



Triple R Teaching

As I look back to the students that I taught, I can picture one particular little boy who I'm sure had dyslexia. He was bright, articulate, and very kind.

I remember, on one particularly rough day of teaching, he gave me this little blue gem shaped like a heart and said, "This is for you because you're the nicest teacher I've ever had." I'll admit I was not feeling like a nice teacher that day, but this sensitive little guy knew that I needed some encouragement.

He was all ears during whole class read alouds, and his language comprehension was excellent, but he struggled to get words off the page.

At the time, I was a balanced literacy teacher. I advised his parents to read to him more, which they were already doing, and I gave him more practice with leveled texts. He was a hard worker, and he had committed parents, but nothing we did made a whole lot of difference. That little boy is now in his mid-twenties, and I sure hope he found a teacher who gave him more help than I did.

Today's episode is what I wish that I knew about dyslexia.

Number one, dyslexia is real and it's more common than you might think.

Recently, a friend of mine shared with me that her graduate school professor told her that dyslexia doesn't exist. Lest you think this was decades ago, it was 2015. 2015! Dyslexia is real. People can have mild, moderate, or severe dyslexia. The Yale Center for Dyslexia and Creativity says that up to 20% of students have it. It is the most common learning disorder. There is much we can do for students with dyslexia, but there's no cure. Our students will not grow out of it.

Number two, dyslexia is a language-based learning disorder.

Old myths die hard, but dyslexia is not about seeing letters or words backward. It's most commonly due to a difficulty in phonological processing. This is the International Dyslexia Association's official definition,

"Dyslexia is a specific learning disability that is neurobiological in origin. It is characterized by difficulties with accurate and/or fluent word recognition and by poor spelling and decoding abilities. These difficulties typically result from a deficit in the phonological component of language that is often unexpected in relation to other cognitive abilities and the provision of effective classroom instruction. Secondary consequences may include problems in reading comprehension and reduced reading experience that can impede growth of vocabulary and background knowledge."

Phew! If that felt like a mouthful, that's because it is! Dyslexia is difficult to define, and experts don't always agree on the definition.

Number three, early screening helps us know which students are at risk for dyslexia.

Clues for dyslexia can appear even before a child starts school, so it's imperative that teachers use a screener to detect red flags. Screeners do not diagnose dyslexia, but they do tell us which students would benefit from more testing. I'll make sure to link to some screeners you could try in the show notes.

Number four, it's a big mistake to take a wait-and-see approach when it comes to dyslexia.

Early identification is crucial so students can get the help they need. We've learned that the brain responds best to intervention when children are young. As we get older, our brains get less plastic. We can still help older dyslexic readers, but the process will be harder than it would've been when they were young, and, by that time, children have often become very discouraged, making it harder to reach them. Many students with dyslexia need one-on-one tutoring so they can move forward. As a teacher, it's your job to alert parents to this need.

Number five, students with dyslexia can learn to read with the right approach.

Students with dyslexia need a structured literacy approach. The good news is, all students benefit from structured literacy. It uses explicit, systematic teaching to teach phonology, sound-symbol relationships, syllables, morphology, syntax, and semantics. Structured literacy is very different from the way I used to teach reading, using predictable leveled texts and three-queuing. Balanced literacy approaches will not teach dyslexic students to be successful readers.

Number six, students with dyslexia need reasonable accommodations. Here are some that make sense in a primary classroom: allow more time for test-taking, repeat directions as needed, use daily routines so it's easier for students to know what's expected, give small step-by-step instructions, build in daily review, and provide books on audio.

Finally, number seven, YOU can be the teacher that makes all the difference. When you educate yourself about dyslexia, point parents in the right direction, and change the way you teach so you reach all learners, you will make an incredible lasting impact on a child's life.

Here's how to learn more, read "Conquering Dyslexia" by Jan Hasbrouck. It's short, easy to read, and practical. You can read it in a weekend. Read "Dyslexia Advocate!" by Kelli Sandman-Hurley to know how to help a child with dyslexia in the public education system. Bookmark the International Dyslexia Association's website; its printable fact sheets are super helpful. And finally, read my blog series, all about dyslexia, which I'll link to in the show notes for this episode. You can find those show notes at themeasuredmom.com/episode27.

See you next time!