't we doing this? And we thought that it would be well received because we did keep hearing this [message]: "We can't just give them this skill stuff. It's boring, it's skill and drill." And we knew intuitively from our own experience with our kids and then also from what we had researched that it really was important for all kids to get this type of instruction, and beneficial even for high [performing] kids.

Can you lay out for me the components that you have been pushing for in your district, and what the response has been so far?

Kate: So I think the letter lays it out pretty explicitly, but in general, the part that's most important that we've been pushing for from the beginning is just more comprehensive training for our teachers and really good materials around that training. And I think that's the thing we've gotten most pushback on. We felt from the beginning that teachers didn't have this information and we've learned that it's not part of most teacher training programs. Pennsylvania actually has a higher number of structured-literacy [teacher-preparation] programs. I think we have five programs, but we don't have a ton of teachers who have participated in them. And so we've really been asking since the beginning for the administration to provide access.

We spoke about the curriculum piece. And then I think the other piece, the most important piece that we've pushed for is data. In the beginning we weren't saying, "Your reading programs stinks;" we were just saying we need to look at this and we want to look at the efficacy of the reading program, and the reading-support program. And the way that we would do that is by looking at benchmark data. You know: how well the students are growing. It's clear to us now that we are not going to see that data. It makes us concerned, very concerned.

Some teachers in your district are being trained in Orton-Gillingham, which is a traditional systematic, explicit decoding approach. So that's good, right?

Jamie: Well, it's good. This was not something we asked for. But it's really good because the kids who are in special ed., needing that intervention, now have something. The teachers are in the practicum now, so it's really new for everybody. What I understand is that the teachers are feeling really empowered about having that to be able to offer to kids. We strongly feel all the teachers really want the kids to learn.

Kate: We have in Pennsylvania our dyslexia pilot program. We have, I think, six schools participating in a districtwide program where they introduced a structured literacy into the element, into the lower grades, like K-3. They've trained a lot of teachers in Orton-Gillingham or structured literacy for the lower grades. But what they said is if you do it in a vacuum with only a small group of people and those people are not going into the classroom, and the rest of the people have not had experience in the evidence base, understanding why it's important and how it helps all students, you don't get the bang for your buck. I think that's the piece that we're missing because this hasn't been a cultural or a systemic change in terms of grabbing onto the evidence base and saying, yes, this is something that works for all kids. It's still this one-at-a-time kind of approach. We know a lot of parents know their kids would benefit even in the gen.-ed. classroom.

Q: Do you ever get sort of the pushback—I think this happens a lot in well-resourced districts—the sense of, "Go away parents, we know what we're doing, you're too invested in this, chill out"? The whole sort of helicopter-mom pushback. Do you ever get that?

Jamie: We get that at the higher level, like the administrative level a bit. I will say, as a parent I don't get that from any of my teachers. My teachers have always been collaborative and really interested in what I brought, even for my 5th grader when he was younger, I brought some ideas that had been recommended for intervention and the teacher was like, "I will try to find time to do that." And she did. So it's not that. But I do think there's a narrative sometimes that happens about us.

Kate: I think that we do get some of that from parents who don't know. We have different reactions from different parents and sometimes we have both reactions from the same parents, because those parents then realized, holy moly, my kid is, my kid has happening to them what you're talking about and I need your help. And now I get it. But the folks who aren't on board are aligned or have similar responses to the school board, in terms of: "We're the best district in the state; how could you say this about us? And you know, our teachers are the best." And we really try hard to, you know, share our support of the teachers. But the open letters have made it a little more tenuous, in terms of the way some parents are responding, and those are parents who don't have struggling readers or don't know they have struggling readers. We had one incident where someone actually responded negatively because they were selling their house and they said, "Please don't put that stuff on your web page."

Q: Let's turn to some practical kinds of takeaways. What kinds of questions should parents whose kids are having problems decoding, or just problems with early literacy, be asking? What should they be asking of their kids' teachers and administration?

Jamie: Well, a really easy question that they could ask is for progress-monitoring data so that they could see how their kid is growing and what the protocol is that the school's following for monitoring their kids. So many, many schools do that and they give a report and it helps them to understand what area is the struggle and then they can ask the question, how is that particular need being supported and are there more concerns? We know that in 1st grade, if you looked at a chart of numbers, that's where like the big growth happens for most kids. And that's also where struggling readers get really left behind.

And then the other thing is to see what local resources they can find. I mean, we find we have to [help] the parents a lot to find resources to get their kids that instruction in those areas of weakness before too much time passes. Because the later that intervention happens, it's so much harder. And you know, in our work supporting parents, one thing that has come up is the emotional impact for kids and parents, families of kids who are anxious, who have behavior problems, who are having depression, who are having self-harming behavior, and, as they get older, that the impact of those are more challenging.

The Importance of Automaticity

By Terrie Noland

> Automaticity is necessary in everything we do in order to move to higher-order thinking skills and perform tasks flawlessly.

Do you remember when you first learned to drive and how it took all your senses to focus on what you were doing? When teaching my son to drive, he couldn't listen to the radio or even have people talking in the car as it took all of his attention and brain power to drive safely. At that stage of our learning process, we have not mastered the "automaticity" of the skills needed to drive a car, but with practice and confidence, our lower-level processing becomes automatic. The same is true in reading.

The Importance of Automaticity in Reading

Automaticity is necessary in everything we do in order to move to higher-order thinking skills and perform tasks flawlessly.

This is true in the classroom as well. If students cannot easily perform lower-level reading processes such as phonemic awareness, phonics and decoding with automaticity, they will find it more difficult to free up the mental capacity to concentrate on and absorb the material they are reading. In this scenario, there is a greater likelihood that gaps will occur in the learning process.

This is the situation faced by many struggling readers, especially those with dyslexia and other learning differences.

Reading, A Multifaceted Activity

Research suggests that the act of reading is multifaceted:

1. An explicit skill-building activity necessary to access print
2. An ability to comprehend text that comes from accurate word decoding

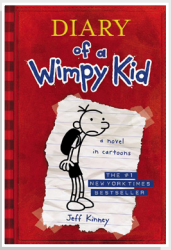
While researchers debate the definition of finite reading skills such as fluency, there is a consensus that reading does involve understanding written text and constructing meaning from that text.

What happens if teachers only pay attention to one reading definition? Let's test this.

A TWO-PART READING TEST

Part One

Read the following excerpt from *Diary of a Wimpy Kid*, a popular series for ages 7-13, and a book with a Lexile level of 950, which is about a late sixth-grade level:



Today is the first day of school, and right now we're just waiting around for the teacher to hurry up and finish the seating chart. So I figured I might as well write in this book to pass the time.

If you mastered the skills of decoding and fluency, pulling words from the page by attaching sounds to letters and reading with correct rate (automaticity and prosody), then you are likely to make sense of the text. Your brain met the automaticity of the lower level-processes.

Part Two

Now, read the following excerpt from a medical journal about developmental dyslexia, which is written at a significantly higher Lexile level:

Two female subjects showed multiple instances of focal myelinated conical infraction, with neuronal loss, gliosis, and myelination of the scars affecting perisylvian and cerebral arterial border-zone territories. (Galaburda et al., 1985, p. 223)

Did you exhaust brainpower to decode all the technical words in this text? Did it slow you down? Did you try context clues or isolating root words and affixes to decipher the vocabulary? Did you feel less intelligent and confident when you read the second passage than the first?

Cognitive Load Theory

This is an example of cognitive load theory, which suggests that our working memory can only handle two or three pieces of information at a time. The limitations of working memory overloads the finite skills of full comprehension.

In the time it took to read the first passage to the second, your intelligence did not change. What changed was your ability to decode content and understand what you read. In the second passage, your brainpower had to drive into overload to use your lower-level processes.

Bridging the Reading Automaticity Gap

Dr. Maryanne Wolf, in her book, Proust and the Squid, builds a visual story of what reading is about by describing the precepts of reading as defined by Marcel Proust, "Proust saw reading as a kind of intellectual sanctuary, where human beings have access to thousands of realities they might never encounter or understand otherwise."

> **Reading fluency helps to reduce the cognitive demand and thus makes text comprehension easier for the reader.**
>
> ***Robert S. Rueda***

We need to help struggling readers find a bridge to content while being taught the lower level processes of reading. Many educators use an evidence-based structured literacy program, which is crucial in order for students to develop lower level processes; it takes time, however, often as much as one or two years. In the meantime, it is necessary to provide access to content so they don't fall behind on grade level expectations and curriculum.

How Do We Support Struggling Readers?

Just as any young child can comprehend above their ability to read, so can a student that is struggling to read. They require a tool to help them automatize the decoding process and to provide reinforcement of skill building in the lower level processes of reading. Giving students access to human-read audiobooks is a reliable way to ensure that the two key reading processes—cognition and comprehension—are occurring simultaneously.

The Learning Ally Audiobook Solution

If reading automaticity is an issue for your struggling readers, the *Learning Ally Audiobook Solution* can help you bridge the reading gap by providing access to the books your students want to read and the grade-level curriculum they need to read. This proven reading accommodation is available is an easy-to-absorb human-read audiobook format.

Terrie Noland, C.A.L.P.

Vice-President of Educator Leadership & Learning

Learning Ally

Terrie's greatest strengths lie in her ability to motivate and inspire enthusiasm in educators to be passionate supporters of the diverse needs of students. She has more than 25 years of experience as both a motivational leader and developer of content for educators and administrators and, over the past six years, has been focused on the pedagogical practices needed to create effective environments for struggling readers and students with dyslexia. Terrie is certified as an Academic Language Practitioner and is currently working toward a Ph.D. in Literacy with an emphasis in Educational Leadership from St. John's University.

About Learning Ally

Learning Ally is a leading nonprofit education solutions organization dedicated to equipping educators with proven solutions that help struggling learners reach their potential. Our range of literacy-focused offerings for students Pre-K to 12th grade and catalog of professional learning allow us to support more than 99,000 educators across the US. The Learning Ally Audiobook Solution is our cornerstone award-winning reading accommodation used in more than 17,500 schools to help students with reading deficits succeed. Composed of high quality, human-read audiobooks and a suite of teacher resources to monitor and support student progress, it is designed to turn struggling readers into engaged learners.

Kate: I think if I were giving a parent advice about early literacy and school, my biggest piece of advice would be to trust your gut. So you're with your kid until they get to kindergarten. And if you notice something that just doesn't seem right or they seem to struggle a lot of times, you're right and the school just might not be equipped at that point to identify that need. But you can and there are a lot of resources outside of the school that can help you to support their early literacy skills, specifically phonemic awareness. You know, letter identification, things like that that you can do immediately, and by doing that, and even if they didn't need it, you're supporting them at a time where their brain is most malleable and they'll get the biggest impact.

And you still need to work with the school to figure it out. But sometimes the different agendas or the different places that the school and the parents are coming from just aren't aligned at that time. It's not always right, but I think there are a lot of things that parents can do at home. If you have the behavioral problems where they're not wanting to practice sight words when they're 5, there probably is some curricular mismatch and you can support that at home.

Issues with early reading affect kids from all different ethnic groups and socioeconomic backgrounds, but you're in a fairly well-resourced district. So what would you say about the need for this to happen across the board?

Kate: I think that there are challenges everywhere with this issue. One thing that I think would be different for us that would be harder for districts or parents that are less funded: Gosh, we have all sorts of time. Jamie and I don't have jobs so we're able to dig in and spend a lot of time understanding the research. So I think having informed parents, while districts might not like it, is helpful in giving [the district] quick access to information. Underresourced districts have to get that information from other places. ... I think the difference is that parents don't always have the information because they have other demands on their time.

Q: And then they might not be able to supplement with tutoring if they can't afford it.

Kate: That piece I think is super important. I mean we're trying to think about ways to support parents who in our districts can't afford the outside help. ... In less resourced districts, what we've seen in terms of the curriculum is it seems like some of them are making changes and sharing data and all of those things because they have to [because of high levels of scrutiny.] We don't have to because it looks like our district's doing well, because we have all these high [achievers] keeping them up. And then I think for parents, the social media piece is huge. Even if you only have a few moments, if you're on Twitter or you're on Facebook, you can get some of this information pretty quickly. It's pretty easily accessible. ■

COMMENTARY

Published October 7, 2019, in Education Week

Stop Punting Dyslexia to Teachers. It's Everyone's Responsibility

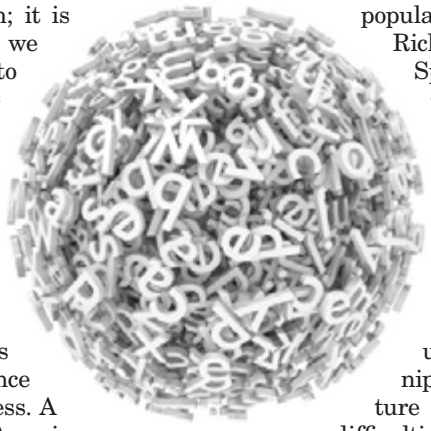
Reading disorders are more than just a classroom problem

By Molly Ness

Tsih si ont waht dyslexia lokso lkie. Most likely, you were able to read the previous sentence. A powerful pattern seeker, your brain ignored the errors and instead sought out pre-existing logical patterns to reconstruct a meaningful sentence. Too many children, however, will never be able to complete such a task. For them, the joy of reading—with its boundless adventures, liberating knowledge, and compelling characters—remains an unattainable goal.

For tens of millions of people in the United States, learning to read is rife with struggle and frustration. Estimates vary, but the International Dyslexia Association suggests that as many as 15 to 20 percent of the population present with some symptoms of dyslexia.

Struggling to read is more than an educational problem; it is a societal one. As such, we cannot punt dyslexia to the purview of teachers alone. Overcoming dyslexia requires a confluence of players.



—Getty

Despite many common misconceptions, dyslexia is not seeing letters or words backwards, reversing or inverting letters. It is not linked to intelligence or attributable to laziness. A 2011 paper from the American Academy of Pediatrics states unequivocally that dyslexia is not rooted in visual problems. Nor is dyslexia a life sentence for failure; several dyslexics in popular culture (including Richard Branson, Steven Spielberg, and Whoopi Goldberg) attribute their reading differences as a key ingredient in their success.

Instead, dyslexia is a neurobiological reading disability. A child with dyslexia may have difficulties understanding and manipulating the sound structure of language, including difficulties in recognizing rhyme, breaking words into syllables, blending

sounds together to form words, or connecting letters to their associated sounds. A domino effect of literacy challenges often occurs, including problems in decoding unfamiliar words, slow and inaccurate reading, and poor writing and spelling.

When children struggle to read, they suffer in more than academics. Children with reading disorders are more likely to face emotional and behavioral challenges, including depression, anxiety, and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder.

Today, dyslexia is a highly contested topic in social media conversations, mainstream press, and even state legislatures. There are battles among teachers quarreling over best instructional strategies, school district leaders pointing the finger of blame at poor teacher preparation, scientists nonplused that their findings have not translated into classroom practice. What has been forgotten here is the people it affects the most: the children. There are many stakeholders in this fight to overcome dyslexia. As a group, we need to push past our ideological positions so that we can collaborate to minimize the stigma and struggles of the disorder.

At an immediate level, children with dyslexia need support and advocacy from vocal parents who fight tirelessly on their behalf. They need knowledgeable pediatricians who recognize the warning signs as early as age 3 and school psychologists who follow guidelines set forth by the American Psychological Association in identifying dyslexia under the umbrella term "specific learning disorder." Also essential are general education teachers, who understand both the art and science of multifaceted reading instruction, and special education teachers, who provide high-quality instruction and targeted interventions. School social workers and counselors can help students with dyslexia navigate the social-emotional challenges associated with reading difficulties.

Additionally, children with dyslexia need peripheral support from visionary professionals, including school leaders who prioritize meeting the needs of all children, teacher-preparation programs that effectively train teachers, professional organizations who advocate for them, insurance companies that reimburse families for the high costs associated with advocating for their child, employers who support time off for parents to attend school-based meetings, and translators to communicate with parents from diverse language backgrounds.

Research groups and think tanks must push forward scientific brain-based advances. Publishing companies and curriculum designers should prioritize best practices over profit. Colleges and universities should continue to provide support services for students with dyslexia while they pursue higher education. Technology companies can expand digital tools to assist struggling readers. Lawyers can defend every student's right to a free appropriate public education. State legislatures should prioritize funding for universal early screening, effective intervention, and teacher training.

When we come together to address our nation's disservice to growing readers, we have the potential to prevent reading failure. Most importantly, we will help *all children* along the path towards lifelong reading. ■

Molly Ness is a teacher educator, a reading clinician, and an author of three books in the field of education. She is an associate professor in childhood education at Fordham University.

COMMENTARY

Published March 19, 2019, in Education Week Teacher

Explicit Phonics Instruction: It's Not Just for Students With Dyslexia

By Kyle Redford


Getty

"When we know better, we do better." There is something forgiving and medicinal about that teaching mantra.

I am regularly realizing that I could have taught something more effectively or that I should have been more culturally responsive in my language or practices. Content becomes outdated or is later revealed to be incomplete or inaccurate. Some teaching memories haunt me so much that I have had fantasies about finding ways to apologize to former students for the cringeworthy lessons they've endured.

I recently had a wake-up call around reading instruction, and determined I

need to intellectually embrace something that I have long suspected: While dyslexics clearly need robust reading instruction (often more specialized and intensive than their peers), their needs are not as distinct from non-dyslexics as I have previously advocated.

This realization—spurred by the extensive research and reporting in the radio documentary *Hard Words*, by APM Reports' Emily Hanford—is particularly painful because it is connected to dyslexia advocacy work that I have poured myself into over the past decade. While passionately advocating for the dyslexic's unique instructional needs in articles and essays, presentations and films, I realize now that my advocacy was perpetuating a false distinction when it comes to best practices for whole-classroom instruction.

Scientists have figured out that learning to read is not natural—it's not like learning to talk or walk, in which all you need is immersion or interaction with your environment. Without structured, evidence-based reading instruction with phonics at its core, many students will struggle with reading and spelling. If teachers are not taught the science of reading (and if schools and districts do not employ evidence-based curricula), many students are deprived of explicit and systematic instruction in how written language works.

In this regard, dyslexics are the canaries in the coal mine. It is no wonder their struggles and suffering have grabbed more attention—they are more significant and severe. However, there are many students, ones who don't struggle with a neurological difference, who I suspect may present as dyslexic because they have simply never been taught the proper skills they need to learn to read, or at least read well.

Effective reading instruction requires teachers to go beyond convincing their students of the importance and wonders of reading. Merely repackaging whole language teaching, which was popularized in the 1980s but has not held up to scientific scrutiny, by adding a sprinkle of phonics here and there is not enough. While reading instruction is enriched by providing book choice, read alouds, and ample time for independent reading—hallmarks of the whole language approach and what's now called "balanced literacy"—those elements alone will not teach early elementary students to decode words. My own intelligent dyslexic child, common sense, decades of research, and 30 years of teaching have taught me that students who don't know how to decode never become great readers. There is no magic.

It does not make sense to design our reading programs based on our students who learn to read effortlessly, without much direct instruction, and then assume the rest will manage to teach themselves to read simply through exposure to books. Experts estimate that maybe half of all kids will learn to read with broad instruction that includes just a bit of phonics. There may be some percentage (perhaps 5 percent) who will learn to read no matter what. Those students seem to "get" the code with very little teaching. But most kids benefit from sequenced, explicit, code-based instruction to learn how to read words. Students with dyslexia desperately need it, and certainly no one is harmed by it. In fact, even those who learn to read without explicit phonics instruction would likely be better spellers, and perhaps also better readers, with it.

It is time to start looking at reading problems as breakdowns in teaching. We can't hold students responsible for learning skills that we do not explicitly teach them.

A "survival of the fittest" approach to reading creates a profound equity issue. Currently, when students struggle with reading, they often have to go outside the system to gain access to evidence-based reading instruction. Learning to read should not be contingent on parental savvy or financial resources. Weak reading instruction is a betrayal of every student's potential, but most especially those without alternatives.

After listening to *Hard Words*, I felt guilt and regret about how I had previously framed much of my own thinking and advocacy. I even momentarily considered slinking off into a corner and staying quiet. But the stakes are too high for that. Children's potentials are more important than how this conversation reflects on my own credibility or any fears of possible collegial backlash. My friends in the dyslexia advocacy world may be disappointed that dyslexia is no longer the sole focus of my attention. My teaching colleagues (virtual and real) may be made uncomfortable by my critique of the inadequate teaching that is often peddled as balanced literacy, but lacks a strong early phonics foundation. I accept that.

As uncomfortable as it is to admit my blind spots, it seems essential to the work. In the case of reading instruction, if I am going to ask my fellow teachers to bravely (and critically) look at their own instructional practices and make necessary shifts, I need to name my own mistakes and misunderstandings in this area. Every child needs and deserves access to evidence-based reading instruction, not only dyslexic ones. ■

Kyle Redford is a 5th grade teacher at Marin Country Day School, a K-8 school in the San Francisco Bay Area. She is also the education editor for the Yale Center for Dyslexia and Creativity.

COMMENTARY

Published December 5, 2018, in Education Week's Special Report: Special Education: Practice & Pitfalls

A Special Education Student Speaks: Dealing With the Ups and Downs

Frustration with lack of consistency

—Courtesy of Griffith-Tager family

By Ella Griffith-Tager

I was diagnosed with dyslexia at the end of 1st grade—they called it a reading disorder.

Nothing much changed at first except for some one-on-one time with my teacher. Then in 2nd grade I got an individualized education program and started getting pulled out for special education classes in reading and writing. Things kind of got better because I had a patient teacher.

In 3rd grade I went to a new school, and it was too loud and I didn't get help in other classes, but my special education teacher was one of the best teachers I ever had. She was helpful, attentive, and open to new ideas. I took breaks and played games, which I think is age-appropriate for 3rd grade. I still left at the end of the year because of the school environment and changed to another school in the district.

This new school's climate was way calmer, but then I encountered a special education teacher who did not work well with special ed kids. She would constantly say "you can do it," which actually can be harmful to kids with dyslexia, because instead of changing the way she was teaching something (that didn't work) she kept encouraging us to try harder, even though I learn differently. I started rejecting going to school because, frankly, the work environment was becoming toxic for me. My parents pulled me out, and I was homeschooled for the second half of the year.

In 5th grade we moved to a new state and another new school. Overall the school was different to me. An assistant teacher kept breaking my IEP and did not listen to my polite suggestions about how I could learn better.

Middle school was another new school, and 6th grade was great. The whole school had a policy that helped out 6th graders more than any other grade, so I got more help in each of my classes, and I was being pulled out constantly for special education. The teacher was very caring and always attended to my emotional needs before my academic needs, which actually helped me academically.

But in 7th grade the help was lacking, and I did not want to go to school again. I was struggling in all the subjects, so I was pulled out and home-schooled again for the second part of the year. And now I am in 8th grade in another new school that is an alternative school. That is working wonderfully for me because I get one-on-one tutoring, creative classes such as 3D printing, screenwriting, and Psychology 101. The school only has 45 kids, and I feel I will stay here because of the calm environment, constant attentiveness, and classes that stimulate my brain.

Since I was diagnosed at a young age I always knew I had dyslexia, but it still affects me. I think that dyslexia is more than the definition, because how people react shapes how you react to your own dyslexia.

In the past, my main problem in classes was that I only get accommodations in reading and math. I feel that reading pops up everywhere—in social studies we constantly read history books, and sometimes my school would have an assistant teacher to help me read with a group.

I wish when I told teachers that I was dyslexic they would not change their voice tone—or make a face or seem to pity me—because I learn differently. It is not like it is stopping me from learning anything, and if it does I will find a way. And it is part of their job to help me find those ways and not cast off the ways that seem odd, like doodling or taking breaks, not wanting to read out loud, etc.

The people who tested me would tell me what I needed to learn—methods—but when I translated this to teachers, they made me feel like I was asking something extra of them. It made me feel that my needs were petty in that I was putting too much on the teachers around me. But, I learn how I learn. Don't compare me to how another dyslexic kid learns because each one of us is different. It is not just black or white, and make sure you ask me, "Will this work for you?" when it is something new.

Ella Griffith-Tager, 13, is an 8th-grader at LightHouse Holyoke in Holyoke, Mass.

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