

What We do Moving Forward is Shaped by How Much We Have Learned

Is your life the same today as it was a year ago? Mine isn't. I am still coming to grips with personal loss and the collective loss experienced by us all. As the world shifted and things came to a halt, it was hard for many people to comprehend why all of this was happening because we could not see the cause. It was invisible to the naked eye. What we could see and continue to see are the outcomes—represented as numbers. At first, these numbers grew at a rate that seemed inconsequential—lulling some of us into a false sense of security, but then, those numbers grew at a rate that seemed incomprehensible.

As a result of the global pandemic, almost all of us have been personally touched by loss and can serve as witnesses to this moment in history. A meme that struck me as particularly poignant read: "I am tired of living through historic events." The meme is an expression of how we can use humor to cope with loss. The past year has taken away so much from all of us—people we love, a way to provide for ourselves and our families, and the experiences we took for granted before the pandemic. The loss differs from person to person, but everyone lost something.

Something that children lost was the time that they should have spent engaging in learning at school. Their losses have placed a spotlight on education and learning outcomes. In a recent special legislative session, the governor, legislature, and the commissioner of education took time out to share a very real number with Tennesseans. And unfortunately, this number is consistent with national numbers. In the year preceding the global pandemic, 66% of the children in Tennessee public schools were unable to read at grade level by the end of third grade. Let that number sink in for a moment. Most of the children in our schools could not read short text passages and answer questions about what the passages meant. Findings published by researchers at the University of Memphis have highlighted that a failure to pass tests like the Tennessee state reading assessment is due in part to kids' not being able to



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Introduction

read words. It is not just the result of kids; not being able to comprehend. And recent findings published by researchers at this center have highlighted that failures on tests like this result from a lack of quality reading instruction during the early grades, well before third grade assessments reveal the problem.

What is truly alarming is that there is nothing new about these numbers. The majority of children in Tennessee and the nation have struggled to read for several decades. Before the pandemic, numbers like these were part of the background noise that made up the busy lives that we lived. Now that the world has slowed down, we have time to reflect, and there is a growing fear that these numbers will only worsen due to the time lost in school. As a result, the Tennessee legislature passed legislation intended to ensure that Tennessee schoolchildren receive quality reading instruction in the early grades to head off reading failure.

This initiative looks toward the future and to what the state of Tennessee plans to do. In this context, I wanted to look back at what our little center has been doing and what we have worked so hard to keep doing moving forward. The scale of our resources limits the scope of our efforts. There is only so much that a center with five people can do. But our hearts are mighty, and our collective knowledge and commitment to the center's mission are deep. In this issue of our newsletter, I asked everyone to share a bit of what we do here at the center. And we gathered some thoughts of how these efforts have made an impact. For my part, there are two things that I want to showcase as part of my opening thoughts.

First, the center is first and foremost a vehicle for translating research into practice through all that we do. And it always has been. We actively engage in conducting research on literacy and literacy outcomes for children and adults. We subject these findings to the peer review process and publish them in scientific journals. We also add to this community through our service. Members of the center staff serve as editors, on editorial boards, and as reviewers for peer-reviewed research journals. Published findings from the center have added to the evolving understanding of reading development and how to support that development in all children. We also train MTSU undergraduate and graduate students from various degree programs to be the next generation of research practitioners. We equip them with the knowledge and skills needed to enter various roles in the workforce as informed purveyors and consumers of research. We teach them how to translate the research into practice.

Second, we develop content that translates research findings into digestible resources for parents, educators, and others. These resources take the form of videos, infographics, practice guides, and instructional materials. Several state departments of education have shared these resources with their stakeholders. They have also been incorporated into statewide teacher training initiatives in several states. And teachers, parents, and administrators share these resources through social media platforms.

These are just two concrete examples, and the efforts of the center go well beyond them. I invite you to learn more about what we do here at the center in this newsletter.

Timothy Odegard, Ph.D., Chairholder, Murfree Chair of Excellence in Dyslexic Studies

Recent Findings

The Process Guiding Our Research Efforts and Unveiling Our New Educator Knowledge Norming Study

When describing what our center does, we boil it down to three pillars: research, assessment, and education. Although they are different aspects of the center's work, each one informs the others. But what do we mean by research?

From the mechanics of research standpoint, we are scientists. We use the scientific process. It guides how we form questions and the procedures we use to address them. It determines how we make sense of our findings. Our work relies on theories that attempt to describe behavior and mental processes. Theories make predictions about what will likely happen. They propose the conditions needed for something to happen. To generate our hypotheses, we read the empirical literature and observe the world around us. For example, many people may be familiar with national reports about how well, or not well, American schoolchildren can read. The results of those national reports are disheartening. Large numbers of children from early elementary through high school seniors struggle to read. The pandemic exacerbated some of these problems. It made existing disparities between children or between schools even more apparent. Such data provide evidence to motivate our studies. One of the great joys of working at our center is teaching our undergraduate and graduate



MTSU students and Dr. Emily Farris examine EEG results.

students all the nuts and bolts of this scientific process. We teach students very precise standardized and systematic procedures for data collection. We also teach students about the statistical analyses we use to examine the data we collect. Our students are learning how to make sense of our findings, and how to share them with the world. They work collaboratively with us on conference presentations and submissions to journal articles.

But what is it that we are studying? Each of our projects relates to dyslexia and reading in some way. When we have several projects that aim to answer the same question, those projects form a line of research. One of our lines

of research focuses on teacher training and educator knowledge. We want to know what kinds of knowledge a person needs to be an effective instructor for any child who may struggle with reading. This line of research has very real implications for educators as well as students and their parents. It also shows how easily our research efforts integrate with other center activities.

Our center also provides educators with training and professional development opportunities. We host workshops and post resources on our website. Many of these activities discuss what dyslexia is, which consequently leads to discussions of how people read. We also

Recent Findings

discuss instructional techniques for teaching reading to all children. These opportunities do not simply help veteran teachers

The Tennessee Center for the Study and Treatment of Dyslexia at MTSU helps individuals with dyslexia and other reading difficulties in so many important ways. The center's rigorous, interdisciplinary research, such as their teacher knowledge project, adds to the scientific knowledge base on early identification and effective teaching of these students. And their first-rate workshops and conferences ensure that all of this scientific knowledge reaches the children and educators it is intended to benefit.

—Louise Spear-Swerling, Ph.D., Professor Emerita, Southern Connecticut State University

keep up with research in their fields. Nor are they exclusively a booster session. Instead, they are sometimes an educator's initial introduction to these topics and techniques. In other words, the educators are not always as prepared to teach as they, or we, hope they would be.

Unfortunately, there is substantial empirical data to support this anecdotal evidence.

Despite good intentions and strong motivations, many educators are not prepared to teach reading. They completed coursework and other licensure requirements for their respective states. Yet, they may still have gaps in their knowledge. They do not have explicit knowledge of the structure of the English language. They also are not proficient in using empirically validated reading instruction and intervention techniques.

Why does this matter? Well, if you had to bake a perfect soufflé from scratch and you've only used an Easy-Bake Oven before, how well do you think your soufflé would turn out? What if you had to explain the process to someone else who has even less experience than you, so they could bake it? Many educators in our country live with this sort of difficulty every day.

When an educator does not have a solid foundation in the content they teach, their job is infinitely harder. There is even a term for this finding that focuses on how a person cannot give things that they do not have. This term is the Peter Effect. Binks-Cantrell and colleagues (2012) applied it to educators who taught teacher candidates. A deep level of explicit knowledge of the structure of the English language is needed to go from oral to written forms of communication.

These researchers found that even the knowledge of reading teachers may not be sufficiently deep. Students whose classroom teachers have higher levels of knowledge perform better on the end-of-year tests than students whose classroom teachers had lower levels of knowledge (Carlisle et al., 2011).

The research also provides glimmers of hope. A teacher's knowledge of word-structure relationships changes with training. These improvements relate to changes in their students' performance over time (e.g., Spear-Swerling & Brucker, 2004). A study from our lab emphasized the importance of specialized training to teach reading to children with dyslexia. It compared educators who were at different stages of certain formal training programs. The most advanced educators had finished extensive practicum requirements and certification tests. They outperformed educators who had not received that training. They had higher performance in phonemic awareness, decoding, encoding, and morphology (McMahon et al., 2019). Subsequent manuscripts using this measure in other samples of educators are under peer review.

Across decades of research, several measures of teacher knowledge were developed. They vary in the constructs covered and their formats. However, many of these measures were used and

developed for a particular sample of educators. They may focus on some of the contents of structured literacy. But they are less likely to include items about instructional techniques. Researchers build on each other's tests, but performance is not easily comparable across them. These findings motivated our new study.

We expanded our existing measure (McMahon et al., 2019) to include six content areas. Our new test examines phonological awareness, decoding, spelling, morphology,

Having been involved in center-related research as both an undergraduate and graduate student, I believe these invaluable opportunities have expanded my knowledge about both the research process and dyslexia. I'm currently assisting with components of the Educator Knowledge project where I'm learning not only hands-on skills related to research, but also how research can be used to assist schools and educators. These are skills that will help me be a more competent and effective practitioner in the schools one day!

—Kelli Payne, student lab coordinator, School Psychology M.A. student

vocabulary, and reading comprehension. We expanded the focus of the multiple-choice questions. Some questions examine academic content knowledge (e.g., how many morphemes are in the word, scrumptious?). Others investigate pedagogical content knowledge (e.g., what should be included in effective, evidence-based phonemic awareness instruction?).

We also expanded upon who we wanted to take part in our new educator knowledge norming study. We are recruiting a cross section of educators within a school or district. Our study includes educators who have several different roles so we can look at the context of the entire school environment. We want classroom teachers, literacy coaches, reading specialists and interventionists, school psychologists, special educators, paraprofessionals, principals, and district administrators to participate. One of our goals is to have a large representative sample. We want to be able to more directly compare educators across roles and schools.

This new educator knowledge norming study launched last fall. We are partnering with schools and districts to get our data. We will continue to form new partnerships for quite some time. We need a large sample with thousands of educators to have sufficient statistical power to appropriately examine our research questions. In the meantime, the schools and districts that partner with us will each receive a summary report. This report is a group-level overview

of the participating educators and their performance on the knowledge test. It also includes group-level information about the educators' perceptions of their knowledge. This perception data allows us to investigate some other research questions. It also gives the schools snapshots of how their educators feel. If you want to know more about having your school participate in our study, please contact us!

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EDUCATOR KNOWLEDGE OF READING RESEARCH OPPORTUNITY

What Is the Project About?

We are researching what educators across North America know about reading and reading instruction. To help us do so, we are developing a test that measures educators' knowledge of reading and reading instruction! And we need your help because we need educators who serve in different roles to complete our measure. So, we are reaching out to schools and districts to collaborate and to serve as sites for norming the test.

What Will Your School/District Need to Do?



Provide us a list with emails and roles for a cross-section of educators (e.g. Teachers, Instructional Coaches, School Psychologists or Diagnosticians, Administrators, etc.). All information is kept confidential!



We will work with you to customize some of the background items to best fit your group. Then, each educator will be sent a personal link to the reading knowledge survey via email.



The entire survey takes approximately 60-90 minutes to complete. It can be taken all at once or over multiple sessions.

What Are the Benefits?

Individuals: Each individual receives an email summary of personal results on the knowledge measure.

Sites (i.e., schools or districts): Each site receives a report with an overall snapshot of their group's prior training, perceptions of knowledge and practice and performance on the knowledge test. Sites can use this report to guide staff development.

Your help contributes to our understanding of reading and reading instruction!

To find out how your school or district can become a norming site contact:

Dr. Tim Odegard | tim.odegard@mtsu.edu
Dr. Emily Farris | emily.farris@mtsu.edu



*Tennessee Center for the
Study and Treatment of Dyslexia*

MIDDLE TENNESSEE STATE UNIVERSITY

Center News

Conference Presentation

Recent presentation as part of the International Dyslexia Association Literacy, Research, and Learning Annual Conference held virtually in November 2020 or the associated Science of Reading Content Power Sessions released through 2021:

“From Cognitive Science to the Classroom: Meaningful Ways to Intensify Structured Literacy Instruction,” presented by Emily A. Farris and Melinda Hirschmann as part of Power Session 2, initially released online January 4, 2021.

“Testing the Impact of Online Training in Areas of Reading Instruction on Educator Knowledge,” paper presented by Shonna Donovan Phelps, Timothy N. Odegard, Emily A. Farris, and Jennifer L. Flipse at the Mid-South Educational Research Association annual conference held virtually on October 28, 2020.

Approximately 15%–20% of schoolchildren may have difficulty mastering reading skills and thus, are unable to achieve proficiency in academic subjects, which can have debilitating effect on the individual, society, and the nation. Further, these reading difficulties can be seen across different educational and socioeconomic backgrounds (Wagner et al., 2020). While various factors, such as home background, genetics, oral language proficiency, and motivation, may contribute to the high incidence of reading problems, early identification of the problems and explicit teaching of specific components of reading can be helpful in solving this riddle of the high incidence of reading problems. While we have scientifically based instructional programs available to teach all but a handful of students, several research studies have shown that teachers may not be familiar with these useful instructional techniques, which may not have been provided during their training and in professional development. The Center for the Study and Treatment of Dyslexia at Middle Tennessee State University has been a pioneer in helping children with reading difficulties with its research and practical incentives.

R. Malatesha Joshi, Ph.D.

Professor of Literacy Education and Educational Psychology at Texas A&M University

Instruction Matters

It's What We Do: Evidence-based Teaching and Learning Using Structured Literacy Instruction

I developed a partnership with the MTSU Center for the Study and Treatment of Dyslexia initially through my work as a special education consulting reading teacher. The staff at the center gave me personal attention and helped me gain a deeper understanding of the research in reading as well as sharing their practical knowledge of teaching reading. The center staff works in schools and with students, and they understand what teaching reading to struggling students means. Attending workshops and educator events has given me the confidence to share what I have learned with others in our district. As a result, our entire district, both general education and special education, is now embracing reading programs based on the science of reading.
—Laura Beeler, Sumner County Schools

One of the center's primary missions is to link research and evidence to how we teach literacy to students. We host and facilitate workshops that support educators in optimizing literacy instruction for all their students, including those with dyslexia and other reading difficulties.

We often collaborate with districts in Tennessee to increase teacher knowledge about essential literacy content: phonemic awareness, sound-symbol correspondences, morphology, vocabulary, grammar, fluency, and comprehension. It is the explicit, systematic, and integrated delivery of these layers of language that provides the foundation for proficiency with reading and writing. When educators use their deep knowledge of the language for instruction and insightful error correction, students are provided with the expert guidance they need to progress with literacy.

School-Based Workshops

- Trouble with Words: an Overview of Dyslexia
- School-based Identification of Characteristics of Dyslexia
- Essential Components of Effective Reading Instruction
- Three Layers of Decoding: Understanding Phonemes, Syllables, and Morphemes
- It's Not Just What You Teach, But How You Teach It: Strategies to Maximize Your Small Group Reading Instruction
- Teaching Handwriting: Automaticity in Support of Reading and Spelling
- Intensive Intervention for Students with Characteristics of Dyslexia
- Using Assessment Data to Inform Intervention Instruction

In addition to school- and district-level collaborations, the center hosts workshops and trainings provided by national literacy experts. The expertise within our staff is also sought out for participation in other states' educator events and conferences.

A sample of 2020-21 workshops and trainings

The center also publishes instructional guides, e-books, infographics, and other resources to help educators deliver research-based reading instruction in their classrooms. Many of our resources are freely available on our website: mtsu.edu/dyslexia. The center's YouTube channel features professional development content for educators.

A few years ago, I reached out to MTSU's Dyslexia Center to get support with a project I was working on in the Franklin Special School District. We collaborated with center staff to facilitate professional learning for teachers in grades K–2 focused on foundational literacy. Through a series of five sessions, we provided critical reading content knowledge supported with application to practice with students. Center staff planned and delivered the content portion of the day, while I facilitated the application to practice through lessons utilizing our materials and students. Our K–2 Reading Academy was such a success that we expanded to grades 3–4 and grades 5–8. The feedback from administrators and teachers has been very positive, and we look forward to more partnering in the future!

—Gina Looney, Franklin Special School District

A sample of center publications

Instruction Matters

In order to model and demonstrate structured literacy instruction for both pre-service and in-service teachers, center staff members certified in the delivery of academic language instruction provide dyslexia-specific tutoring to small groups of students. Direct, explicit instruction is beneficial for all students and essential for those with characteristics of dyslexia. This approach promotes the development of foundational skills and fluency, which in turn supports reading comprehension and written expression. For students who have struggled with less explicit instruction, the growth in self-esteem is as valuable as the academic gains.

In addition to dyslexia-specific tutoring, the center offers additional resources to parents as well. Resources include parent focused conferences and e-books. ■

Structured literacy instruction has been a godsend for my daughter. She began to be tutored using this format when she was 8 years old after testing determined that her difficulty learning to read was due to dyslexia. I had been trying for three years at that point to teach her, only to be frustrated at every turn. I have never regretted my decision to have my daughter assessed and tutored at the MTSU Center for Dyslexia. My daughter has benefited in so many ways from this program. Of course, one of the main benefits is that she is learning to read. Structured literacy has given her the skills she needs to be able to decode words, understand meaning, and put it together for stronger reading comprehension. However, the greater benefits have been much deeper. My daughter came into the program hating words and disliking herself for her struggles. Structured literacy has given her the confidence to know that she CAN read. This confidence has seeped into every aspect of her life. She knows that while some things may take more effort, she can do it! She has also lost her fear of books. She will read for fun now, something I never thought I would see her do. This program has also benefited me as her mother and her teacher. Through watching her tutor go through the program with patience and much repetition, I have learned better how to encourage her reading skills, and that in turn has shaped how I teach other academic areas. I've learned things like "give her more time to think" and "it may take more repetitions for her and that's okay." Overall, this program has given us both the confidence we needed to continue her education with the right skills and attitude, and I will be forever grateful.

—Melissa B., parent

The image shows two overlapping book covers. The top cover is titled "Structured Shared Reading" and features a collage of three photos showing adults and children reading together. Below the photos, it says "A planning guide to support shared reading experiences in the home" and includes the Tennessee Center for the Study and Treatment of Dyslexia logo. The bottom cover is titled "Decoding Tips for Parents" and features a photo of a woman reading to a young girl. It lists "5 common word reading errors and how to help" and also includes the center's logo.

A sample of parent-focused publications

In Focus

Introducing Ask an Expert: Our New Parent-Focused Virtual Q&A Sessions

Each week the center receives many calls and emails from parents seeking information and help for their child who is struggling to learn how to read. While the center creates parent-focused publications to assist parents as they interact with the school system to advocate for their child's needs, there are many factors that go into the identification and intervention processes in the school setting that may be confusing and frustrating for families. In order to address parent concerns and support parents as they navigate the process, the center has begun offering monthly parent-focused virtual Q&A sessions. Our goal is to support awareness and understanding about the ways that dyslexia is identified, how students with dyslexia should be taught, and what supports are available to students with characteristics of dyslexia. Each session is hosted by a center staff member. Sessions are an opportunity to bring parents together to hear the common concerns surrounding the identification and intervention process and build a supportive community. The sessions are free; advanced registration is required. The response to the initial offering of the sessions was enthusiastic. Registrations for the first two sessions were snapped up quickly by parents on the center's listserv. The center plans to offer additional sessions as demand and personnel allow. We invite our readers to learn more about our Ask an Expert sessions at mtsu.edu/dyslexia and register for an upcoming session. ■



got questions?

ASK AN EXPERT

**A VIRTUAL Q&A SESSION
TUESDAYS @ 6:00 P.M.
SIGN UP AT [MTSU.EDU/DYSLEXIA](https://mtsu.edu/dyslexia)
FREE AND OPEN TO THE PUBLIC**

 Tennessee Center for the Study and Treatment of Dyslexia
MIDDLE TENNESSEE STATE UNIVERSITY

Our daughter began the structured literacy program at the MTSU Dyslexia Center when she was 7 years old. Prior to receiving dyslexia tutoring, she had struggled with reading nearly every word in any story she was given, even if she had practiced the same words 20 times before. There was nearly no recognition or recall of phonics and high frequency sight words, and she was not able to move beyond the preschool/kindergarten level. Testing at the MTSU Dyslexia Center revealed she had characteristics of dyslexia. The structured literacy program offered through this center went well beyond phonics instruction. The explicit instruction coupled with hands-on manipulatives to aid in the encoding and decoding seemed to be the key that unlocked our daughter's reading potential. At 8½, she is now about 20 months into the two-year program. She went from struggling to read Book 1 in the "Bob Books" to reading chapter books aloud and for fun! We have even been "catching" her reading stacks of storybooks in her room. Our daughter's life has been put on a whole other trajectory because of the help she has received at the MTSU Dyslexia Center, and we are ever so grateful.
—Donetta and Scott M., parents

Friends on the Block

Teaching Early Literacy Skills to Students with Intensive Needs: Implementing “Friends on the Block”

June 14–16, 2021, and October 9, 2021

9:30 a.m.–11:30 a.m. CDT

Virtual Workshop via Zoom Platform



Participants will learn to implement Friends on the Block from Dr. Jill Allor, principal investigator on the IES research grant from which the curriculum was developed.

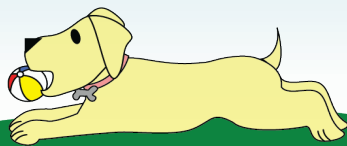
\$299 registration fee includes:

- 8 hours of professional development
- Premium digital membership for one year (\$125 value)
- All 60 e-readers (files that may be viewed on devices)
- Accompanying teacher guides, warm-up charts and learning games that may be printed or used to create virtual lessons
- Assessment resources, how-to videos, permission to use with anyone you directly teach
- Sampler Training Kit (\$125 value): 4 student readers, 4 teacher guides, 4 warm-up charts, 10 learning games with game pieces, training manual

This four-session live, virtual workshop will provide teachers with practical, research-validated methods for teaching foundational literacy skills to students with intensive needs, including students with developmental and intellectual disabilities, dyslexia, or other disabilities. Though the target of the workshop is students with intensive needs, the materials follow the science of reading and structured literacy and are completely appropriate for beginning readers (K–1) who are developing typically and for struggling readers who have not mastered foundational skills. The program is highly flexible so teachers can easily provide customized lessons to meet the needs of varying learner types.

Friends on the Block is a unique curriculum that includes carefully designed books with scaffolds that allow students to begin reading books very quickly while enhancing comprehension through teacher-read “helper” text. Explicit, systematic lessons accompany each book and facilitate transfer of skills immediately to the books. The program was designed by researchers, and research is ongoing. Support for carrying out this research was provided by grants R324A130102 and R324A200151 from the Institute of Education Sciences.

Register: mtsu.edu/dyslexia



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I AM *true* **BLUE**

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 MTSUDyslexia

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In Focus

Training Future Educators to Help Students with Dyslexia

Part of the center's mission is to train future educators to identify and support students with dyslexia in the schools. One way we fulfill this mission is through our graduate assistantship program. In addition to graduate assistants who serve on our research team, graduate assistants on our clinical team primarily assist with the dyslexia evaluations conducted at the center. Many of these graduate assistants are studying to become school psychologists.

School psychologists play an important role on school teams. They help to analyze screening and progress-monitoring data and identify students who need intervention, including special education services. They use their knowledge of mental health, learning, special education law, and behavior to assist students and their teachers. In school psychology classes at MTSU, students learn how to identify and support students with learning disabilities, including dyslexia.

Graduate assistants at the center receive additional training and hands-on experience with the dyslexia evaluation process. They receive extensive training to help them understand dyslexia and related learning differences at a deeper level. They review student files, which helps them to

My graduate assistantship at the TN Center for Dyslexia was an invaluable experience that cultivated my knowledge of reading disabilities. My time at the center continues to influence my current practice as a school psychologist. Not only did my position foster my skills in assessment and data analysis, but I was trained in the selection of research-based interventions and accommodations that carries over into my recommendations to school teams. Additionally, the center gave me tools I can share to empower students and families.

—Lauren Goss, Ed.S., School Psychologist, Rutherford County



Current graduate assistants on the clinical team: Hannah Morley, Kellie Payne, and Chelsea Thorpe

understand support team and special education paperwork from a variety of school districts. They also view evaluation reports from several types of professionals outside of the school system.

They learn to administer and score a variety of tests and determine what the results mean. They gain experience working with parents by interviewing them about their concerns and sharing our test results and recommendations with them. They help to write reports of our findings and recommendations, which builds their report writing skills. In addition, graduate assistants participate in case review meetings with center staff. These meetings help them learn how to determine if a child has characteristics of dyslexia and to choose the right kinds of interventions and accommodations for the child.

By the time they leave the center, these graduate assistants are well prepared to work with children, parents, and school teams. They are able to help their schools identify the students who have characteristics of dyslexia. They are able to assist school teams with choosing the right interventions and accommodations for these students. By training graduate assistants on our clinical team, we are able to meet the needs of more children in schools throughout Tennessee and beyond. ■

The MTSU Dyslexia Center staff members speak in one or two classes each spring to help practicum students in the School Psychology program prepare for their work with K–12 students suspected of having dyslexia. These state-of-the-art classes are interesting and informative. In addition to helping all of our students, the center provides outstanding training for a select few hired to be graduate assistants. Those students often comment on how helpful their work at the Center was when they apply for internships and jobs.

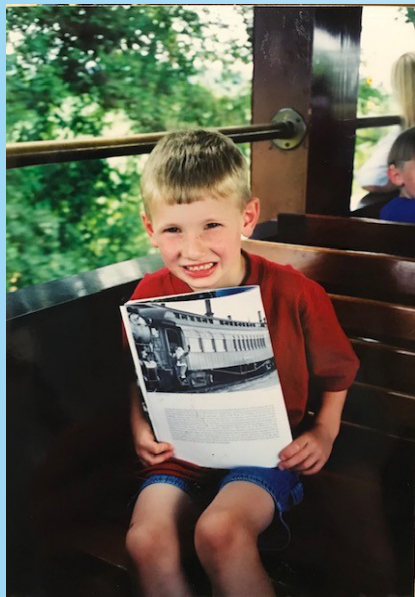
—Jim Rust, Ph.D., Coordinator of the School Psychology program at MTSU

In Focus

Dyslexia Success Story: The Penningtons

Kim's Story

Lee comes from a long line of people in the family who have dyslexia. His father has it, and so do a few of his uncles and his grandfather. Because of the family history of dyslexia, we anticipated that Lee might also have dyslexia, so we were very aware and extra attentive to his reading once he started school. We chose to put Lee in prekindergarten to give him an extra year to develop both physically and mentally. Lee was a very active young boy who loved life, playing, learning, and especially reading. He was a very sharp kid who knew how



Lee Pennington, age 6

to figure out things in his own way.

In the second grade, we started noticing problems with his reading. His grades were not up to par in certain areas. After a discussion with the assistant principal at the elementary school, we chose to have him tested. He received an IQ test along with the state guidelines test for his grade in school. Apparently, they

[did] a points system where they [took] the IQ score and the state test score, and there had to be so many points discrepancy between the IQ and the state test in order to receive extra help. Unfortunately, Lee's test results did not meet the point discrepancy to get the extra help he needed. This was the most challenging and frustrating part of the school system in acknowledging and trying to get the extra help that Lee needed. After a lengthy discussion with the assistant principal, she suggested waiting until the fourth grade and retesting Lee then because the curriculum would be harder.

Editor's note: At the time of Lee's evaluation in 2005, Tennessee schools used an IQ-achievement discrepancy method to determine if a student had a specific learning disability. This was the primary method of identifying learning disabilities at that time, and a few states may still use this method. Research has shown that this method is flawed for several reasons. Kim Pennington describes one of these problems in her story. When a discrepancy model is used, schools often have to wait for a child's individually administered achievement score to be low enough before he can receive special education services. This wastes valuable time that could be spent providing intervention. Tennessee (and many other states) now use the Response to Intervention (RTI) framework to screen all children for learning difficulties. This allows students to receive early intervention in the general education setting. Early intervention can keep students from getting further and further behind their peers. Students who respond slowly to this intervention may require special education services. Under the RTI model, when evaluating children for special education, achievement tests are often given to determine the child's skills in reading, writing, or math. However, an IQ test is no longer required to determine if a child has a Specific Learning Disability.

In Focus

Dyslexia Success Story: The Penningtons *(cont'd from page 15)*

During that time, I sought out help and found information about the MTSU Dyslexia Center. I quickly called and put Lee's name on the list to be tested. At that time there was usually about a twelve month wait, but miraculously for us Lee was able to get in within a few months... Lee was tested at the dyslexia center, and we received an abundance of extremely helpful information and a true diagnosis of Lee's dyslexia. Everyone was so kind, courteous, extremely helpful, and very eager to help Lee receive the proper help during his education process. We then were able to take all the paperwork and forms back to the elementary school and have him retested with the state guidelines test again, and since the curriculum was harder in the fourth grade he finally met the point discrepancy in order to begin an IEP and start receiving extra help in the classroom. Because of the center's diagnosis and very detailed instructions, suggestions, and learning techniques on how to help Lee personally in the classroom, Lee began to really excel in his reading and in all aspects of school. All his teachers throughout elementary school were very patient and took the extra time to help Lee, especially



Pennington Family (L to R): Lee, Tabatha, Todd, Kim, Tre', Sabrina and Morgan

when it came to test taking. His 4th grade teacher actually pulled Lee aside after he did not do well on one of the exams and read the questions to him aloud as opposed to Lee reading the questions by himself. Lee got every answer correct.

After the center's diagnosis and test results with recommendations on learning techniques, we sought out and found an amazing tutoring center run by Miss Pat Shafer. We met with Miss Pat, and she set us up with some exceptionally gifted tutors who worked extremely hard with Lee in helping him

with the mental techniques and phonics of reading and spelling. We did tutoring with Lee once or twice a week throughout the school year and continued once a week throughout the summer. I remember one of the important things the tutors had us work on at home was sight word repetition. We had a list of sight words that Lee and I would work on every week. Looking at the words and repeating them over and over helped Lee tremendously. Lee started elementary school in the Rutherford County school district and then in the fifth grade moved over to the Williamson

County school district with his IEP, and after the first few weeks of school we sat down with some of the counselors, and they were all very impressed with Lee's reading and phonics techniques that he had been taught. Lee was able to keep his IEP with him throughout elementary, middle school, and high school.

Lee absolutely loved books, but unfortunately disliked reading since it was very difficult for him. Thankfully one of the center's recommendations on how to improve and help Lee's reading was to have him listen to audiobooks and use his finger to follow along. To encourage reading and the love of books to all of my children, we would go to the Linebaugh Library on a weekly basis and check out books and audiobooks. We also participated in the amazing summer reading programs that they had each year. This literally opened up a whole world of adventure for Lee. He would sit and listen to books for hours. He made his way through all of the Eragon series, the Percy Jackson series, etc.

My personal goal as a mother was to make sure that Lee had every opportunity to do well and excel in school, and my ultimate goal for him was to be able to have extra time on his ACT before he graduated from high school. All of Lee's teachers and counselors were absolutely phenomenal in helping Lee progress and do very well in school. During Lee's junior year, he was able to take the ACT in a three- or four-part section with plenty of time to do all of the reading. Lee ended up scoring a 28 on the ACT, and we were all thrilled! That being said, Lee was and continues to be an extremely hard-working young man. Lee graduated with honors from Page High School in Franklin, Tennessee, in

2015. Lee went on after graduation and served a two-year service mission for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in parts of Colorado



Kim with her son, Lee, age 23

and Wyoming from October 2015 through October 2017. Once he returned from his mission, he then enrolled in college at Brigham Young University–Idaho in January 2018. Lee was married to an amazing young woman in August 2020, and they are both continuing their education together. Lee is studying to be a civil engineer with plans to graduate in the spring of 2022. As his mother, I am extremely proud of him and how hard he worked during all his school years and in every aspect of his life. ■

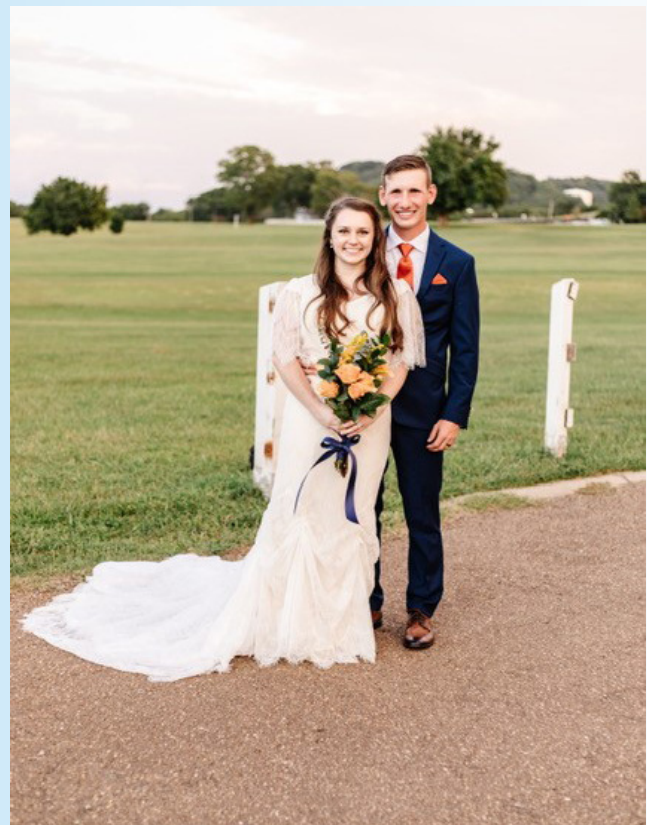
In Focus

Dyslexia Success Story: The Penningtons *(cont'd from page 17)*

Lee's Story

I was in the second grade when I was tested for dyslexia. Before that I don't remember too much about how hard it was to learn to read. Although, I do remember all of the extra time that I spent learning and practicing reading. There was an after-school class that I would go to while I was in elementary school that would help me practice sounding words out and other reading skills. My mother would take me to a tutor once or twice a week where I went through flash cards with small words (sight words) on them. I would work on writing words out and spelling them. I did this tutoring for a few years.

Middle school is when I really realized that I struggled a lot with reading. I would be assigned books to read for homework and would never get them finished in time because it took me too long to read them. I would have to ask my mom or dad to read the books to me in order to complete the



Melanie and Lee Pennington

Looking back on my education experience with dyslexia made me realize that dyslexia does not prevent someone from being able to read or mean they aren't smart, it just requires more practice to master certain skills like reading.

assignment. I always hated when I got called on in class to read a paragraph in school. Reading out loud in front of everyone always seemed to make

my dyslexia worse. It was about this same time in my life that I started to listen to books. It was too hard for me to read them myself, so I would listen to audiobooks and follow along with the book.

Once I entered high school, I decided that I wanted to get better at reading and to not depend on other people to read for me. I realized that in life there is not always going to be someone to help me and that I will have to do things myself. I stopped relying on the help that the school gave me with my IEP and tried to do as much as I could myself. I attend a church that offers a seminary

In Focus

class/bible study every morning before school. In this class we were assigned to read some of our religious material like the Holy Bible. I was challenged to read them every day throughout the school year. I decided to take the challenge and do it. It was not easy, but this is where I felt that my reading skill improved. Finishing a book all by myself was so rewarding. It made me feel so accomplished and motivated to read more.

I am now 24 years old and have improved my reading so much that I don't even feel dyslexic anymore. I still misread words here and there, but compared to how I read in high school, I read very well now. Looking back on my education experience with dyslexia made me realize that dyslexia does not prevent someone from being able to read or mean they aren't smart. It just requires more practice to master certain skills like reading. Just because something is hard, we can't give up. We have to put in the effort, and when we do, we will see the results. If I did not put in the extra time reading or have the people like my mom who helped and gave me the opportunities I needed to improve, I would not be at the level that I am today. I am now in college, and dyslexia is no longer a crutch that is holding me back. I know for anyone else who struggles with dyslexia that they can overcome it too. ■

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Upcoming Workshops & Conferences



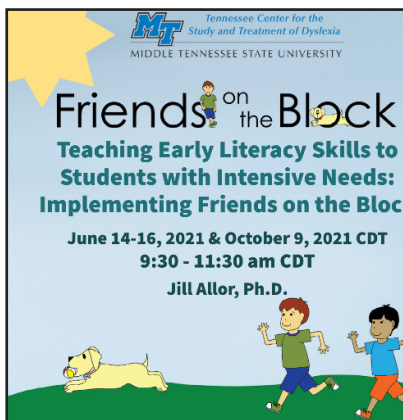
Have you found yourself wondering how you can make your virtual Wilson Reading System® lessons more effective? Hear from three Wilson experts who will share important considerations, best practices, technology tools, and lessons learned about supporting your students with dyslexia while delivering high-quality remote instruction.

Date: April 6, 2021
Time: 8:30–11:30 a.m. CDT
Location: Virtual (Zoom)



Do you have a question about dyslexia and literacy? Get expert insights, answers, and resources in our parent-focused Ask an Expert sessions! One of our staff members will host each session as our resident expert. Our goal is to support awareness and understanding about the ways that dyslexia is identified, how students with dyslexia should be taught, and what supports are available to students with characteristics of dyslexia.

Date: April 20, 2021
Time: 7:00–8:00 p.m. CDT
Location: Virtual (Zoom)



This four-session live, virtual workshop will provide teachers with practical, research-validated methods for teaching foundational literacy skills to students with intensive needs, including students with developmental and intellectual disabilities, dyslexia, or other disabilities.

Date: June 14–16, 2021 and October 9, 2021
Time: 9:30–11:30 a.m. CDT
Location: Virtual (Zoom)

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