Triple R Teaching

What are the signs of dyslexia? What should you do if you suspect dyslexia? And what can classroom teachers do to support all students as they learn to read? We've got the answers today with Heather O'Donnell, certified Dyslexia Practitioner and owner of New Paltz Multisensory Tutoring Clinic.

Anna Geiger: Hello, everybody. Today we have the honor of listening to a conversation with Heather O'Donnell. She is the owner of a tutoring practice founded in 2018, and she and her team are currently supporting sixty eight families, both online and in-person, with multisensory reading, math, and writing instruction. She is here today to talk to us about dyslexia, what the signs of dyslexia are, what parents and teachers can do, and how they support learners at their facility. Welcome, Heather!

Heather O'Donnell: Thank you so much for having me. I'm excited to be here.

Anna Geiger: Before we went live here, you and I talked about your background in learning how to teach reading. Like so many of us, you learned the balanced literacy way in college, but pretty early on you said that you had some experiences with teaching with Foundations, and that changed your perspective. Can you talk about that a little bit?

Heather O'Donnell: Sure. So I started my career as a general education teacher. I've always been passionate about early childhood, and I was actually teaching preschool in a private preschool in the New York City area. I found that I was drawn to a student in my class who had a SEIT (Special Education Itinerant Teacher), a special education teacher coming into my classroom to work with her to facilitate the environment for her.

So I made a slight career shift. I went back to school to get a second master's in Early Childhood Special Education. While I completed that coursework, I worked at the Aaron School, which is a private special ed school in New York City. At the Aaron School, we worked with small classes of eight to twelve students. There was a teacher and an assistant teacher in every single classroom.

My first year I was the assistant teacher in a kindergarten classroom, and we taught kids to read using Foundations. Coming from a balanced literacy graduate program, to me, this was just amazing. I had no idea you could teach children to read sound by sound, letter by letter, and I really loved it. I loved taking the material. I loved bringing out the multisensory materials, adding things to make it interesting and having the children come alive with the learning. For me, looking back as a teacher, this was one of those formative experiences that I just stumbled into, but it really shaped who I was as a teacher.

When I left that school, I bought my own Foundations kit and continued to work with students privately. Then I put all that away when I took five or six years off having my own children. And then when I came back to teaching again in formal classrooms, I pulled out the letter tiles. That is the approach that I feel makes the most sense for kids when they're learning to read, especially at the early elementary level.

In the time that I was looking to get back into teaching full-time, there were lots and lots of teachers. At this point, it's well-known that we were sort of headed more into a teacher shortage, but it was 2015 or so when I was looking for positions, and they were really hard to come by. So I was able to work in several districts as a leave replacement or doing short-term teaching, and I was working as a special ed teacher.

I had several positions as a self-contained classroom teacher, which is amazing work. The kids are fantastic, but being a self-contained classroom teacher is a lot. Everything needs to be visual. All the systems and the routines need to be visual. You're talking about individual visual schedules. You're talking about completely tailored experiences.

That was my last position. I was working in a local district as a K-2 autism classroom teacher, and there was a long commute involved, and I had my own kids. I just reached that point of needing to step back and move things around in my life.

In the fall of 2018, I decided to take the Wilson certification, which I'd gained from that district in order to better support students learning to read, and I opened my own tutoring practice. Originally, it was just me. Now I have a team of certified Orton-Gillingham providers. We have Wilson certified, and we have Orton-Gillingham certified through the academy. They are tutors who help me support so many more families than I could on my own.

Anna Geiger: So I know that many of the students, not all, but many of the students that your team teaches have dyslexia, which we know has to do a lot with phonological processing. There are other parts of the definition. I can direct people to a blog series I

wrote all about dyslexia, which really gives a lot more information, but could you talk to us about the signs of dyslexia that a teacher or parent might see that would alert them that we've got to do some more digging to find out what's going on here?

Heather O'Donnell: Sure. There's a belief that you can't diagnose dyslexia until about the age of seven, but there is actually research that indicates there are signs even before a child enters school. A child who is late to talking, for example, or has difficulty remembering letters, numbers, preschool curriculum, colors, numbers, nursery rhymes.

Nursery rhymes are considered a little traditional at this point, but the rhyming, the sing-song aspect, is an important step towards establishing an understanding of rhyming words and verbal fluency. Often kids with dyslexia have difficulty identifying rhymes and have difficulty recalling and retaining those nursery rhymes when they're practiced in the classroom.

So those are some signs that you can see before a child even steps into a kindergarten classroom.

Once they become school age, I think the biggest indicator that I hear time after time from our clients and teachers is that you have a really bright, capable child who is intelligent and so smart, but their reading progress is just so much behind that profile, and the teachers are a little confused and not sure what's going on. And the parents are a little confused and not sure what's going on.

A child with dyslexia at school age will have trouble with spelling. Spelling is really difficult, because again, spelling is harder to a certain extent than reading. When we're reading, we're looking at words on a page and we're interpreting them. But when we're spelling or writing, we have to understand the sounds. We have to hold onto the sounds. We have to remember how to form the letters on the paper, and go ahead and complete that physical motion, which for a kindergartner or a first grader, that's a lot. Writing is a huge demand, and that's why kids with dyslexia really struggle with it.

School-aged kids with dyslexia take a long time to do reading and writing tasks. Homework takes forever, and there's usually tears, unfortunately, and they avoid reading. I hear it from client after client. I've had teachers come to me and they're like, "I'm a teacher and I love reading, and my child just isn't there, won't do it, is not interested. Something's wrong and we don't know what's going on."

When teachers and parents notice all these little things and they're coming together with a child who is significantly behind where they should be in terms of their reading expectation, that's when as awareness increases, hopefully, it's time to take the next step and look into, what else could be going on here and how can we get this child more support?

Anna Geiger: Do you think it's necessary, if these problems are all showing themselves, that a parent should seek out a dyslexia diagnosis or should that not be on the top of their list?

Heather O'Donnell: I usually recommend to families to start with a school evaluation. That's always my first step. I recommend to them if they have any questions about their child's learning, that should be step one. It's free, and it will provide a basic look at your child's strengths and weaknesses.

Now, unfortunately, requesting an evaluation from school districts can be a little bit of you get what you ask for. For instance if you don't necessarily request a phonological awareness assessment like the CTOPP or if you don't request the right assessment, it might not be included necessarily. So there's a little bit of a learning curve there for families, but that is typically the first step that I ask families to take when they come and they're wondering what's going on with their child.

Now, school evaluations can take a couple of months to get done because you put in the request, and then the testing has to be done. So typically, what we would do is if a parent comes to us looking to start tutoring, we will make sure to do our own evaluations so that we have a clear starting point that can then be referred back to. Then we will start to work with a student and start to remediate and support their reading difficulty.

But I typically encourage parents to start at the school level, because sometimes that can be enough. A meeting is held. A school might decide that the child is deserving of an IEP. And at that point, services can be provided. And then if the parent chooses to go on to a private evaluation and a formal diagnosis through a doctor, they can. But ultimately, it's about supporting the child in the school environment.

Anna Geiger: So what are the assessments that you give when you first meet a student?

Heather O'Donnell: So we offer several. We offer an evaluation package, which

families who are often interested in an IEP and getting their child classified to receive more support at school, will seek. We give the WIST, which is the Word Inventory Spelling Test. I always get that wrong. Word Identification Spelling Test. It is one of the hallmarks of the Wilson Reading Program. It's the beginning evaluation that records all the data. It is standardized. It provides percentiles and standard scores and all of that. So we offer that as a stand-alone package for parents who perhaps are not necessarily sure they're interested in tutoring, but are looking to offer more support to their child in school and seeking a classification.

When a family just comes to us, and they're ready to start tutoring, we give their child what's called the WADE, which is a similar test to the WIST. It's just not standardized. It's the Wilson entry level test. It goes through all their skills. It will show the weaknesses that will be remediated through tutoring. And then my Orton-Gillingham providers will give the Gallistel-Ellis or an equivalent test that they prefer, that they're more comfortable with.

Again, it's really important to us to make sure that we get that starting point, both in terms of tracking the child's progress and making sure we're remediating the areas of weakness, but also so that if a family does try to get more support from a school, we can provide that information for them as well.

Anna Geiger: So I know that as a teacher, I look back, and I certainly know now that there were definitely a couple kids that probably had dyslexia. At the time, I really knew nothing about it at all. People listening to this podcast are probably quite a bit more educated than I was at that time, twenty-some years ago. But they still might not know, what can I do to help this child within my classroom?

I think we both agree that a lot of this starts with the Tier 1 instruction. So maybe we can talk about what core reading instruction should look like for everyone, which we know will actually greatly decrease the number of kids that may need to be classified as dyslexic because they're getting their needs met already in the regular instruction.

Can you talk to what that should look like and maybe what it should not look like?

Heather O'Donnell: Oh, this is a great question, but definitely a loaded one, because I think what I would describe in a perfect world of what it should look like, I also recognize that not every teacher has the ability to necessarily implement that. Schools have curricula, schools have expectations, and I absolutely feel for the teachers who are in positions and in classrooms where they want to move one way, but there are real constraints that make it a complicated situation. So I feel like I have to say that off the top.

I think in a perfect world, where price is no object, and I could design the curriculum for every classroom, I think every teacher should have some basic Orton-Gillingham training and be able to directly and explicitly teach the sequence and the structure of our language to their students.

I, myself, have children who took to reading like ducks to water, but I still see the deficits in their understanding of the structure of the language. Prefixes, substances, morphology, it's a code and it can be taught. I personally think every child would benefit from even maybe not an in-depth ongoing study of it, but just the basics. This is how the language works. It's not wild and crazy. It comes from Anglo-Saxon. It comes from French. It comes from all these places.

And so I think whether it's a curriculum, like S.P.I.R.E.'s one that I've grown to love. I have several tutors who are using S.P.I.R.E. right now, and that's a pretty great Tier 1 curriculum. It's direct. It's explicit. Would it necessarily meet the needs of a child who's severely dyslexic? Maybe not, but it provides the direct instruction in spelling, the direct instruction in decoding. It provides decodable stories all embedded in it. I personally would love to see more use of that in my area in general, in the classroom.

Decodable stories, that's such a huge piece when kids are struggling with reading. Teach a skill. Give them practice in it. Give them a decodable story to practice more. And then move on to the next skill. The ability for more teachers to be able to approach reading instruction that way and in the Tier 1, I think would be amazing. It would make a big difference for those kids who are struggling a little bit when there are too many untaught concepts coming at them at once, because that's the challenge with some of the programs. Even the basic books have these skills to them that if they're not taught and kids can't decode them, then that leads to guessing at the words as opposed to actually reading them.

Anna Geiger: Any practices you can list that teachers should try to avoid if they have the freedom to do that?

Heather O'Donnell: Of course. I mean, I think when students are struggling, it's really important to scaffold the classroom so as not to put them on the spot for reading out loud or reading in groups. I think reducing the amount of independent reading time or partner reading time for kids who are really struggling is huge, particularly in the structure of reading workshop models.

I know I had a client who came to me a few years ago and described that she would sit and hold her book, but she had no idea how to read it. And then she would get so nervous she would start pulling at her eyelashes because she just didn't know what to do.

I think the classroom teacher's job is so complicated and so challenging, but I think the quiet ones are the ones that it's so important to check in with and really pull out some words on a sheet of paper without any picture to find out, can they actually read them? Because again, if there's a strong reading skill base, reading in a book or reading on a blank piece of paper with no pictures, it shouldn't make a difference. But often when that picture support disappears, the struggling readers really start to flounder.

In terms of writing assignments, when kids are really struggling with the language you can try using word banks, using sentence stems to get them started, providing the vocabulary words and the content words. Then you're not asking students to hold onto that information, and spell it, and put it into the context of the curriculum, whether it's, I don't know, forests or science and things like that. Those kinds of supports.

I think the more teachers are able and willing to brainstorm. If we have to be here, but there's still these deficit skills from the past couple years, what can we put into place to support the learners through word boxes, sentence stems, models, and things like that? I think that's really helpful.

Anna Geiger: So rewinding a little bit, you talked about reducing the amount of time that a child with perhaps dyslexia or another reading problem has to read independently or read with a partner. I know some people will hear that and say, "Well, that's what they need. They need practice," which is certainly what I've always said. And at some point, that is very important. But can you explain why that's not what's best for a child with a word reading problem?

Heather O'Donnell: I mean, again, I'm going to caveat my answer with the fact that if you're one classroom teacher and you have twenty five kids, or you have thirty kids, there is only so much you can do. I absolutely think kids who are having difficulty learning to read need practice, but I think they need practice with an adult wherever possible, whether it's a teacher's aide, or whether it's parent volunteers coming in to listen.

In my experience, and again, through the lens of an early childhood teacher, which was what I was in the classroom, asking another first grader to moderate or monitor a student's struggling skills has two challenges. Number one, it's really a lot to ask of a first grader, and number two, if a child is really struggling and they're feeling badly

about themselves, because again, the challenge with dyslexia is these are such smart, capable kids, and they know, they are looking around at the kids in their class and they're seeing that there's understandings happening that they're not getting.

I had a first grade client last year tell me, "They don't know how to teach me so that my brain knows how to learn." He was in first grade, and he has a diagnosis of dyslexia and he knew.

So I think that is a challenge. And I think it's a real challenge for teachers who are stretched too thin and managing all these different student needs. But the more that the kids who are struggling are paired with adults to monitor and support their learning, the better it is for those kids within the challenges of a early childhood classroom.

Anna Geiger: Well, thank you for sharing what parents and teachers can look for when it comes to dyslexia and next steps, as well as the approaches that you take at your center. Are there any resources, like journals, or books, or anything that you found really helpful that you'd recommend to teachers and parents?

Heather O'Donnell: I know we've recommended Dr. Sally Shaywitz's book, "Overcoming Dyslexia." Actually, I think the biggest resource these days would be the podcast, Sold a Story, which has been amazing, by Emily Hanford. She has written several investigative pieces of journalism. The New York Times has been coming out with great articles, and there was one in Time Magazine last summer.

Anna Geiger: Well, thank you so much for joining me, and I'll be sure to link in the show notes to your center, as well as the book that you mentioned and anything else that you share with me after we turn off the recorder.

Heather O'Donnell: Thank you so much for having me! This was a ton of fun. I love the opportunity to talk all things dyslexia.

Anna Geiger: You can find the show notes for this episode, including a link to Heather's tutoring clinic at reachallreaders.com/episode105. Talk to you next time!