



Seedlings
Foundation

DISCUSSION GUIDE

Written and Edited by Teachers College, Columbia University

THE **MYTHS**,
THE **STIGMAS**,
THE **TRUTHS**,
REVEALED.



THE BIG PICTURE RETHINKING DYSLEXIA

A challenge. And a gift.



DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT By conservative estimates, one in five people are dyslexic. Although very bright and often highly creative, they have a difficult time making sense of written language. I know a little about this. My son, Dylan, is dyslexic.

Like many dyslexics, Dylan is intelligent, thoughtful and intellectually curious—a “big picture” thinker. But at the age of ten, he was barely able to read and write. To say that school was difficult for him is beyond understatement. Now that he is grown and thriving, there are many things that I wish I had known about dyslexia at that time—things that would have helped me understand that his struggle in lower and middle school was not the final verdict on his academic or intellectual ability or ambition. When I was given the extraordinary opportunity to make a film about understanding dyslexia, the mission was simple: make the movie I wish my family could have seen when Dylan was functionally illiterate in 4th grade.

This film reveals that dyslexia is a neurological issue, not a character flaw. It explains that the struggle with the written word is not an indication of one's ability to think, to create, or to solve problems—all valuable skills in the world outside the classroom. This film also reveals that some of our greatest leaders in business, law, politics and medicine are dyslexics who succeeded in spite of their learning challenges.

The film also shares some of the more practical—and occasionally humorous—tips on how to deal with dyslexia on a daily basis. Hopefully, this film will help dyslexics and their families realize that the challenges of early education will be behind them one day, and that the future can—and should—be brighter for dyslexics.

It was not easy to cast my wife and son in this movie. We are typically private people, and those who know us will be greatly surprised to see this film. However, the opportunity to help other families in turmoil was important to all of us, particularly my wife, Kyle, who is a life-long educator and now an expert regarding dyslexics and education.

And we were not alone in this; three other families took a risk to share their experiences in order to help others, as did some of the world's better-known leaders in the fields of law, politics, and business. By combining our experiences with the wisdom, creativity and expertise of Drs. Sally and Bennett Shaywitz, top experts in the study and treatment of dyslexia, we hope that a broader and better understanding of dyslexia will help make the world a better place for one in five people worldwide.

—James Redford, *Director*

The Big Picture: Rethinking Dyslexia

CREATING A POSITIVE CULTURE FOR
DYSLEXIC LEARNERS

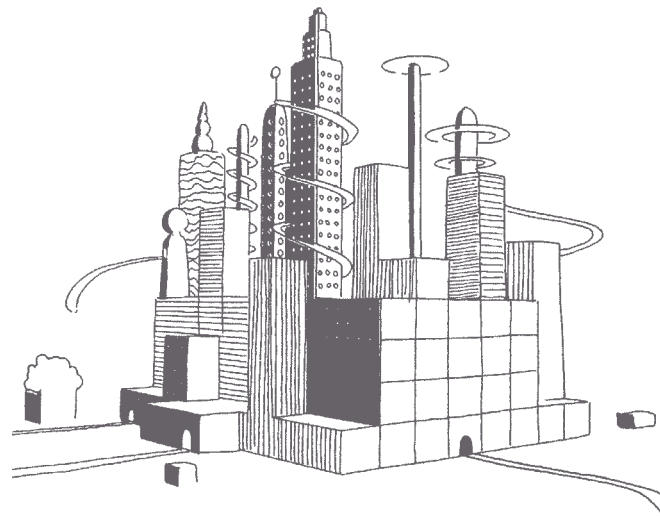


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BACKGROUND INFORMATION Though up to twenty percent of students are dyslexic, many pass through school misunderstood and performing below their potential. Creating a school culture that supports dyslexic students is not as difficult as it might initially seem. If schools operate with a solid understanding of dyslexia, and the extraordinary potential of dyslexic students, it's easier to identify and support them. Of course, dyslexic students will not fulfill their potential if they don't learn to read. That's what makes early screening and effective instruction so critical. However, aside from the learning challenges that dyslexics present in the early elementary years, those who receive intervention can become the brightest and hardest working students. Indeed, in the right environment with the right support, there is no reason to lower academic expectations for dyslexic learners.

Dyslexia is a learning disability, not a thinking disability. Teachers need to communicate this, parents need to understand this, and—most of all—dyslexic students need to know this. With a few tweaks and accommodations, dyslexic learners at any school can become engaged, high performing students. In fact, many experts would argue that it has never been a better time to be a dyslexic learner. With the educational imperative of encouraging out-of-the-box thinking and innovation in the classroom, as well as the explosion of new assistive learning technologies, dyslexics today are uniquely positioned to leverage their intellectual strengths to offset their learning challenges. It is time to rethink and re-imagine dyslexia.

SCHOOL SELF-ASSESSMENT: Questions to help you examine whether or not your school is set up to be supportive of dyslexic learners.

1. In the film, Dylan says that it is important to “just own it”. Is the word “dyslexia” used at school, and with what connotations?

Importance of naming “dyslexia”

- › The word contains the condition (“I’m not stupid, I’m dyslexic”)
- › The word demystifies the condition (“So that’s why certain things about school are hard for me”)
- › The word “destigmatizes” the condition (There is no need to whisper about it because it shouldn’t be scary or embarrassing)

- › The word introduces students to an impressive group of individuals who have managed to succeed in many areas of life despite their mechanical academic challenges
- › Naming the condition is critical to becoming an effective self-advocate. Most, if not all, successful dyslexics credit effective self-advocacy as their most important skill for overcoming their dyslexic challenges.

2. Attending a school that didn’t understand dyslexia impacted Skye’s early schooling. What is your faculty’s understanding of dyslexia? Is there professional support in place at your school so that faculty can understand, identify and intervene when necessary?

Kinds of challenges dyslexics face in the classroom:

- › Early elementary years: dyslexics demonstrate basic academic mechanical difficulties (i.e. reading, writing, spelling, sometimes math facts). They can also appear to struggle with everything related to school.
- › Late elementary years and on: dyslexics demonstrate difficulty keeping up with large volume of reading and writing
- › Dyslexics can learn to read and write, but they will always read more slowly
- › Completing assignments often takes additional time
- › Spelling is difficult for dyslexics and being bad at it is not an indication of low effort
- › Taking notes during class discussions or lessons is difficult (recording voices or borrowing someone else’s notes allows the student to pay attention during class and think about the lesson)
- › The same challenges that make learning English difficult also make learning foreign languages particularly hard for dyslexic students (usually not recommended)

3. **Dylan, Skye, Allison, and many of the adult characters in the film did not get identified early. As a result, they experienced learning delays, confusion, and low self-esteem as students. If they had been diagnosed earlier, how do you think their experience would have been different? Do teachers know the red flags to look for? When do most dyslexics get identified at your school?**

Identifying dyslexia—red flags to look for:

- › Family history of dyslexia
- › Trouble learning letters, sounds, numbers
- › Trouble rhyming
- › Trouble spelling or recognizing letters in own name
- › Trouble identifying word patterns that have same sounds (me, we, he, she)
- › Complaints that reading is hard
- › Reading of words as a memorized whole rather than sounding out the different parts
- › *Dyslexia also impacts spoken language*
 - › Can make odd word mistakes when speaking
 - › Dyslexics commonly use the wrong word to describe something
 - › Although they have the right meaning, they will use the wrong word (i.e. As Dr. Shaywitz mentions in the film, “Presbyterian” instead of “pedestrian”)
 - › They often have stutters or oral fluency issues
- › *Clues to help identify dyslexic students in upper grades*
- › Slow, reluctant reader
- › Skips words, guesses at words, replaces words with other words with similar beginning sounds
- › Postures with books
- › Poor speller
- › Poor handwriting

- › Demonstrates a gap between oral and written abilities
- › Written assessments don’t match the level of understanding expressed in discussion

4. **Dylan had to leave his school to get specialized reading instruction and Skye had to go to a specialized school. This can be costly and impractical for many students. What specialized instruction does your school offer? Is reading remediation implemented by someone who has been specially trained to deal with dyslexia?**

Effective and early intervention with specialized reading instruction

- › Instruction is most effective and efficient in grades k-2 (when classroom instruction is focused on reading instruction and peers are learning to read)
- › Reading instruction should be in small groups w/trained teacher
- › Reading program should be evidence-based
- › The earlier the intervention, the better outcome for the dyslexic student

5. **Dr. Shaywitz makes the point that dyslexics are dyslexics for life. If a dyslexic student starts to perform better in school, it is likely due to effective supports that have been put into place. Consequently, it is important not to eliminate the supports once the student starts to succeed. How are learning issues communicated among faculty? Are student learning profiles and learning accommodations shared as student’s progress through the grades?**

Dyslexics never outgrow their dyslexia

- › The challenges change over time, but the condition can not be “educated away”
- › Taking away supports when a student starts to succeed will only set them back
- › Dyslexic student success is predicated on sustained effective supports

6. Lt. Governor Newsom, Dylan, Skye, Sebastian, Allison—indeed most of the characters in the film—benefitted from having parents who helped them navigate their complicated and frustrating learning journeys. In fact, it’s often said that behind every successful dyslexic is a very invested parent who was part of their child’s learning team. How does your school communicate with and engage parents in their dyslexic child’s academic success?

Parents are a great resource

- › They know what the student’s experience looks like at home (how hard they are working, how they are feeling about themselves and school)
- › They know what kind of support they are getting away from school
- › They can help support the learning goals in the classroom (reading books aloud, getting audio-books from the library, helping with writing tasks or finishing incomplete work, keeping their child organized, etc...)

7. Dylan explains that it was important to know how he learned so that he could utilize the supports that were available for him at college. What kinds of accommodations are in place for dyslexic students at your school? How easy is it for dyslexic students to access accommodations and support? Does the school support and encourage self-advocacy?

Basic accommodations

- › Accommodation of extra time gives dyslexic students a chance to express what they know
- › Dyslexic students benefit from composing on keyboards
- › Recorded books or e-Readers should be offered to support dyslexic students with assigned reading
- › Providing course syllabuses in summer can give dyslexics a helpful head start so they can keep up with volume during school year
- › Waivers for foreign language requirements should be available

8. Dr. Shaywitz explains how dyslexia robs dyslexic students of time and how the accommodation of extra time can restore it. What are your school policies regarding the accommodation of extra time? How accessible is extra time? How many students feel comfortable asking for it and utilizing it?

Why is extra time so important?

- › Dyslexia robs the dyslexic student of time—providing them with extra time offsets the disadvantage of reading slowly.
- › Extra time provides dyslexic students with the opportunity to express what they know
- › There is no research that connects a student’s student’s speed with the depth or breadth of their knowledge or understanding. Time creates a false barrier when it comes to demonstrating what a student knows.
- › Do students feel comfortable asking for it when they need it?

9. What kinds of assistive learning technologies are available for dyslexic students? Are teachers generally supportive of accommodations and assistive learning technologies in class?

Important to encourage and support use of assistive learning technologies (as needed)

- › Speech to text
- › Text to speech
- › Recorded books, ebooks (for audio-potential as well as adjusting font size and spacing)
- › Predictive spelling software and autocorrect
- › Calculators as a bypass method if student can’t memorize math facts

Dyslexics are trying much harder than they appear in class

- › Often much of the effort that dyslexic students put forth is obscured by their mechanical challenges

- › Mechanical challenges are greatly diminished by the use of things like extra time, laptops, ipads, calculators, and software designed to help them read, spell or compose
- › The often poor handwriting and editing errors one sees in a dyslexic student are not indications that they are not trying (rarely are the errors “careless”)

10. There are many examples in the film of individuals who had to overcome low expectations. They were surrounded by people who assumed that they were not college material, let alone capable of becoming doctors, lawyers, or famous politicians or entrepreneurs. At your school, are academic expectations generally lower for students with dyslexia?

Dyslexia is a learning disability, not a thinking disability

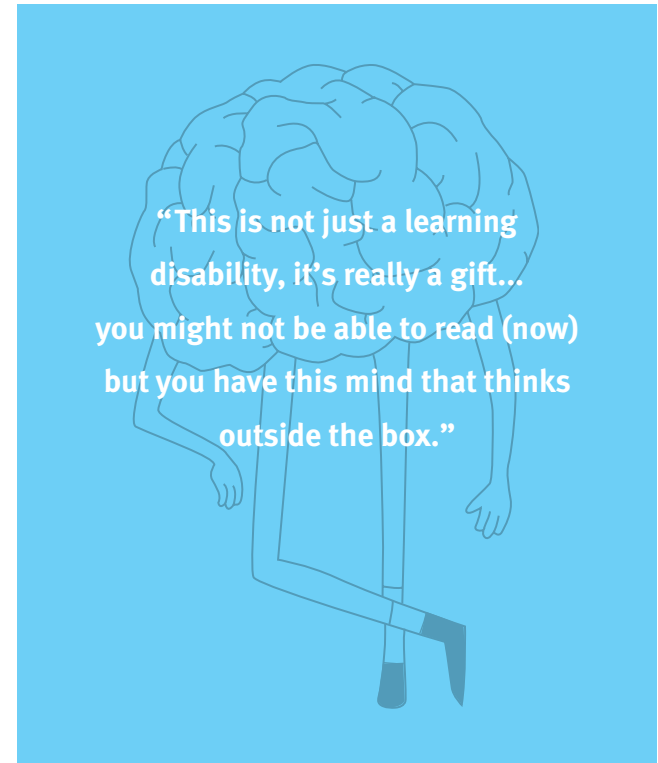
- › Once dyslexics get past basic decoding, they often are very adept at finding main ideas, seeing connections, and understanding story or characters on a deep level
- › Dyslexics can be deep readers, albeit slow
- › Dyslexics struggle more in the early years when the school day is heavily weighted towards mechanics of learning rather than thinking, understanding or generating original ideas
- › Adjusting expectations related to mechanical abilities is one thing, but there is no need to lower academic expectations for dyslexics when it comes to thinking and generating ideas. Low expectations are dangerously self-fulfilling with a population of students who have struggled so much in their early years of schooling.

11. Are there easily identifiable dyslexics in the school community who are thriving in leadership and academic roles? If not, what does the school need to do to make that more common?

You can learn a lot about the experience of dyslexic students at your school by observing whether or not you have any high-achieving examples. If not, it is likely a result of inadequate supports, or low-expectations. Dyslexic role models can help give hope to other dyslexic students. It becomes a positive powerful cycle.

12. Finally, imagine you are a dyslexic student at your school. If asked, would you report feeling supported and understood at your school? Why or why not?

Ultimately, apart from specialized reading instruction, the institutional and instructional best practices that support dyslexic learners are the same best practices that benefit all students. Consequently, by making classrooms more friendly to dyslexics, schools also improve the experience for all learners.





STUDENT DISCUSSION GUIDE

(adapted from *Project Eye to Eye*)

1. Did you relate to anyone in the documentary?
How did you relate to them?
2. Did hearing other people's stories help you?
3. After hearing others' stories do you feel more inclined to share your own story?
4. How do you use the word "dyslexia" when referring to yourself? (i.e. I am dyslexic, I have dyslexia, etc.)
5. What are the stereotypes and misconceptions of people with LD's (i.e. kids with dyslexia see words backwards, kids with ADHD are lazy, and kids with learning disabilities can't make it to higher education)
6. Everyone in the world uses various accommodations and strategies everyday such as apps on smart phones or Post-it notes. What accommodations do you use to help you succeed? (In school, at home, in the work place, etc.) Do you feel comfortable asking for extra time and supports that are available at your school?
7. Skye's dad, Dr. Lucas, says in the film that he didn't like being referred to as "learning disabled". How do you feel when someone says you have a learning disability? Do you identify as being "disabled" because you have a learning disability? Do you prefer other terms instead?
8. In the film, both Allison and Dylan mention the relief that came with a dyslexia diagnosis. What was your experience like being evaluated for a learning disability? How did you feel before, during and after your evaluation? How were your evaluation results shared with you and/or your family? How did you feel when you were told your evaluation results? Did your evaluation experience influence the way you felt about your self or saw yourself? How so?
9. If you are LD but not dyslexic do you identify with the stories and experiences in this film?

HELPFUL RESOURCES

Yale Center for Dyslexia & Creativity (YCDC)

YCDC's mission is to uncover and illuminate the strengths of those with dyslexia, disseminate information, practical advice, and the latest innovations from scientific research, and transform the lives of children and adults with dyslexia. Doctors Bennett and Sally Shaywitz, scientific advisors to *The Big Picture: Rethinking Dyslexia*, were instrumental in the development of the film. Dr. Sally Shaywitz has devoted her career to helping children and adults with dyslexia; her research provides the basis for understanding the disorder. Together, they originated a widely accepted model of dyslexia that emphasizes the strengths seen in people with dyslexia. (www.dyslexia.yale.edu)

Decoding Dyslexia

This is a grassroots movement driven by families concerned with the limited access to educational interventions for dyslexia within our public schools. They aim to raise dyslexia awareness, empower families to support their children and inform policymakers on best practices to identify, remediate and support students with dyslexia in public schools. (www.decodingdyslexianj.org)

Visit other state sites: Pennsylvania

(<https://www.facebook.com/pages/Decoding-Dyslexia-PA/286398311445713>)
or (<http://decodingdyslexiapa.org/>)

Dyslexia Help

The University Center for the Development of Language and Literacy (UCLL) at the University of Michigan is behind Dyslexia Help. A wonderful resource. (www.dyslexiahelp.umich.edu)

The International Dyslexia Association

Serves individuals with dyslexia, their families, and professionals in the field with approximately 8,500 members—60% in the field of education and 30% are individuals with dyslexia or parents of children who are dyslexic. They operate 44 Branches throughout the U.S. and Canada, and have 21 Global Partners in 18 countries. (www.interdys.org)

LD Online

LD OnLine.org is the world's leading website on learning disabilities and ADHD, serving more than 200,000 parents, teachers, and other professionals each month. The site features hundreds of helpful articles, multimedia, monthly columns by noted experts, first person essays, children's writing and artwork, a comprehensive resource guide, very active forums, and a Yellow Pages referral directory of professionals, schools, and products. (www.ldonline.org)

Learning Ally

Learning Ally has a collection of more than 70,000 digitally recorded textbooks and literature titles—downloadable and accessible on mainstream as well as specialized assistive technology devices. (www.learningally.org)

Mentis Foundation

The Mentis Foundation is a non-profit dedicated to educating the public about dyslexia, enfranchising young people with this learning difference, and supporting their efforts to shape our world. Scholarships given. (www.mentisfoundation.org)

Parents Education Network

San Francisco-based Parents Education Network is a coalition of parents collaborating with educators, students and the community to empower and bring academic success to students with learning and attention difficulties.

(www.parentseducationnetwork.org)

Project Eye To Eye

Dyslexic adults mentor dyslexic students as a means of empowerment. Mentors work with students to become positive and informed self-advocates for their needs as learners. (www.projecteyetoeye.org)

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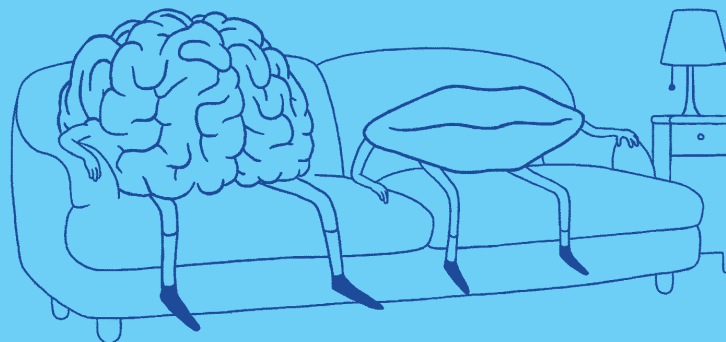
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**More information about the film can be downloaded at
thebigpicturemovie.com**

“Had I seen this movie when Dylan was functionally illiterate in 4th grade, I would have been spared an extraordinary amount of anxiety about the future.”—James Redford, Director



SOLUTION

