

March 15th, 2015

Dear Senator Roblan and Committee Members of the Senate Education Committee:

Going back to school each fall fills me with anxiety and dread. I love learning. I love getting new information. But school has not been an easy road for me. Going back as far as I can remember, I was always just shy of what I really wanted to achieve in school.

I can remember in kindergarten being caught up in a childish competition over who could read the greatest number of books. I was dead even with one of my classmates through the beginning level books. And then we took a test on another book, and she passed, and I didn't. And they didn't tell me why. I kept taking the test, but not passing. I felt terrible guilt and shame, even at the age of five. I started to feel like everyone was against me. Not just the teacher, but also the students that could read. It was like a private club they were keeping me out of.

Moving on to third grade, the phrase 'sustained silent reading' was the end of me. My classmates would all be happily reading their chapter books, and I would sit with my same book, staring at pictures, and making up my own stories. The upside of this activity is that it expanded my imagination. While the other students were conforming to other ideas, I was coming up with my own stories. I didn't see it then, but I know now that my imagination is one the benefits of my dyslexia.

That creativity was also used in my spelling, much to the dismay of my mother. On Thursday nights, she would have me practice my spelling words over and over again, till calluses were on my fingers. I don't blame her for that. She didn't know any better *then*. On Friday, I would take the test, and I would be so ashamed if I got a word wrong, I would correct the answer, hoping no one would know. Shame was an emotion I became all too familiar with; much too familiar for a third grader.

In fourth grade, I was pushed to my limits. I would put my head down on my desk and cry. It was then I was finally diagnosed with dyslexia. My mom had been asking since first grade, but the teachers had been reassuring her that I would "grow out of it." The diagnosis actually made me feel better, because I knew I wasn't just a weirdo who had a hard time reading. Part of the reason I would get so frustrated and emotional was because I knew I was smart, and I wanted to do well. I believed in myself, but I couldn't figure out why it was so difficult for me. The word dyslexia gave me an explanation.

Over the next two years I worked with an Orton-Gilliam dyslexia specialist three days a week. Peggy was a lifesaver. I wouldn't be capable of half of the things I am without her. She believed in me, and she thought I was smart. Just having someone reaffirm what I already felt in my heart to be true was incredibly empowering to me. She didn't cure me of dyslexia. She is not a magician with magic fairy dust. I will always have dyslexia. But she gave me skills and resources to get through my schoolwork, and gave me the confidence to believe in myself.

Fast forward to high school, and I was starting to struggle again with the shame feelings regarding my school work, and what it means to have dyslexia. At Lincoln, I was accused of a new adjective, “lazy.” This hurt worse than “stupid” or “weird” or any of the other unkind words. Because I knew how hard I was working. Things just took me longer. But I started to doubt myself at times, wondering if I wasn’t pushing myself hard enough. I thought there must be other students that were feeling the same thing. So I formed a group at school, naming it the Dyslexic Student Union. I got involved with Oregon Branch of the International Dyslexia Association (ORBIDA) and Decoding Dyslexia Oregon. I became a vocal advocate for dyslexia and have given many speeches around Oregon about my experiences.

I did realize that in my first two years at Lincoln I was not doing my best. I was not being ‘lazy.’ On the contrary, I was working exceptionally hard, but I was not working smart. I was being cowardly and not communicating with my teachers. I needed to be more courageous and fight for my educational needs. But this should not be required of students in order to have their education accessible to them. And that is why things must change. Students need to have access to an educational system that doesn’t fill them full of shame.

I do not blame any of my teachers for any of my struggles. Not the teachers that told my mom I would “grow out of it.” Not the teachers that questioned my need for extra time or accommodations. Not the teachers that implied I was not “applying myself” because I could talk so eloquently in class, but would struggle to turn in papers. I don’t blame my mom for pushing me so hard. They all did what they thought was best. They just didn’t know any better.

That was not their fault. It is not your fault, but it is a problem. And it is a problem with a solution. Dyslexia awareness and education is the first step to changing this pattern.

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Founder of the Dyslexic Student Union