

Neurodiversity Awareness

Do schools embrace this concept for dyslexic learners?

Brains are Not “One Size Fits All”

As adults it's easy to go through the motions with special events and awareness initiatives; it's not always second nature to pause and reflect. The term, "neurodiversity" is generally used in context of spectrum disorders like autism or mental health issues such as ADHD. Neurodiversity means that people don't come with one size fits all brains. People are more complicated and science has shown that different brains are wired in different ways. These differences are part of what gives us our unique abilities, interests, fears, strengths, and weaknesses. Communities become stronger, more compassionate and more accepting of differences when they are educated to recognize and understand each other's unique traits - diversity.

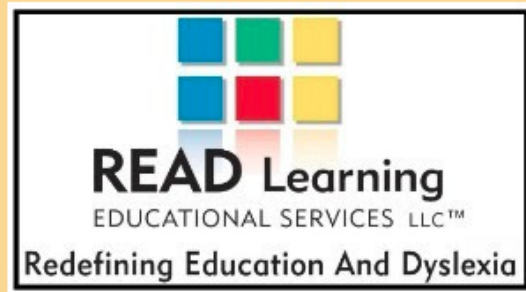


Schools Celebrate Awareness Initiatives

This is why many of our schools across the country celebrate awareness initiatives. Being a former special education teacher and having a brother with special needs one of my favorites was always the, “Spread the Word to End the Word” campaign. T-shirts were sold in March and worn on a specified day. Students gave a school-wide presentation that educated peers about treating everyone, despite differences, with respect and compassion. This created an overall positive “buzz” within the school climate. Another positive initiative happens during the month of April when it's common for schools to celebrate autism awareness month. This is important because it raises awareness. It reinforces acceptance, support, and builds understanding around autism with the goal of making life easier and happier for those who have autism while at the same time building understanding for those who don't so they are able to interact with, work with, and be friends with folks who do have autism. It's mutually beneficial.



These initiatives are examples of neurodiversity awareness. They are beneficial to our communities. As a dyslexia specialist, this makes me pause to think. Over half of our country has some kind of dyslexia legislation in place, yet I've never heard of a school celebrating dyslexia awareness month. Come to think of it, I've never worked in a



school that has recognized October as being significant to dyslexia. Do schools in your area celebrate dyslexia awareness month? I'm sure there are districts that do, and I'd love to hear where they are and what kind of events are planned for dyslexia awareness. Please share!

Dyslexia is Not Visible from Outward Behavior

It's safe to say the majority of schools don't participate in dyslexia awareness activities - but why? Why doesn't dyslexia get more attention? Why aren't schools helping to build more understanding of this very prevalent language acquisition disorder? Is it because it's known as an invisible disability? Autism is generally easy to spot because of how a person interacts or doesn't interact socially. On the contrary, dyslexia is not visible from the outside. You can't tell someone has dyslexia by looking at their outward behavior. This makes dyslexia awareness all the more important. Dyslexia comprises 80% of all learning disabilities and is visible through FMRI imaging in neurological research. Yet, the term is still taboo in many of our schools. Neurological imaging has proven that dyslexics have different brain wiring in the language processing center of their brains and have shown different activation patterns within the brain while they are reading. This sounds like neurodiversity to me.

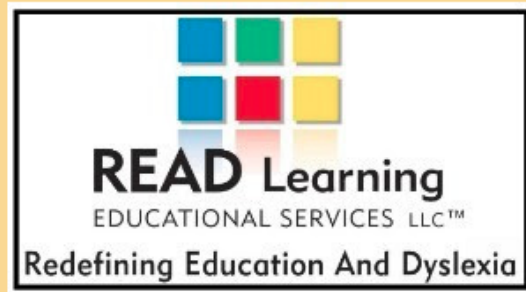
Different Approaches Get Different Results



As a dyslexia specialist and the founder of a specialized learning center, [READ Learning Educational Services, LLC](#) I help students, young and old, learn to read and spell when traditional approaches have failed. You might wonder, "How is our reading center able to bring students up to grade level in reading when highly qualified teachers and specialists at the child's schools have not?" This is where neurodiversity comes into play and where more awareness and education is needed. There are no "one-size-fits-all" approaches to teaching reading and many (not all, but many) in the education world are unaware of two very important principles.

- First, there are different approaches to teaching reading. Different approaches will reap different results when working with dyslexic learners.
- Second, neurodiversity should come into play when choosing the most appropriate reading approach for dyslexic students.

Please note, the term "approach" is not synonymous with the term "programs". There are hundreds and maybe thousands of reading programs available to educators.



“Approach” refers to the actual teaching method/style in which a student is taught. This includes but is not limited to the sequence of content taught, how content is presented, the type of text that is used for students to read, specific strategies that are taught to support reading and spelling skills, and strategies to support memory and generalization of concepts. At my reading center we only use Orton Gillingham based approaches. Orton Gillingham is a very different way of teaching reading (when compared to balanced literacy approaches) and is steeped in medical research as opposed to educational philosophy/theory. It’s intense, explicit, sequential, multisensory, rule based and focuses on spelling just as much as it does reading. Reading and spelling are taught in tandem. Orton based interventions focus on phonemic awareness, phonics, decoding, fluency, accuracy, and spelling. If you’d like more information on how to teach spelling systematically, check out the [Silver Moon Spelling Rules](#) program.

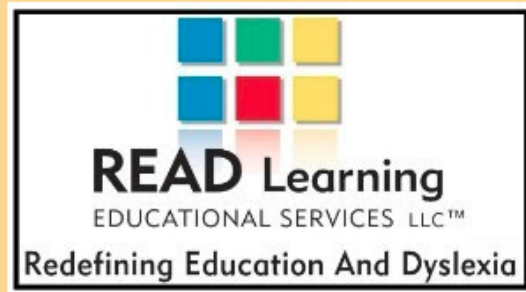
5 Common Characteristics

Students we work with at, [READ Learning](#) generally enter our doors with five things in common.



- First, traditional reading approaches have failed them.
- Second, the student is anywhere from 1 year to 8 or more years behind in reading level.
- Third, the student has nothing wrong with their intelligence.
- Fourth, the student feels something is wrong with them and struggles with confidence and often some anxiety.
- Fifth, the student wants to do well and they want to improve their skills but they just don’t know how.

We’d likely see less students with these five characteristics in common if there were increased awareness and education surrounding dyslexia in our schools. If you’d like to



learn more about dyslexia, request our [“Characteristics of Dyslexia”](#) or [“Dyslexia Testing”](#) resources.

Sometimes You Don’t Know, What You Don’t Know

Consider the following scenario. Last year, I spoke with a special education teacher who shared a frustrating conversation she had while at work. She was in a meeting with her school's psychologist discussing student literacy needs. She shared that a few of her students were showing signs of dyslexia. She went on to share that most of these students had shown little to no progress in reading even with ongoing tiered intervention and classroom instruction over the past year. The school psychologist responded by saying that it didn't really matter if her students were dyslexic or not because it wouldn't change the way they would teach reading to them anyway.



It wouldn't change the way they would teach reading anyway. This statement is worth repeating because of its transparency. It shows that this professional is working in a district that’s missing some key information. In other words, “he doesn’t know what he doesn’t know.” This district has not trained their key players to understand the

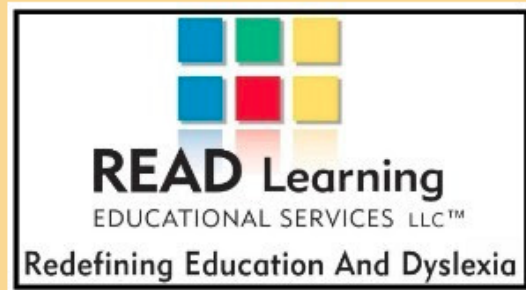
neurological/medical research surrounding dyslexia. If they had, the psychologist would know there are different courses of action (approaches) recommended when working with students who show symptoms of or are diagnosed with dyslexia. When students are not making enough progress to close the achievement gap between themselves and benchmark reading levels it should, at the very least, spur a conversation about other possible approaches that could be used for the child’s reading instruction and why the current approach is not working.

All You Have is a Cold

I felt the need to share this story because it's not an uncommon experience. I hear versions of this quite often, except with different players. In the other versions there have been principals, special education directors, reading specialists, literacy coordinators and other teachers as the persons who aren’t knowledgeable about dyslexia or alternate reading approaches.

Unfortunately, I can relate to this experience. When I was still teaching in the classroom, I listened to my special education director tell our department not to





use the word, "dyslexia" when talking to parents, but instead to refer to the cluster of symptoms as being a reading disability. Yikes! This perspective is comparable to going to the doctor with pneumonia and the doctor telling you that all you have is a cold. The prescribed solution for pneumonia is very different from that of a general cold. With a cold you would simply rest up and drink lots of fluids. With the latter, you'd be given medication with specific directions on how to take the medication and for how long. This is a relevant analogy considering dyslexics have different wiring within their brains. They acquire reading differently from the majority of readers. Because they learn to read differently, it's important to identify them as early as possible and have alternate, more prescriptive approaches readily available. It's a common myth that dyslexia is rare. Dyslexia is not rare; the prevalence in the general population is 15-20%. Instead, what tends to be rare is a school's ability to accurately identify and intervene.

Had I Only Known Sooner

How can your school or district embrace neurodiversity awareness for dyslexic learners? Could you sponsor events for dyslexia awareness month? Maybe you could reach out to bring in an expert that is able to [speak about dyslexia](#)? If you or someone you know would like to learn more about the science behind teaching those with dyslexia, I would suggest reading the book, Overcoming Dyslexia by Sally Shaywitz. A few years back, I shared this book with a reading specialist who, after reading it, came to me in tears. Had she only known sooner...were some of the feelings she shared.

"You may choose to look the other way but you can never say again that you did not know." - William Wilberforce

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