

# THE DYSLEXIA REVOLUTION

Quarterly Newsletter from The Dyslexia Initiative



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## A MESSAGE FROM THE FOUNDERS

Summer time is over and fall is in full swing. School is back, in whatever form you opted for as a family. Hopefully everyone is falling into some kind of routine we all depend on so well during this time of year, even if you're still working from home. Additionally, here we are in October, which is when we all stop and celebrate Dyslexia Awareness Month, and that's what this particular issue of our newsletter is dedicated to.

Here at The Dyslexia Initiative we're diving into more to the details that make up educating and empowering our community of parents. We will keep talking about assistive technology, the science of reading, self esteem, the law and advocacy, your rights as a parent, your children's rights as a child with dyslexia, and many other things in between.

We will keep having conversations and reading books and exploring all of the rabbit holes of information that help bring enlightenment and awareness, and continue to share what we learn with you.

And, as with all times and all things, we just want to remind everyone to breathe. Life definitely isn't getting any easier, and the mental stress on us all is still ever present. I know I definitely feel it in my day to day life, and sometimes I forget to focus on the good, especially when so much is bad. As I told a friend the other day though, we have to try to hold onto the joy that life shows. It may be hard to see, but it is there. Our dyslexia struggle is big and daunting and we're talking about our children, but don't forget to hug and laugh and cuddle and take joy too. It's those moments that fill our tanks and keep us all moving forward.

-Ashley, Chontae, and Julie



# DYSLEXIA AWARENESS MONTH

BY: ASHLEY ROBERTS

There was a great meme that I saw last October that said, "October may be dyslexia awareness month, but dyslexia exists in January, February, March, April, May, June, July, August, September, November and December as well. Every month is Dyslexia Awareness Month." Needless to say, I love the meme, because it's true, every month is Dyslexia Awareness Month because in my life and in so many others, every day is Dyslexia Awareness Day.

I like having a dedicated month because it is important, as it is with so many things, to take a pause and acknowledge, celebrate and discuss all things dyslexia, and I'm cool with it being October because I love the month since it harkens fall, the coming holidays and a time in general where I hope the whole world slows down and savors life. It's a positive thing to have a month dedicated to banners in schools, proclamations across our cities and states, and conversations near and far to advance the understanding of dyslexia.

But, the thing is, I can't tell if it has an overall impact on actually changing the educational landscape for our children, and here's the reason why I say that. As an example, there's a school district, which shall remain unnamed, that holds a parents dyslexia awareness night, where they bring in a quality key note speaker and then offer several break out sessions. Overall, it is a quality session, truly, but the reality is the session is purely lip service. It was a way to lift up a banner and say, "Hey! We celebrate dyslexia! Look at how awesome we are!" The reason I say this is that getting a dyslexia diagnosis within this district is extremely challenging, accommodations are slowly stripped away, and the curriculums given as remediation are overwhelmingly sub par.

The sad reality is our public school system holds remediation to the child's intelligence and capability level (which is full and complete remediation) as a mythical unicorn that can never be caught, but we know this to be wildly untrue. Our dyslexic children can and do learn to read, and can and do read with amazing ability, on par with their "normative" peers. It is incredibly short sighted to believe they can't. To believe so is to believe that dyslexia is a disability, not just a difference in how the brain learns to read. In fact it forces it to be a disability for the rest of the person's life.

I came across another quote, which is profoundly true. "Dyslexia is only a gift if you are not born poor." This was stated by Dr. Julie Washington, a professor and the program director of Communication Sciences and Disorders in the College of Health and Human Development at Georgia State University. Her research focus is language development and language disorders in African American children at the time of school entry and emergent literacy skills of high-risk preschoolers.

Think about the truth in that statement, then think about this. The definition of dyslexia is a definition of privilege.

As Emily Hanford stated in her recent podcast, "What the Words Say" when you walk into a poor school in a poor community, one cannot discern a child not being given adequate opportunity, meaning both literacy enrichment at home as well as effective classroom instructional opportunities, which the quality of can be debated in poorer schools, from those with a learning challenge. We know for a fact that structured literacy (SL) is the great equalizer. When SL is the mainstay of educational instruction in our schools, the question of how literacy rich one's home is, doesn't matter, but when that opportunity is not given to our children because Balanced Literacy is the mainstay of our educational curriculums across the country, those children in poorer schools are left that much further behind. You deny the learning challenged children the right to be identified, perpetually denying them of FAPE, because your entire student population is denied FAPE. Given enough time this becomes, and is, a multi-generational illiteracy problem that we have willingly perpetuated, and is further evidence that a dyslexia diagnosis is one of privilege.

To be born to a middle or upper class family means access to private tutors and other therapies for remediation, at the expense of the family on a personal level in both time and money. The schools then get to continue their poor methods, their denial, and their determination to define dyslexia remediation as a mythical unicorn that cannot be achieved. They get to continue to say, dyslexia is a disability, and they get to keep ensuring that it is to multiple generations of children, all the while taking credit for the family's personal efforts.





Additionally, the laws that are being passed are great efforts, and some more than others, but I think most advocates will still acknowledge they're not enough, through the fault of NO ONE that is actually fighting for them. The uphill battle against those that oppose literacy in this country is a steep one. Fortunately there is significant precedence of winning real change against unprecedented and determined odds.

And that's what this comes down to. It is in that precedent that you find the real beauty of dyslexia awareness month.

For each person that joins the fight, that's one more voice standing for the equity that literacy provides to all; that's one more person who stands for all of our children to be taught to read in the known and proven methods of how the brain learns to read; that's one more person who stands for the truth that dyslexia doesn't have to be a disability, and that our children are not less than, are not unteachable, are not unworthy of an education.

To those who simply pay lip service while failing to actually teach our children, to those who sit in 504 and IEP meeting after meeting and proclaim their methods and trainings to be amazing things, to those who willfully deny time after time again, to those who refuse to say the words dyslexia, dysgraphia and dyscalculia, to those who bully and threaten parents, who gaslight advocates, who play games with IDEA and FAPE out of spite that a parent had the temerity to push back against their denial, to those who pay lip service time and time again and pretend like they're celebrating dyslexia awareness and working to educate our children, I have a few things to point out to you.

- 1) Dyslexia is a General Education problem. Until you refuse to continue using Balanced Literacy techniques in the General Education classroom, you will never truly be servicing your dyslexic students, or any others for that matter.
- 2) Parents are not stupid. Clearly you assume the stupidity level of the masses is significantly high, but more and more people are realizing we have a significant and GROWING illiteracy crisis in this country, and the educational system is the one perpetuating it. Parents are figuring this out in droves, so be wary.
- 3) The days of violating parental rights and authority are coming to a swift and joyous end. For those tongue in cheek pom pom sessions trying to "raise awareness" while you continue to deny, know that won't last much longer. You're going to have to put those pom poms down and do the right thing.
- 4) Teachers are not at fault, and are just as much of a victim as our children are by the failed curriculums, and they're figuring that out, if they don't already know, as well. You sold them a bundle of false goods in their university programs, hold fun professional development parties where they might get a selfie with the writer of that program, and encourage them to go back to their schools and spread the good word. You want them to believe parents are the enemy and are uniformed and don't know what we're talking about. You push them to judge our children from a behavioral perspective and dismiss their challenges as anything less than an emotional disturbance problem, then blame the parent for not reading to them while then asking the child to pick a "just right" book. It's hard to stand up against the one who signs your paycheck, and be a voice for change. The movement is happening though. We will get laws to protect them too. Wait, there is the whistleblower law....

What this boils down to is a growing movement, and I for one am ever more empowered to see it grow. I love the level of communication and awareness that is happening every single day. I love that the curriculum masters of Balanced Literacy are scared. I love that every time Emily Hanford opens her mouth more golden goodness is said and the spot light of knowledge is shone in the darkest corners of your world.

Education is supposed to be about the children. The science is real, and all children can learn how to read and read well, and frankly, the dyslexia parents are not afraid to hold the mantle of literacy high and march forward to make the necessary changes happen. We're not afraid to be the champions for literacy, and that is what dyslexia awareness is really about. This is the #DyslexiaRevolution, and I'm loving every moment, in October and beyond!

# TIME TO BURN THE BOAT

BY: FAITH BORKOWSKY

It has been twenty years since the National Reading Panel (NRP) issued its April 2000 report, "Teaching Children to Read," which summarized the importance of evidence-based reading instruction. As mandated by the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, the federal Reading First initiative allocated massive amounts of money to Title 1 Schools to help disadvantaged students in grades kindergarten through third grade. The money funded programs, materials, and assessment tools, and provided coaches and professional development aligned with the NRP's findings. Reading First was supposed to be a turning point in education after years of stagnating reading scores, and I was proud to do my part as a regional reading coach, providing embedded professional development to teachers, paraprofessionals, and administrators on Long Island. Unfortunately, Reading First did not produce the intended results, as twenty years later we are still talking about the same issues.



Interested parties came up with various theories to account for Reading First's demise: too much emphasis on phonics; not enough attention to vocabulary and comprehension; the marginalization of content area subjects; no attention to writing; and so on. In other words, it was argued, instruction based on "Scientifically-Based Reading Research" (SBRR), the premise underpinning Reading First, was not the solution to the growing literacy problem in this country. My experience working in the trenches, however, left me with a firm conviction that such arguments missed the mark. While the pundits and analysts may have viewed data after the fact, they had no way of knowing just how SBRR was actually implemented in the schools, a frequent problem when looking at just numbers. In my view, attributing Reading First's lack of success to perceived pedagogical deficiencies in an SBRR approach revealed a lack of nuance and understanding of the real-world resistance the initiative faced from the inception.

The Reading First grant was dedicated, first and foremost, to bringing SBRR to "low performing" schools. Not surprisingly, many educators confided in me that they viewed the grant as a "booby prize" and resented that they were being perceived as bad teachers in need of "fixing." From those teachers' perspectives, Reading First was punitive, which made it more difficult for them to embrace the coaching and new ideas. Even worse, many of the administrators and teachers in Reading First schools had the same schooling and training as their counterparts in schools without the grant. More affluent school districts were not requiring their teachers to change their practices and continued to use strategies that confirmed their bias for "balance." Clearly, if what they were taught in their teacher-training and professional development programs was still valued in high performing districts, then it was the children and families who were failing, not the practices. Such teachers naturally felt threatened and angry. To smooth over the feelings of resentment, Reading First administrators made many unforeseen compromises. These compromises diluted the efficacy of SBRR, were not reflected in the Reading First impact evaluations, and had long term consequences.

For instance, some districts layered leveled books and "Guided Reading" onto Reading First's recommended core reading instruction. Despite our attempts to instill "fidelity to the core" SBRR curriculum, some districts had their building coaches write guidance documents for bridging the two philosophically divergent approaches. In some cases, administrators trained in "Literacy Collaborative," a learning model promoted by Lesley University in partnership with Guided Reading gurus Irene Fountas and Gay Su Pinnell, were in charge of executing the grant. Those administrators could not separate themselves from their allegiance to that model. Thus, notwithstanding that their districts had signed on to the grant, teacher observations were being conducted by school leaders who followed a contrary philosophy. Inflexibility and skepticism on the part of school district administrators, combined with directives from some Reading First administrators to placate the district administrators by "not throwing the baby out with the bath water" undermined the efforts of all who believed in SBRR. Those were just some of the unseen factors that were not examined or considered in the impact evaluations.

As a regional coach, it was easy to see why school leaders resisted a new model and held onto old patterns. Human interaction and transformational change experts Sheila Campbell and Merianne Litemann state in their book, *Retreats That Work*, "It's natural for people to want to hold on to things. It is said that the hardest thing for a trapeze artist isn't grabbing hold of the new trapeze as it swings within reach but letting go of the one she's already gripping. So, it is with change; it's hard to let go of the familiar and comfortable."

It was painful for many of the grant's participants to take on new learning and behaviors when their belief systems were so entwined with their identities as educators. Many of the teachers and administrators were not open to coaching because of this internal conflict. Science alone was not going to convert them. Visualize a trapeze artist in mid-air holding on to two bars at once and not going in either direction. Balanced Literacy is like a trapeze act gone wrong. Many educators find it more palatable to "swing using both bars."



And, that is why we have not gotten anywhere in twenty years.

It was not the pedagogical premise of Reading First that failed. The science was and is clear. What the pundits and analysts failed to account for was the human component and the recalcitrance of people too entrenched in their ways to accept change, no matter how beneficial to children. From my perspective, that, more than anything, led to the view that Reading First was not effective and successful.

Without honest reflection, a cultural shift is not possible. We cannot expect change if we do not address the elephant in the room: school districts resist change because educators contribute to the existing problem and have a vested interest in sustaining Balanced Literacy practices. We cannot expect them to view the problem objectively and not become defensive when it is their identity and philosophy that are being questioned and they are trying to protect their image. Even teachers who understand the five pillars of literacy and believe in SBRR quickly learn what is valued by their supervisors and adapt to the cultural norms in order to fit in. Just take a look at district leadership. Who gets hired? What is their background? What is the educational lingo they use? Literacy Collaborative proponents believe that they are "student-centered" and value "differentiation" and "balance." Their tagline is to "build school communities rich in books and words." Who wouldn't want to have those positive attributes attributed to them? So, an outsider trying to buck this approach is seen as anti-child, extremist, and inflexible.

Consequently, the drivers of change today are not educators but knowledgeable parents who recognize and understand faulty practices and have been questioning basic assumptions about literacy. They do not have time or patience to wait for the schools to come up with solutions or accept educators who are not flexible enough or refuse to change in the face of scientific evidence and common sense. They are demanding that their schools let go with "both hands" and make a radical change. There should be no "safety net" for those who hold onto old, faulty strategies. Parents are not concerned with ideology or philosophy; they just want their kids to learn to read and write.

So, once again, it will be a small, vocal group fighting very hard against a system that is not groomed for change. As in the past, educational leaders will undoubtedly try to placate them. They will provide professional development to help teachers recognize dyslexia or learn multi-sensory strategies for struggling readers. They'll add a phonics component to a faulty program and claim it's a "game-changer." Yet, time and time again, we have seen that they, themselves, don't really believe it necessary. For the majority of children, they believe, the status quo is working just fine, and they have no intention of rocking the boat.

Unless we begin to hold everyone in education accountable for bringing about change, not just some schools, not just some teachers, and not just for some children from disadvantaged backgrounds or with special needs, we will continue to be faced with the same poor results.

Maybe, the only way to promote true change, then, is to "burn the boat."

Faith Borkowsky is the founder of High Five Literacy and Academic Coaching with over thirty years of experience as a classroom teacher, reading and learning specialist, regional literacy coach, administrator, and tutor. Ms. Borkowsky is a Certified Dyslexia Practitioner and provides professional development for teachers and school districts, as well as parent workshops, presentations, and private consultations. Ms. Borkowsky is the author of the award-winning book, *Failing Students or Failing Schools? A Parent's Guide to Reading Instruction and Intervention* and the "If Only I Would Have Known..." series. She is also a board member of Teach My Kid to Read, a 501(c) non-profit organization with a mission to support and empower students, teachers, and parents through education so all kids, including those with dyslexia, learn to read.



# BEHAVIORS BEFORE DYSLEXIA

BY: LAUREN TAYLOR

He doesn't show any of this behavior at home. Are you sure someone didn't say something to him or do something that he could have felt threatened by? This isn't normal for him. He's always been an extremely social and well-behaved child. What do I need to do at home to make sure this doesn't continue to happen in the classroom?

I've been watching and listening to this same story play out for years now. Not only with my own child, but numerous other little boys and girls that I've worked with along the way. Their parents, often desperate for answers, end up being tossed into the deep end of the world of behaviors without even knowing that's what they're walking into. They innocently seek the opinions of medical professionals in an effort to figure out where all of this could be coming from. Does their child have something going on beneath the surface? Could it be a diagnosis they'd never heard of? Was it something they'd only heard from teachers as horror stories regarding past students? This is usually done in an effort to appease the teachers, not the parents mind you. We are often sent down rabbit holes in an attempt to make sure that our children fit into that box the other children seem to do such a good job at fitting into.

What we as parents often times are not made aware of is that our children have not yet mastered a way to explain and or give us any insights into what's driving their everything outside of the home environment. Why would they? They are still extremely young. Most if not all of them are flagged as early as kindergarten and first grade. They aren't being flagged for the glaringly obvious learning disability mind you. They are being flagged with behaviors.

There was an article I vividly remember reading prior to my own son starting school. The name of the article was titled "The Drugging of the American Boy" (<https://www.esquire.com/news-politics/a32858/drugging-of-the-american-boy-0414/>) and I had stumbled across the article inside Esquire magazine by chance in 2014. I was naïve to ADHD at the time of the article. I had only known friends who had been diagnosed sometime in middle school. They would end up on several different medications until graduation. That's if they graduated. There was always something underneath the surface that wasn't being addressed with my friends. I knew they did not perform well in most subjects. Regardless of the medication, they had no attention span and school was the last thing they cared about. It's as if they spent more time trying to figure out how to get in trouble vs paying attention so they'd be able to fly under the radar.

I remember reading the article numerous times and being horrified by the studies inside this article. The alarming number of little boys who were still being medicated before they'd even learned to self regulate. How had something like ADHD been able to become a one stop shop to control the classroom. Surely by now they'd figured out not all little boys had ADHD. Surely by now the studies had shown our little boys matured slower than their female counterparts. Did someone forget to teach budding new teachers this before they graduated? Why was this still happening. As I continued to read this article things started to fall in place. Not only were we tossing our children into the realm of behaviors, but we were now starting to diagnose children with Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD) and Disruptive Mood Dysregulation Disorder (DMDD). When I say children, I should clarify that we were starting to diagnose six-year-old children with extremely frightening behaviors that end up labeling children as impossible to work with. They are essentially a lost cause if they were blessed with these acronyms. More disturbing, the rate at which they were throwing children into self contained classrooms because the child not only had an ED qualifier, but they were also unable to read. They were labeled defiant and without medication there was no hope for them. I had come across this before. Only when I came across this it wasn't through a friend. It was with my sister.

In an effort to have this conversation and do it justice, I'm going to have to attempt to shrink what could be an entire novel into cliff notes on all the ways Dyslexic children and their parents are tossed into the deep end without a life raft. All the ways we as their parents are told it's our child's behavior preventing them from learning. All the ways we are not told it's actually an underlying learning disability. Why is this conversation so important to have? Well just as it's important to discuss the statistics that come along with our children, this is where those statistics start to manifest. Imagine being told your performance at work had data to support that everything was pointing towards your behavior. The reason you didn't understand the task at hand, the reason you disrupted everyone around you, the reason you couldn't get your job done in the time they'd given you; it was all because of your behavior. This is exactly what takes place in classrooms as early as preschool every single day.

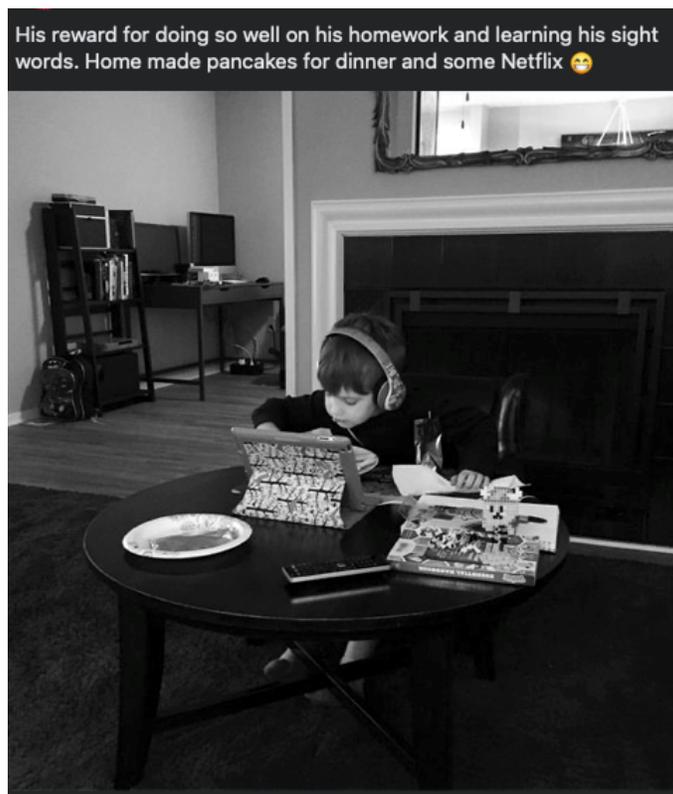
Children have data collection start before they even enter the halls of a K-5 environment. This starts at an early age in attempt to keep the eyes on an area that's not even there. Our children are placed on behavior management plans where they start basing their self-esteem on what color apple they received for the day. By the time they make it to Kindergarten we've already seen a drastic change in their once innocent and curious personality. We assume this is due to coming of age. We're told by pediatricians and educators this is all age appropriate behavior. We are told this is expected and it's nothing to worry about. We are not told however that something is driving that behavior under the surface. I have seen this very scenario play out with my own child. I as his



mother was told they were going to try something new. He was only three years old. They were going to try to see if he responded to a behavior management plan. I did not know what that was, I was just told that my son needed to be redirected often so they were attempting to see if he'd respond to positive interventions. Again, my son was three years old. Somehow his everything was being studied during a time in his life where he should have been afforded the freedom to be a little boy. I not only allowed this, but we created our own chart at home to show our son just how awesome or bad he was being. We would reward him if he received three stars a week. We would buy him a toy if he achieved a status that was being gauged not by science, but by teachers. There was no control subject. There was nothing to back what we'd done other than being told our son was showing signs for ADHD as a three-year-old little boy.

Do I believe these teachers had any intentions of creating the downward spiral that was his everything? No, I do not. I believe an entire system out there has not only wronged our children, but they've also spent years teaching educators to pay attention to the wrong red flags. Instead of paying attention to expressive receptive, phonological processing, written expression, educators are told to pay attention to how a child responds to a program designed to destroy their self-worth. I do want to point out this isn't a theory by the way. I've worked with plenty of former teachers and or currently teachers whom are horrified they had anything to do with creating the trauma they now see in several of their former students. They themselves have trauma attached by proxy of what they feel they induced in children due to the horribly botched guidance they received while in college. Some of these educators have since reached out to their former colleges in an attempt to find out the WHY to this. They are often met with silence. They want to know why they weren't taught to actually TEACH children to read. They want to know why they spent more time diving into the psyche of a child's behavior than they did with anything else. Again, they are met with silence. These are not schools that you'd expect silence from either. These are highly accredited colleges. They are highly sought-after colleges. Yet there is nothing there to support educators once they've graduated.

I come across photos of my own child from kindergarten and first grade and I literally find myself crying now. I want to tell that little boy in those photos that his mama is so sorry. That his mama wished she would have never believed that her child was being defiant on purpose. That I didn't believe a teacher when she told me my son was disrupting the classroom on purpose. That I as his mother didn't believe a teacher had me so convinced my child was actively lying to her that I would do the unthinkable and punish him for something he himself wasn't even aware of. The guilt I carry with me every single day is almost unfathomable. While eight years later I now know that my child was never any of the things I was told, I spent far too much time arguing with a child that didn't even understand why his mother didn't believe him but believed a stranger instead. The reason I spend so much time helping others navigate this world is due to my own guilt. I do not want other parents to go through the same. I do not want parents to find themselves in a place where they don't recognize that person after they've taken the advice of someone, we want to believe has all the answers. If there is any lesson, I've learned over the years it's to trust myself. I have learned to listen to children instead of their teachers. I have learned to read 30-page evaluations to understand what's actually going on with a child. I have shown so many parents how much trauma was attached to their children it keeps me up at night. This trauma, this everything could have and should have been avoided. These parents had no idea it was even there. I had no idea it was there until it was too late. This is a direct result of a system designed to diagnose behaviors before learning disabilities. You'll be hard pressed to run this by a pediatric psychologist that understands how learning disabilities drive behaviors and have them disagree with everything I've stated.



His reward for doing so well on his homework and learning his sight words. Home made pancakes for dinner and some Netflix 🍷

Five years ago today this photo was taken. I posted it on Facebook. I was so excited that my newly diagnosed Dyslexic child had done so well on his homework and learning his sight words that we made him pancakes for dinner and allowed him to watch Netflix. This is what I see on my timeline as "memories" and like I said earlier, I wish I could hug this little boy and tell him I'm so sorry. Remember this story the next time you're met with an entire room of "professionals" trying to keep your eye on your child's behavior instead of what your gut is telling you. I promise after spending 80 hours inside of IEP meetings the subject didn't change until my son's pediatrician saw for herself just how much damage had been done. When my son was prescribed medication for his panic attacks that had been induced inside school, the meetings took a turn for the worse. They now had to come to terms with what they'd allowed to take place. They had to come to terms with knowing I had spent YEARS explaining to them it wasn't behavior. It was his Dyslexia and the lack of support driving his everything. It didn't matter that I'd had numerous outside psychologists, therapists and allies inside our community explain to them in depth they needed to stop focusing on the behavior, they still did it. Our children deserve better. Our teachers deserve to be blessed with the knowledge of what drives behaviors. They deserve to be taught how to teach children to read. They deserve more than they are afforded when they have the best intentions but find themselves in awkward meetings that make no sense to them. They don't want to harm our children. They don't get into teaching to find themselves involved in any of this.

Lauren Taylor is a mother and advocate, fighting for more than just the right to FAPE for her own children, but all children in multiple states. You can follow her on "Our Dyslexic Journey" on Facebook.

# THE SCHOOL TO PRISON PIPELINE

BY: ASHLEY ROBERTS



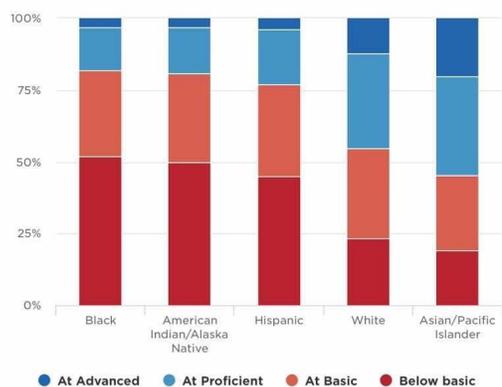
This is a topic a lot of people talk about, but how many of you believe this is actually happening?

I still remember the first time I heard the concept of pipeline to prison. That was a shocking thing as a parent to hear, and so I dug in only to find several articles on why it wasn't true, because let's face it, unless you dig in hard it's easy to find articles to support any point of view, so I was ignorantly satisfied with what I had found, but as my knowledge base regarding dyslexia, literacy and education has expanded over the years, the reality that a pipeline from our schools to our prisons does in fact exist, cannot be ignored. This is a reality we need to face head on without fear or preconceived notions. It's time we shelve what we think we know and look at the cold hard facts of what our educational system has created, but even that isn't enough. This is a reality we have to stop talking about and start changing.

### Federal Findings

First let's start with cold hard facts. Our own government acknowledges the existence of the school to prison pipeline. Here are just some of the published findings which can be found in the report "Beyond Suspensions: Examining School Discipline Policies and Connections to the School-to-Prison Pipeline for Students of Color with Disabilities", a Briefing Before The United States Commission on Civil Rights Held in Washington, DC, based on a report dated July, 2019 (<https://www.usccr.gov/pubs/2019/07-23-Beyond-Suspensions.pdf>).

**U.S. fourth-graders' reading levels by race/ethnicity**



SOURCE: The National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2019.

- "Students of color as a whole, as well as by individual racial group, do not commit more disciplinable offenses than their white peers – but black students, Latino students, and Native American students in the aggregate receive substantially more school discipline than their white peers and receive harsher and longer punishments than their white peers receive for like offenses.

- Students with disabilities are approximately twice as likely to be suspended throughout each school level compared to students without disabilities.

- The U.S. Department of Education recognizes that since it began collecting state-level data on suspensions and expulsions in the 1998-1999 school year, a consistent pattern persists of schools suspending or expelling black students with disabilities at higher rates than their proportion of the population of students with disabilities. The most recent CRDC data reflects that, with the exception of Latinx and Asian American students with disabilities, students of color with disabilities were more likely than white students with disabilities to be expelled without educational services.

- In addition to missed class time, excessive exclusionary discipline negatively impacts classroom engagement and cohesion and increases the likelihood excluded students will be retained in grade, drop out of school, or be placed in the juvenile justice system. Black students with disabilities lost approximately 77 more days of instruction compared to white students with disabilities."

### An Education System That's Not Educating

Harsh statement? To some, perhaps, but to those of us in the know it's not nearly harsh enough. The reality is current educational philosophies are akin to white collar crime. Damning statistics are published every two years that show, in increasing numbers, that our children are not learning how to read in droves. The last NAEP scores had 62% of 4th graders reading below proficient levels. That number increases in 8th grade to 66%, and scores fell 2% points from 2017 to 2019.

Our nation's schools are deeply entrenched in balanced literacy. Unfortunately, nothing within balanced literacy will teach anyone to read other than the small percentage of children who will just automatically start to read, but the fact is a certain percentage of those children will need the supports that will come through structured literacy at some point in their educational career.

Further, let's specifically consider the findings stated above from the federal government's report and consider the impact. "These interactions contribute to a cycle of negative encounters that can lead to or exacerbate a student's behavioral and academic problems, disengagement from learning, and disconnection from school (McNeely & Falci, 2004). These interactions also contribute to dropout, delinquency, arrest, and incarceration (D. Osher, Quinn, Poirer, & Rutherford, 2003; D. Osher, Woodruff, & Sims, 2002). (<http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.850.450&rep=rep1&type=pdf&fbclid=IwAR0KV38zhcCbRhQGgXAQDMSLVgrwiDJcloXtfGnymFhlznTEnkXuXpgURyw>)

### Behavior Before Learning Disability

In the prior article, Behaviors Before Dyslexia by Lauren Taylor, you read a powerful and emotional account from a mother turned advocate of how the journey of behavior took precious time away from her child. The fact is our schools look to behavior first. In a system designed to the behavior of girls, our boys are punished for being children at very young ages, and it becomes a slippery slope of negative reinforcement that, without the proper intervention, is only going to erode.

### A Smart Child That's Struggling Will, What?

What we as advocates know is that if an intelligent child is continually struggling, without access to someone to explain why they're struggling, or help them to break through their struggle, they will act out with behavior.

"The amygdala is a collection of cells near the base of the brain. There are two, one in each hemisphere or side of the brain. This is where emotions are given meaning, remembered, and attached to associations and responses to them (emotional memories). It's key to how you process strong emotions like fear and pleasure. When you feel threatened and afraid, the amygdala automatically activates the fight-or-flight response by sending out signals to release stress hormones that prepare your body to fight or run away. This response is triggered by emotions like fear, anxiety, aggression, and anger." (Healthline, 2019 - <https://www.healthline.com/health/stress/amygdala-hijack#:~:text=When%20you%20feel%20threatened%20and,anxiety%2C%20aggression%2C%20and%20anger.>)

Additionally, "The frontal lobes, home to key components of the neural circuitry underlying "executive functions" such as planning, working memory, and impulse control, are among the last areas of the brain to mature; they may not be fully developed until halfway through the third decade of life." (June, 2010 - <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2892678/>)

What this all comes down to is the expectation of behavior from a child that a child is not capable of demonstrating or expressing. Triggered into fear and anger, very human emotions that all people possess, the acting out, depending on the level of fear and anger, can reach violent levels.

However, instead of trying to reach these children and help them find the words they do not possess or to self-regulate, they are confined, restrained, arrested, which begins the pathway to the juvenile system, and eventually the adult prison system.

### Obtaining An LD Diagnosis Is A Gift of Privilege

As has been discussed of late, to obtain a dyslexia diagnosis is to have a diagnosis of privilege. Too often in the poorer schools within our country one cannot discern which children are deprived of educational opportunity versus those who are truly struggling with a learning disability, therefore both are lumped together, under-served, misunderstood, dismissed, denied, left to their own devices, which typically leads to an inevitable outcome based on the behavior issues which may arise from being so under-served.

### Under Investment in "Troubled" Schools

It is challenging to lure teachers into "troubled" schools. The discipline issues keep the majority of teachers away, and as the profession remains predominately female and white, (National Center for Education Statistics, May, 2020 - [https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator\\_clr.asp](https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator_clr.asp)), this will remain so until drastic measures are taken.

Education curriculums at the university level need to shift from psychology and behavioral studies to structured literacy and learning disabilities. As the shift from balanced literacy to structured literacy begins to level the playing field for all students regardless of color and socio-economic status, and as teachers and administrators are taught to understand learning disabilities and the challenges that may arise from those LD's, the schools will be less hard pressed to lure teachers and administrators of all races.

Further, tax dollars remain the primary source of income for schools. For poor areas, their schools remain poor. States have yet to figure out how to "balance this pendulum" and have financial distribution be fair and equitable for all students.

### Criminalizing Behavior

"Through its Cradle to Prison Pipeline initiative, the Children's Defense Fund has studied the grim effects of being trapped in a criminalizing environment from which the obstacles to escape are formidable. The Cradle to Prison Pipeline consists of a complex array of social and economic factors as well as political choices that converge to reduce the odds that poor children — especially poor black and Latino children — will grow up to become productive adults. These factors include limited access to health care (including mental health care), under-performing schools, broken child welfare and juvenile justice systems, and a toxic youth culture that praises pimps and glorifies violence.

Hardened by long terms of incarceration, released criminalized youngsters return to communities that are ill equipped to reintegrate them positively. Outcast and unemployed, they become the teachers and role models for a new crop of youngsters pushed onto the streets of America's most depressed neighborhoods. This cycle of infection makes the Cradle to Prison Pipeline one of the most damaging health problems in America today." (<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1955386/?fbclid=IwAR3qUVz2gkF-ZEuVChFf1vDZDUdhgqgYCdGW3D0YYj-CprgbW8boArvGaeg>)

### Police States

The above statistics are not just playing out in America's poorest schools, but in every school across the country. Countless stories are shared across various forms of media of small children being dragged into isolation rooms, left alone, commonly in the dark, to scream it out.

Uneducated in learning disabilities and untrained in de-escalation tactics, school administrators call police before parents to deal with "problem children" due to a lack of understanding about their disability and the behavior that may arise as a result.

Children are not met with understanding therapists or counselors, but are instead pinned to the floor, handcuffed, and taken to police stations to be booked for assault. Think about the emotional damage this causes. In a single instant you alter a child's trajectory forever.

Far too many of us have seen this play out on videos with too many autistic children, but this is happening on too wide of a scale to too many children with various LD's, and, as we have shown here, statistically out of proportion to children of color at an alarming rate.

### **The Road Begins Earlier Than Many Realize**

We are expelling our children in preschool, as young as infants and toddlers, but predominately among 3 and 4-year-old children.

"According to the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), each year over 8,700 three and four-year-old children are expelled from their state-funded preschool or prekindergarten classrooms."

"Early research published in 2005 found that preschool children are expelled at three times the rate of children in Kindergarten through 12th grade. Importantly, the majority of these young children, at least 42 percent of preschool children suspended, are identified as African American boys. These racial and gender disparities are evident as early as preschool, where black students are 3.6 times as likely to receive an out-of-school suspension as their white classmates. Additionally, while boys represent 54 percent of preschool enrollment, they constitute 79 percent of all suspended preschool children. Research indicates that a child's early educational experiences greatly influence their development and outcomes later in life, making these data particularly consequential." Institute for Child Success, 2018 <https://www.instituteforchildsuccess.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/ICS-2018-PreschoolSuspensionBrief-WEB.pdf>.

### **Conclusion**

So, we have disproportionate suspensions and expulsions that also occur at an alarming rate, we are exacerbating behavior problems as a result, in an environment already not actually teaching children how to read, not diagnosing learning disabilities or providing adequate services, and yet we're surprised there are consequences for these actions? And, we're not talking about PERSONAL consequences for these actions, we're talking SOCIETAL. This is impacting our culture, our economy, our citizenry.

While, yes, I'm walking into education's house and telling them they're doing it wrong, and that's not going to sit well with anyone, what I hope for is courage. We the people have it within our power to change the course for our children, but it's going to take immense courage. The shackles of balanced literacy have to be thrown into the deep abyss of the ocean, never to be found again, and that's just the beginning. Ending balanced literacy is not the only thing that needs to happen here. Our educators must understand disabilities, and we must take police out of our schools and put highly trained counselors inside of them instead.

We know what works, and frankly, many of us are sick of talking about it. The fact is that the cost to our society is overwhelming, in tax dollars, prisons, health care, and the consequences of illiteracy. We're talking BILLIONS with a B. \$225 Billion a year in non-productivity in the workforce, crime and loss of tax revenue because of unemployment and \$232 Billion a year in health care costs linked to low literacy. That's \$457 Billion a year! And, the children of parents with low literacy have a 72% chance of being at the lowest reading levels themselves. How much money do we have to collectively spend as a society before we wake up? And, how much do we have to spend before it's too late to turn the tide?

This needs to scare you! We owe it to our children, the very future of our society, to educate them all. We need to be having the tough conversations. Education must be priority #1 for all of us. We can no longer afford to sit idly by and assume that our educational system is amazing and our kids are ok because they're not.

Raise your voice! Challenge your school boards, your legislators both state and federal. Ask questions. Demand answers. Don't accept non-answers, evasions, and delay tactics. We no longer have time for evasions. Our children's lives, ALL OF OUR CHILDREN'S LIVES, depend on us demanding that education change.

## **VOICES OF DYSLEXIA**

Something very near and dear to my heart is a little something we created called Voices of Dyslexia. Voices is an archive of testimony, whether written or recorded, showing the good, the bad and the ugly, to show the world the truth of what it is to be dyslexic. We profoundly believe that there shouldn't be an ounce of shame in being dyslexic as there is nothing wrong with the dyslexic individual, it's simply how their brain is wired, yet the truth is the way our educational system ignores our children, the cost can be severe. This archive of testimony is meant to serve as a reflection of that truth. This is open to children (with a parent's or legal guardian's permission), adults, advocates, parents, to tell their truth. Our dream is that one day the archive will be large enough that the truth of dyslexia can no longer be ignored.

To lend your voice to the archive, please reach out to The @VoicesofDyslexia or the @DyslexiaInitiative pages on Facebook, or message us through our website.



# ALFABET SOOP

BY: AMY TRAYNOR, OTR, M.A., ATP

A column dedicated to facilitating an understanding of the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) framework and Assistive Technology (AT) and what each might look like for individuals with dyslexia.

Messy handwriting. Poor spelling. Difficulty generating writing topics. Simple vocabulary. Disorganized. Writing difficulties are hand-in-hand with reading difficulties for individuals with dyslexia. Given the phonological skills that are required for reading (decoding) are the same skills required for writing (encoding), it should come as no surprise that writing difficulties are hand-in-hand with reading difficulties for individuals with dyslexia. Reading difficulties also complicate the writing process as they can prevent the writer from being able to identify errors and make corrections in their own product. Skilled writing also requires the cognitive skills of working memory and executive function, which are often difficult for an individual with dyslexia.

As a seasoned occupational therapist, my support was frequently requested due to "illegible handwriting". Writing is a complex process that only ends with the transcription piece, how the final product is produced, either by hand or electronically. Rather than simply poor motor control, this "illegible handwriting" was more frequently the visual representation of the struggles this student already endured to get to this point. Coming up with an idea,

organizing his thoughts, and selecting words he thought he could spell are just a few of the common difficulties individuals with dyslexia face when writing. In this article, I will share with you tools that support these steps of the writing process allowing the writer to generate a product of which he can be proud!



A good written product starts with a good plan. Ranging from no/low tech to higher tech, there are a variety of tools that a writer might employ to support the ideation and organizing of his thoughts, generating the plan for his piece. A graphic organizer is a tool that provides visual structure helping to illustrate relationships, simplify ideas and organize thoughts. No/low tech, this could be as simple as a printed worksheet or one that the writer sketches himself. Tech based solutions might include the Google extension, MindMaster. Available free in the Chrome store, MindMaster allows the user to create a visual mind map as they brainstorm. Ideas can be organized and moved around visually with the final mind map able to be exported as an image or in text outline form to a word processor. I wrote about Snap and Read Universal (paid,

<https://learningtools.donjohnston.com/product/snap-read/>) in my last piece, but there is a feature in that tool that is an incredible support during the writing process. The study tool in Snap and Read Universal has over 60 ready-to-use outlines for a variety of writing needs. These outlines provide written prompts to support content as well as visual structure for organization. When writing, the user is able to type information into the outline or 'drag' text from an electronic source into the outline. When the text is copied into the outline Snap and Read also provides the complete citation in either MLA, APA or Chicago reference styles. After the outline is created in Snap and Read, the outline AND references can be transferred into a Google doc or other word processor to continue the writing process. Snap and Read universal also provides the text to speech support that is helpful for revising and editing.

Transcription, the actual writing, done either by hand or electronically. The benefits word processing provides stretch well beyond relieving the effort required when writing by hand. Adding, removing, or moving text are all revisions that are easily done with a word processor and the use of built in spell and grammar checks provide immediate feedback to the writer. Beyond traditional keyboarding, speech to text, is a beneficial feature that is built-in to many word processing programs and mobile devices. For ease of use, my personal favorite is the voice type tool in Google docs. Found in the 'Tools' menu, this tool when selected gives the writer the opportunity to speak their content for the computer to transcribe, freeing him from the effortful tasks of handwriting or keyboarding. Using speech to text has come a long way since the early days when voice files were required to be made, but can still require some getting used to. Accuracy is improved when used in a quiet environment and optimized when the user wears a headset with microphone. Speech to text is not ideal for users with speech articulation concerns. Word prediction is another helpful writing tool. There are several word prediction softwares on the market, but my favorite is CoWriter Universal (paid, <https://learningtools.donjohnston.com/product/cowriter/>). Co:Writer is an intelligent word prediction program, meaning that it actually predicts what words or phrases the writer intends to use. Even phonetic and inventive spelling styles are no match for CoWriter! Using CoWriter also gives the writer an opportunity to create "topic dictionaries" which automatically pull topic specific vocabulary for word prediction, enhancing the writer's word choice. One final feature word processing provides has been highlighted during this period of virtual learning-turning in or sharing work! When the product is generated using word processing, it can easily be saved in and shared from cloud-based storage, such as Google docs or Microsoft OneDrive, for easy collaboration with others, teacher feedback or simply turning it in!

Information related to the benefit of technology for students with learning disabilities can be found on a multitude of websites including but not limited to [understood.org](http://understood.org) and [readingrockets.org](http://readingrockets.org). Just as I did in the previous issue regarding reading support, I wanted to provide a reference that you can keep on hand, when you need to address the written expression needs and assistive technology with your child's school.

Hetzroni OE, Shrieber B. Word processing as an assistive technology tool for enhancing academic outcomes of students with writing disabilities in the general classroom. *J Learn Disabil.* 2004;37(2):143-154. doi:10.1177/00222194040370020501

Amy Traynor, OTR, M.A., ATP: Amy is an occupational therapist, assistive technology professional, and most proud of her role as mom. She began her occupational therapy career in August 2000, committed to success and participation for ALL students in the school setting. Most of her 20 years supporting students in public schools were focused on assistive technology supports for literacy and physical access. As a parent of a child with dyslexia, she has a deep understanding and appreciation for the role technology plays for students who learn differently. Amy recently founded E2 Alliance, LLC, providers for educational consultation, evaluation, advocacy and training. Given her commitment as a parent advocate, the National Center for Learning Disabilities has contracted with Amy to lead their Texas Parent Advisory and Advocacy Council. Feel free to share thoughts or ask questions by emailing Amy at [info@e2alliance.org](mailto:info@e2alliance.org).

## 3RD ANNUAL DYSLEXIA INITIATIVE ART SHOW

BY: LINDY JONES AND CHONTAE FELDMAN

October is Dyslexia Awareness month! To celebrate and bring further awareness to a traditionally invisible disability The Dyslexia Initiative will host its third annual Dyslexia Initiative Art Show. In years past it's been quite the gala celebrating local artists of all ages with dyslexia. Disciplines ranging from painting to sculptures have been proudly displayed for the North Texas Community to enjoy while the talented artists share accounts, accomplishments and success stories of dyslexia. Parents and artists delight in connecting with other families that share the same journey and develop deep connections and long term friendships. Unquestionably 2020 has presented challenges, but our Dyslexia Initiative Art Show developers Chontae Feldman and Lindy Jones are ready to redefine the conventional art show. The Dyslexia Initiative proudly presents its very first Virtual Art Show "Strength in Feelings" scheduled to go live on facebook October 24, 2020. Dyslexic artists of all ages are encouraged to submit their talent to <https://form.jotform.com/202518913339154> Submissions will be accepted until midnight of October 21, 2020. Join us in celebrating Dyslexia Awareness month! Let our voices explode and be heard through "Strength in Feelings".

The event itself may be found at the following Facebook link:  
<https://facebook.com/events/s/strength-in-feelings-di-virtua/2708437039444352/?ti=icl>



**Editor's Note:** This next article is so special. As Dyslexia Awareness Month begins we'd like to introduce Titan Gabrielse. At only 8 years old he already a proud voice for the dyslexia movement. Diagnosed formally in first grade, Tiffanie Gabrielse has said numerous times that acknowledging the learning difference by its name and "owning it" has helped Titan become unafraid and most importantly unashamed.

Together, Mrs. Gabrielse and I decided it would be a very positive benefit for the community at large if we published two versions of Titan's article. Why? Simply put, it's important for the world to see the effort that goes into writing for the dyslexic child.

That being said we present both the unedited and the edited versions. Titan worked very hard on this article, and his mother honestly put it best with the following words used on her Facebook page to describe the process:

"There were the notorious headaches that come with dyslexia. So, we packed some ice, placed it on our head, and kept it moving. If nothing else, it served as a good distraction.

There were deep sighs, groans, and loud cries of irritation, because the thought of all the words, Words, WORDS we wanted to say versus those we could muster out made us lose our place several, several times. And that irritation turned into anger. We had to step away more than a few times. We had to play a video game for a break, shoot up a few zombies, gain some points to upgrade our character, and when we were finally ready to acknowledge our anger we were also ready to take a deep breath, let it go, and return to the screen.

So, to curb it a little we made a pact to only do a few lines a day. Mostly in the morning over breakfast and some fresh coffee together.

Eventually, though, excitement overshadowed it all! One line became two. Two lines gradually became 4. And then 4 somehow grew into 12, 18, 24, and 30! We saw the slow yet steady creep of progress! Then there was pride in our selection of words. We learned simpler is better.

There was the hunt for the proper spelling of items by going on scavenger hunts to find those items in the house. Finally, there was a sudden bolt out the front door to get our friends, bring them back to the breakfast nook, and read it aloud happily! And, finally, there was a decision to do some awesome collaboration for the most perfect title (or as I have otherwise called it, Asking For Help).

At eight years old his voice will reach so many to read, love, and absorb. And with it the original copy without all the spelling edits, because Dyslexia is not something that can be cured. Titan is not cured. Dyslexia is complicated. Hard. There are good days and bad days. It is a giant pain in the rear. Together we struggle. But together we persevere.

This is what writing with dyslexia looks like. Actually, this is what dyslexia should look like."

So, without further ado, here is Titan's first article.

## IT'S GREAT TO BE DIFFERENT THINGS!

BY: TITAN GABRIELSE

THE EDITED VERSION



Hi boys and girls! My name is Titan. I have something important to say to you. We are more than Dyslexic.

One day in my class I was getting really upset, because math was so hard. I started to cry. And then I said I was sorry and that I'm just dyslexic. Then my teacher, Mrs. Klaus said that I am more than just dyslexic. And it was important that I remember Dyslexia is just a small part of me. It's not everything I am.

At first, I didn't get it. I was confused. Then when I got home my mom helped me think of all the things I can do and the things I like. We made a list together.

I love to build LEGOS. I'm proud of everything that I build. I put a lot of detail into my creations, like my spiked snake. I put white and tan rectangles with three points on the end. He has one blue eye and one yellow eye. I took an entire day to build it. This makes me a builder. Then my baby brother took my LEGO snake upstairs and hid it under the pillows. He is always playing tricks. I had to teach him how to play nicely with LEGOS, so we don't lose them. That makes me a big brother, too.

I love to play Minecraft and Fortnite in creative mode. I know how the game works. I like to play a lot. One of the best things I like to do is play with my dad. We play on the Internet as a team in Battle Royale. We win trophies by doing challenges and we unlock special characters, like baby Groot from Guardians of the Galaxy. This makes me a gamer! And because I am playing with my daddy this makes me a son.

When my friend's come over, we play games together. I share. We take turns. I never want to leave my friends out. We play Plants vs. Zombies-- Garden Warfare. And if I lose, I still say, "Good job, bro!" This makes me a good friend and a good sportsman.

My mom needs help in the kitchen making lunch sometimes. She needs help getting things from the refrigerator. Reaching things like ketchup or Coke Cola on the top shelf is hard, because she is short. Sometimes getting big things like clean pots and pans in the dishwasher is hard for her, because she uses crutches to walk. So, I get those to. This makes me a perfect helper for my mom.

Speaking of a dishwasher, one day I want to build a see-through dishwasher, because I saw a see-through fridge and it looked awesome! If I build a see-through dishwasher we can see all the bubbles going around and around cleaning the dishes. That makes me an inventor.

And now that I wrote this, my mom said I am a writer!

I really am more than dyslexic.

Now, it is your turn. You are many different things.

Think of all the things you love to do. Think of all your favorite things. I want you to make a list. Right away you are a thinker! And if your family or friend is reading this to you and you are listening that makes you a good listener. Already you are more than dyslexic, too!

### THE UNEDITED VERSION

#### IT IS GRAET TO BE DIFRINT THINGS!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

Hi boys and girls! My name is Titan. I have something emportnt to say to you. We are more than Dyslexic.

One day in my class I was relee upset beecus math was so hard. I startd to cry and then I sed I was soree and that I am just dyslexic.

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We take turns.

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Sometims geting big things like cleen pots and pans in the dish washr is hard for her too beecus she uses cruches to walk. So I get that too. This makes me a prfic helpr for my mom.

Speeking of a dish washr one day I want to bild a see thro dish washr beecus I saw a see thro refrigro and it lokd awsom!

If I bild a see thro dish washr we can see all the bubls going a rond and a rond cleening the dishes. That maks me a invntr.

And now that I rit this my mom sed I am a ritr.

I reele am more than dyslexic.

Now it is your turn.

Think of all the things you love to do.

Think of all your faforit things.

I want you to make a list.

Rit away you are a thinkr.

If your famlee or frend is reeding this to you and you are lisning that makes you a good lisnr. All redee you are more than dyslexic too.

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You can follow the inspirational Titan on Facebook at @TitanReads. He shares his story, his efforts to raise awareness with not just his school but children everywhere.

## CONNECTING

BY: TIFFANIE DIDONATO



I am the only person in my family with a rare form of dwarfism, diastrophic dysplasia. Jargon for never growing passed 36" tall. As a child I fought joint pain and muscle stiffness and endured multiple bone corrective surgeries. If I had an inch for every time I had to relearn how to walk or do a bed transfer I'd be as tall as LeBron James.

Yes, I played with dolls a little bit. I remember a certain Strawberry Shortcake pink stroller I enjoyed pretending to rock back and forth with my doll tucked inside, but pretending to be a mommy never felt 100% accurate. Even after I gained 14 inches through a grueling (and highly controversial) limb-lengthening procedure, my body would never function like other girls'. Instead, I felt more comfortable by the typewriter creating worlds with words I could maneuver within.

Being a mother just didn't seem to be a part of my future.

So, when my husband, a 6-foot tall, dark and handsome active duty Marine returned from Iraq for the second time, and looked longingly one night at a little boy dining with his family across from our Olive Garden table, I knew it was time to start rethinking the whole idea.

For me, being a mother meant more than finding a theme for a nursery, sifting through books on baby names, concocting creative ways to announce our pregnancy, or play dates at the park. It meant a reason to absolutely panic. Right away I was labeled a high-risk mother, and my baby was labeled a high-risk baby.

Don't forget, there was also the ten million-dollar question; would our baby have dwarfism, too? Eventually, we found out: there is no dwarfism gene present in my husband. And because two dwarfism genes are needed by both partners to pass on, our child would be "normal". Not like me.

Just before delivery, as my own mother sat by my bedside and waited for me to be taken in for a C-section, she said to me, "The Lord doesn't give you anything you can't handle."

I admit. I brushed it off. I didn't understand how those words would truly apply to me eventually. After all, throughout my entire pregnancy no one asked what I was afraid of. And it wasn't that I would have a child like me. It was that I would have one who was very, very different. How would I ever be able to connect to a child unlike me?

I was forced to immediately accept something that every parent learns gradually: Our children aren't us. And accepting that from the onset gave me an upper hand when Titan was diagnosed in first grade with dyslexia.

I cannot physically teach Titan how to ride a bike or chase him around the yard. But I can snuggle under his shark-themed blanket just before bed and read aloud from Charlotte's Web, thoroughly making sure to do every character in a different voice. Then smile, laugh, and enjoy the actions Titan pairs with my words. And when he works up the nerve to give the page a try, I am encouraging and mindful that even the simplest of syllables is like doing another arduous and painful bed transfer.

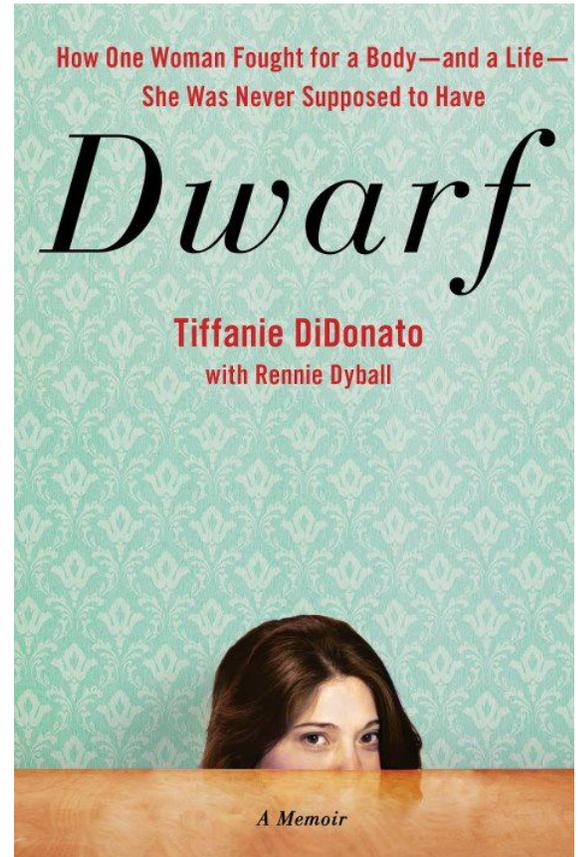
I cannot play catch, run ragged and traverse him back and forth to t-ball or climb the bleachers to see him on the field. But I can sit sweetly by his side and cheer him on as he exerts the same amount of energy writing a single sentence as I do going up a set of 3 mountainous stairs.

I cannot go camping in the mountains or trek in the opposite direction to the beach. But you better believe I can teach him how to overcome adversity and fight for his disability rights.

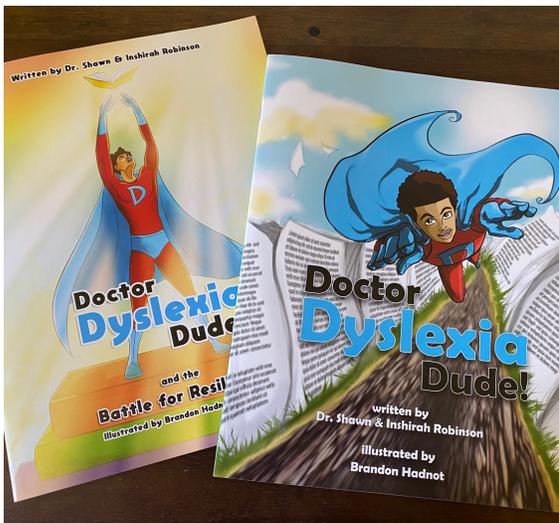
No, Titan's trials are not physical. They are invisible. He will have them all his life. Like me he will have to adapt to a world that will not adapt to him. And I can teach him that none of that makes him any less of a person.

I'm learning a lot being a mother to a child with dyslexia. As it turns out, I learned connecting is not so much about what makes us similar as it is about loving, admiring, and appreciating what makes us beautifully different.

Tiffanie DiDonato is the best selling author of "DWARF: How One Woman Fought For A Body--and a life--She Was Never Supposed To Have" published by Plume, an imprint of Penguin-Random House. She has been featured on Good Morning America and Inside Edition. Her work can be read in The New York Times blog Well Family, Scareymommy.com, and Lucky.com. In addition Tiffanie has been featured in Allure magazine, PeopleNOW.com, MilSpouse Magazine, and The London Times. Initial photo credit Laura Yates Photography.



## FUNDRAISER ALERT



Contribute to a worthy cause for Dyslexia Awareness Month and help make a difference in a child's life.

Purchase a classroom set of Dr. Dyslexia Dude's culturally responsible graphic novels and donate them to a classroom near and dear to your heart. Each set contains a total of 20 books, 10 of the first book and 10 of the second book, and sells for \$90.

Proceeds from the sale of these classroom sets will go to the creation of a scholarship fund created by Drs. Shawn and Inshirah Robinson established with the International Dyslexia Association for the purpose of providing Orton Gillingham tutoring to children in need.

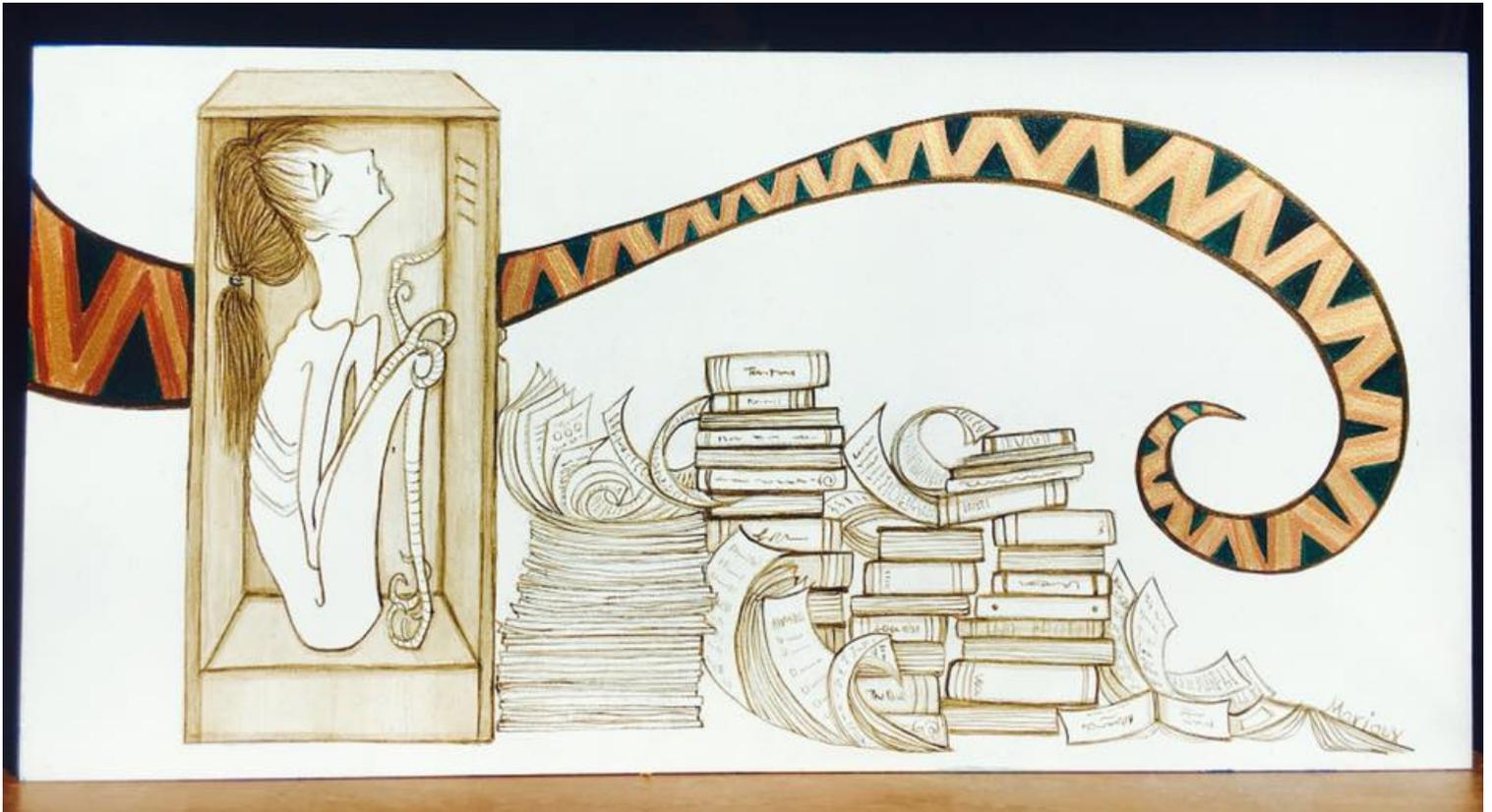
Help us reach the goal of 450 sets to establish this much needed scholarship!

#CulturallyResponsibleGraphicNovels #AHeroJustLikeMe  
#UntilEveryChildCanRead

Purchases can be made at [www.DrDyslexiaDude.com](http://www.DrDyslexiaDude.com)

# LITTLE BIRD GIRL

BY: MARY HARNETIAUX



When I tell my therapist, "I walked into my son's school this morning, started to shake, felt like crying, and my stomach hurt so bad I thought I was going to pass out," she calmly asks me, "how old are these feelings." She always asks me to put an age to my emotions and feelings. I sigh and reply, "these feelings are coming from my eight-year-old self." After all these years, "Little Bird Girl" is still a part of me. Trauma therapy has yet to release her from her confinement hidden deep inside my body, but I'm working on it.

Here's my illustration called "Little Bird Girl."

"Little Bird Girl" is me as an unidentified dyslexic child in 4th grade. "Little Bird Girl" is me throughout my remaining educational years that wove in and out of different schools — including a stint of homeschool.

Here's my Artist Statement:

There I was, sitting in a blue plastic child-sized chair in front of two educators who were trying to decide if they believed dyslexia even existed. The fact that they had a choice made me feel hopeless, helpless, and isolated. As they sputtered and groped to use any word other than dyslexia, a curious thing happened—I began to disappear. First, I couldn't see my hands; then, I watched my lap go up in a thin veil of vapor. I believe for a moment that I was only a pair of blinking eyes. No one noticed, but I disappeared into that place where the "D" word goes—that secret place all "un-teachables" go. I went into the dark locker of library-silent oblivion and neglect. I was small in that place. My knees were under my chin. I curled my toes underneath my body. I might have to stay here forever. My body would, over time, become the shape of the locker. My spine would become bent and twisted. My legs would grow into my chest. My hands and feet would resemble folded bird claws. My clothes would become fused to my skin. I would turn gray with shame and self-hatred. I wouldn't need water or food here. I would become something else, something a little less human in this place.

I'd wait here until someone would let me out, or I'd wake up; because I am dreaming. It's true that no matter how many decades separate me from my childhood, I still have school nightmares.

The Breakdown:

The ribs you see represent what it feels to be educationally malnourished.

By all accounts, starvation is a painful experience. I can assure you, so is educational starvation.

The paperwork and books stacked up against the locker door symbolize all the tools to the knowledge that surrounded me, but my inability to reach them.

The half-bird/half-girl body represents what it's like to feel monstrous by one's difference, and represents the dehumanization I felt by being put aside — being treated as "other."

The locker represents locked potential and isolation.

When dyslexic people tell their stories, historically and currently, there are usually three elements in our experiences that define "the wrongs" that happen to us as students in the past and still today. Our experiences fall into categories of:

- Dehumanization
- Moral exclusion
- Emotional Un-safety

The most dehumanizing experiences I recall were in the rooms I was sent to outside of the classroom. "Reading rooms," or "resource rooms" that were in closets, or makeshift converted storage rooms still make me shiver. My son had a stint in a closet reading room, and I recently spoke to a student who was sent out of his classroom to learn on a busy flight of stairs. These places are usually makeshift afterthoughts, and they feel every bit of such.

In high school, I had to go into a closet tutoring room with a teacher. Our legs were touching as we sat, crammed, at a metal desk. At one point, the door was left open, and my peers saw me in that closet. I felt very vulnerable and emotionally unsafe in that place. The humiliation that I was in a closet felt like hot shame washing over my insides. The anxiety I would be seen in a closet by my peers devastated me beyond words. I froze. I couldn't move. The last thing I could do was learn in such an emotionally hazardous environment. I was only surviving. This closet told me a story about myself that wasn't true.

These experiences outside of my power sent me into fight or flight mode. I called in sick whenever I could. I hid. I did whatever it took to get out of being called on to read aloud. My experiences in school were nightmarish.

I'm sure we've all watched the Harry Potter movies, or better yet, read the books. You may recall the part where Harry Potter is given a room in a storage space under the stairs. Even a small child understands this act is so wrong and dehumanizing to the humanity of our favorite character.

If you think I'm insensitive to a school's budget, let me tell you this, we can teach math and reading and science, but we can never give a young person their self-esteem back. These experiences hardwire our developing brains and are with us through life.

Fear has morally excluded dyslexic students for generations. There's a profound fear we will cost too much money to address appropriately. There's a striking fear that once dyslexic students are identified, that we must be taught. There's also the fear that teachers must be trained to teach dyslexic students, and who's going to do that? These things are small problems when compared to the biggest moral excluder of all time, which is found in this well-known quote by Grace Hopper:

"The most dangerous phrase in the language is, 'we've always done it this way.'"

"We've always done it this way," holds generations of pain and discrimination, and it prolongs the possibility of progress and change.

The mindset of "we've always done it this way" is the mountain we must move.

On September 18, 2014, Sally Shaywitz sat before the congressional committee on Science, Space, and Technology and presented "The Science of Dyslexia."

After presenting irrefutable evidence, she boldly stated, "dyslexia is a civil rights issue of our time." Her bold message was a direct call to dyslexic people and to the people who love us.

Just as critical as literacy is our need for well-being within a school environment. How we're treated as students shapes us. We need to put an end to the scarring experiences. Our collective stories define the wrongs that happen — wrongs that are continuing today. Our hardest and darkest experiences of educational neglect and mistreatment need to be voiced. We desperately need to change an academic culture of wrongs that happen to dyslexic students. I have never seen a civil rights movement advance without articulating the wrongs that have happened throughout time. Our experiences as dyslexic students, parents of dyslexic children, and advocates for dyslexic people need to be told. It is up to all of us to see that ignorance and injustice do not prevail over science, evidence, knowledge, and empathy. Our value as people is not up for negotiation. We need to change the educational experience for future generations of dyslexic people.

#changetheexperience #teachus

My name is Mary Radcliff Harnetiaux. I'm openly and irrefutably a dyslexic person. I'm a mom and a co-business owner in the field of science and atmospheric measure. I'm a writer and a professional artist.



## THE PARENT SESSIONS



In the month of October we are launching the first three parts of an overall series we are calling The Parent Sessions. In these sessions, which are being led by a powerful, educated and influential group of women who were involved in the Reading First initiative in the state of California, after the National Reading Panel, parents will be given information they need to know in order to help educate their own children via the science of reading. If you are a parent, and even if you are an educator who would like to learn more, this will be an amazing opportunity to dive into the science of reading instruction.

We were so excited and honored when this offer was extended to us to be a platform to share this with parents, and we were even more excited that for once, it is training aimed directly at parents, and that the cost would be \$0.00.

The first three sessions are available for registration on our Facebook page. The sessions will not air live on Facebook, but will be via Zoom, and are limited to 100 attendees each. Don't worry if you miss a session, we are recording the sessions, and also hope to cycle back through these sessions as time allows so you can have active engagement and ask as many questions as you can to adhere to our mission of educating and empowering.

## FEATURED BLOG ARTICLES

### WHY ARE YOU NOT PRO-ISD?

Recently I had an exchange with a school board member who may be trying to do the right thing, but is missing the message. The name of this person, as well as the state and district he represents will remain unnamed. For the purpose of this article, we will call him Bob. Bob joined one of our support groups and said he was pro-dyslexia.

To have a school board member within a dyslexia support group is, in my opinion, a huge win, especially one who claims to be pro-dyslexia. It is unknown how much Bob followed the questions, complaints, needs, suggestions, pains and struggles shared within the group.

To read more please go to:  
<https://www.thedyslexiainitiative.org/post/why-are-you-not-pro-isd>



### MCCARTHYISM AND DYSLEXIA

So, why do I bring up McCarthyism?

In the current educational environment there are two opposing sides, the publishing companies and their lobbyists, as well as educational establishment decision makers on one side, and the neuroscientists, dyslexia academics, advocates and parents on the other.

It makes me sad to say this, and this is not the case with every district, but the educational side is engaging in McCarthyism. Because of the change in education over the last forty years from family and child focused to publishing company driven agendas, it's become a game of us versus them. They're McCarthy, and we're just the accused.

To read more please go to:  
<https://www.thedyslexiainitiative.org/post/mccarthyism-and-dyslexia>



Don't forget to subscribe for updates like our newsletter and more on our website,  
[www.TheDyslexiaInitiative.org](http://www.TheDyslexiaInitiative.org).

