

The Dialogue Surrounding Dyslexia: Five Important Takeaways

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Last fall, over the course of five stories, we attempted to piece together where dyslexia, also known as a failure to read words and sentences that [affects anywhere between 5-20 percent of students](#), stands in schools today. The results of our research, along with consultations with the country's best experts as well as parent and teacher interviews, were by no means conclusive, but still informative.

The takeaway: We have a long way to go in schools toward understanding, diagnosing and properly intervening for students with dyslexia.

For many, just saying the word dyslexia is an issue, for only 30 states currently recognize dyslexia as an actual condition, instead listing *failure to read* under a host of different diagnoses and terms, confusing parents and hindering many students from getting the early, intense intervention they desperately need from inside the system. Some families step outside their school system for private one-on-one testing, tutoring and assistance to aid their dyslexic children, nearly all of which comes at an exorbitant cost.

Knowing that early intervention is key and eases reading difficulties, experts and school psychologists alike worried aloud that many teacher-training programs [don't do enough](#) to help classroom teachers identify the markers of dyslexia. In addition, school programs intended to target and help those with reading deficiencies, like Response To Intervention (RTI), do not function efficiently in all schools. Supporting what we heard from parents, [a recent study](#) performed by the federally backed National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance on schools that used RTI for literacy, found that "first-graders who received reading interventions actually did worse than virtually identical peers who did not get the more targeted assistance," according to Education Week.

Even with all these negatives, there are also many positives contributing to improving the lives of those with reading and writing difficulties: Technology in many ways has changed life for those who struggle to read and write; some states are working hard to "say dyslexia," and are attempting to bring awareness to schools around the issue; activists like the parents and teachers who created the [#saydyslexia](#) hashtag tirelessly raise awareness on social media and with school administrations.

Of course, at the heart of the matter are the students themselves who, with lots of tutoring, often gain enough fluency to get through school well enough. Many find success, academic or otherwise, in spite of reading difficulties.

Here are five important takeaways to consider when thinking about how we help struggling readers in school and how we view dyslexics within society:

1. Dyslexia isn't a disease, disorder or flipping letters backwards; it's a different brain. Experts agree that dyslexia isn't a dysfunction of the brain, or lack of willpower in an unmotivated or lazy student, but a [brain that's wired in a different way](#). Since there is no reading center of the brain or reading gene, Maryanne Wolf, dyslexia expert and author of "Proust and the Squid," points out that each brain has to form its own "reading circuit" and learn to read on its own — and many things can happen along the way. When one piece of the reading circuit doesn't connect properly due to the way the brain is constructed, which is the case in most dyslexics (some dyslexics may be hindered by two pieces), then reading fails to happen, or goes very slowly. For the majority of dyslexics, *phoneme awareness*, or the ability to connect sounds to letters, is the missing piece.

Failure to read is often in direct opposition to a student's cognitive ability, and often dyslexia can be "compensated" for a time by a bright child who works hard to memorize words. As academic demands increase, however, a "second wave" of dyslexics are discovered in third, fourth and fifth grades as students struggle with harder words

and more reading assignments, where faster comprehension is required.

Many dyslexics need special one-on-one training in the Orton-Gillingham reading method or a similar program to help them learn to read — although for some, reading and writing will always be a struggle, because dyslexia, while often categorized under “learning disorder,” really isn’t.

2. Technology has changed the game for many dyslexics, and should be used as an aid in schools. For dyslexics, the voice-to-text apps and audiobook reading helpers developed in the last decade are not “cheating”: Instead, these [life-changing tech tools](#) are a way for dyslexics to fully participate in classroom activities that were once unreachable. But to do so, schools must let go of the expectation that all students will get to the same place in the same way; as in Kyle Redford’s fifth-grade classroom, in which she handed a severely dyslexic student an iPad with voice-to-text, and soon realized that once he could move around the hurdle of spelling the words, he was a brilliant writer and had lots to say.

With help from the Strategic Alternative Learning Technique (SALT) Center’s educational technology coordinator, Mary Beth Foster, we discovered that among the best tech tools for dyslexics are:

- * Kurzweil software, featuring Texthelp Read and Write
- * Google Chrome’s VoiceNote and Read and Write
- * Livescribe Smartpen
- * Amazon’s Immersion Reading and Learning Ally’s VOICEText

Our readers jumped in, too: Several commenters recommended Bookshare, an audiobook reading app with follow-along text that’s free for any student with an IEP. Another reader recommended [Fast For Word](#), a software program that helps dyslexics and other struggling readers build foundational skills.

3. Teacher-training programs should spend more time focusing on what do to with kids who can’t seem to catch up. Experts agree that [teacher-training programs](#) vary in the quality of what teachers-in-training learn about reading, and how to recognize the signs and signals of students who are struggling. We reported the story of Martha Youman, a New York City teaching fellow with a master’s degree who had no idea what to do with the struggling readers in her second-grade classroom. When she later became a Ph.D. expert in dyslexia, she realized that her training had prepared her well for how to plan and for how to teach — but not for what to do when the lessons didn’t work.

Even after graduating from teacher-training programs, said Dr. Laurie Cutting, faculty director of the Vanderbilt Kennedy Center Reading Clinic, many teachers operate under an assumption that the 50 percent of kids who didn’t magically learn how to read will eventually do so. But she said that’s mistaken — it’s crucial that teachers recognize when reading isn’t coming together and that all students, even the ones who read well, get direct, intense instruction in decoding, or matching letter sounds to their printed counterparts.

Most teachers, however, shouldn’t be solely responsible to help dyslexic students reach fluency — but just recognizing the signs of struggling readers, and being able to direct them to the services they need, is a huge step forward.

4. While the link between dyslexia and special talents and abilities hasn’t been proved, often talents get overlooked because of the focus on reading deficiency. While interesting that it seems so many talented people struggle with reading and writing — from artists like Pablo Picasso and Steven Spielberg to business giants like Richard Branson — scientists have yet to figure out the chicken-or-the-egg proposition: Do dyslexics compensate when they realize they can’t read? Or does a different brain structure allow [different talents and gifts](#) to emerge?

It doesn’t really matter what the answer is, say dyslexia experts in the field. What matters most is to focus on a child’s potential rather than deficiencies. And all too often, children in schools who are confronted with so much failure understandably fail to realize their strengths and talents. This doesn’t just apply to art and business either: As

Dr. Sheryl Rimrodt at the Vanderbilt Kennedy Center Reading Clinic said, often beaten-down dyslexic students don't realize that they can go to college and major in medicine, law or other subjects that may require lots of reading and writing. The key, said Rimrodt, is to realize that dyslexics have a different brain, and that brain will have different needs, and to proceed from that point. But students shouldn't sell themselves short — and neither should their teachers or parents.

5. The failure associated with dyslexia follows students into adulthood. One of the most moving moments of posting the dyslexia articles on social media was reading the responses we received from adult dyslexics.

From Devon M.: Professors in college often deny their [reading difficulties] existence, too. I actually had one professor tell me to, "just exercise more and it will go away" and then later, "you SAY you have all these learning disabilities, but you're actually quite sharp!"

From Pamela B.: My math teacher laughed at me in front of the class when I explained that the numbers in the fractions kept moving around. Now I have a PhD. Check mate.

From Felix Q.: I constantly get the "but you're too smart!" comment, which not only strips us of what we know to be true, but works under the assumption that people with learning disabilities cannot possibly be smart.

This only highlights the need for more and better education on what dyslexia is and what it isn't, and how recognizing the signs early, along with getting students the proper intervention they need, will help suffering students. While all the interventions in the world will not make dyslexia disappear, hopefully early intervention, along with positive reinforcement, will mitigate much of the difficulties students face when they're born with a different brain.

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