



Glean Education's Research to Practice Podcast Episode #8 - Emerson Dickman

Emerson Dickman: I recall, we met in a room at the Grand Hyatt hotel in New York. And after the evening before, coming to conclusion that we were at least two years away from coming to consensus on the definition, in two hours, we had one that was not only adopted IDA, but was adopted by the National Institutes of Health to support research on the issue of dyslexia and reading.

Jessica Hamman: Hi, and welcome to Glean Education's research-to-practice podcast, where we talk to education experts from around the world about their latest work and bring their fascinating findings out from the journal pages and into your classroom. I'm Jessica Hamman, founder of Glean Education. And today we're talking with Emerson Dickman, a special education attorney and child advocate in New Jersey. He is past president of the International Dyslexia Association and was founding member of the Consensus Committee gathered in 1992 to create the legal definition for dyslexia. He speaks about dyslexia on the national and international stage, promoting awareness and advocacy. He, along with his wife, Georgette Dickman won the Margaret Bird [Rossen 00:01:27] lifetime achievement award from the International Dyslexia Association in 2012. He also happens to be my Dad. So hi Dad, and welcome to our podcast today.

Emerson Dickman: Hi, Jess. It's a pleasure.

Jessica Hamman: I know that a lot of people are really interested when I tell them that you played a very major role in creating the current definition that many states hold in their law today about dyslexia. Can you tell me a little bit about how your role in creating the definition got started?

Emerson Dickman: Sure. I mean, it's almost 30 years ago now, it's really hard to believe. In the early nineties, I was involved as a [inaudible 00:02:15] advocate, representing children with a variety of different disabilities, and many of them were dyslexic. And it was very difficult for me as an advocate to find in the research or any place else, what I should be advocating for. And therefore, as a member of, at the time, the New Jersey branch of the International Dyslexia Association, I put together a small team in New Jersey. And we started to look up the different definitions that were being used in research. And we found that researchers throughout the United States were using as many as 21 different definitions. And as a result, their research, they were coming up with research that was inconsistent with each other. And therefore there was no direction that was coming from research that would help us determine what practice we should be doing.

Emerson Dickman: So we worked for about three years corresponding (this was pre-email) and I was amazed that the people that were my heroes in



the field were actually writing back to me and saying what they thought should be in the definition and what shouldn't be in the definition, et cetera. Eventually after about three years, we put together a kind of a foundation for discussion and brought together a relatively small group of scientists with the support of the International Dyslexia Association and the National Institute for Child Health and Human Development at NIH, which includes the [inaudible 00:04:02] Jack Fletcher and [inaudible 00:04:05] at NICHD, et cetera and a number of others. If I recall, we met in a room at the grand Hyatt hotel in New York, and after the evening before coming to conclusion that we were at least two years away from coming to consensus on the definition. In two hours, we had one that was not only adopted by IDA, but was adopted by the National Institutes of Health to support research on the issue of dyslexia and reading.

Emerson Dickman: It was a very simple definition in the 1994 definition. Basically it was indicating the insufficient chronological processing resulted in problems with decoding single words. And if you had problems decoding single words, you had derivative problems learning how to read or write and spell. I was asked eight years later to consider looking at the definition again. And I got together a team which was some of the same people and some different people. Susan Brady, [inaudible 00:05:18], Guinevere Eden from Georgetown and we got together again and found that the research in the previous eight years had really given us an opportunity to come up with something that was much more nuanced than the original definition. And that's the definition we still have today. As a matter of fact, since 2002, I was asked to do it again. And the basic response from the scientists at this point was we really don't need another definition. The definition that was arrived at in 2002, and



so far as the term dyslexia was concerned, was still valid and consistent.

Jessica Hamman: And in what ways was it slightly more nuanced?

Emerson Dickman: Well, it identified the primary deficit as in the phonological component of language, which was the same as the original definition or essentially the same, but that, that directly influenced not only decoding, but it also influenced encoding spelling, accuracy, or automaticity and fluency. Those four areas were all directly impacted by a problem in processing the phonological component of language. If you have difficulties in any four of those areas, it's going to interfere with your ability to comprehend text.

Emerson Dickman: Now that was an important consideration because what it does is it indicates that a child with dyslexia does not have an intrinsic problem with comprehension. They have an intrinsic problem with gaining access to the meaning of words, sentences, et cetera, which only indirectly and derivatively impact comprehension. Also, the child with dyslexia is less likely to read as much as other children. So reading experiences impacted if you have problems in any of those four areas, which in turn impacts the development of vocabulary and background knowledge, which are the basis upon which comprehension again, relies. Comprehension relies on vocabulary and background knowledge when you're reading text. So as you can see, the definition was much more complex and much more nuanced than the original definition.



Jessica Hamman: Well, it's interesting too, because it seems that as it evolved, the first definition supported scientific research. But the way it expanded, the second definition is quite helpful for classroom teachers, educators, and administrators. The second definition really made it relevant to what classroom teachers were experiencing with their students. So I could see how that would be really important on a wide level.

Emerson Dickman: So you're right. The purpose of the definition has changed dramatically over time. Initially we needed one for research. The NICHD research that was taking place under the leadership of Dr. Lion basically focused on three questions. How do children learn how to read? That is, neurotypical children? Why do some children have difficulty learning how to read? And what can we do about it, if a child has difficulty learning how to read? Those questions have been answered. Mm. So we know why some kids have difficulty in learning how to read, and we now know what to do about it. So what is the purpose of the definition? Now, it's more in terms of we've done the research. We know what the problem is. We've done the research, we know what to do about it.

Emerson Dickman: Now we need to get that vaccine or whatever you want to call it to the public. So the definition is being used for policy purposes at the present time. It's going into legislation. There's a danger to that, however. And the definition identifies one reason; chronological processing. It happens to be the main reason by quite a significant amount, why children have difficulty learning how to read - that you wouldn't expect to have difficulty learning how to read. However, by using the definition of legislation, are we necessarily



causing a confusion between diagnosis and eligibility for services? Are there children that have difficulty learning how to read that aren't getting the diagnosis of dyslexia and therefore are being denied the services that they require to learn how to read to the extent of their potential?

Jessica Hamman: And that's an enormous point of confusion among parents, even general ed teachers over that difference of diagnosis versus eligibility. And that is a tricky area.

Emerson Dickman: Yeah. And it's one that's a significant concern now, since the definition, which obviously I've put a lot of my life's effort into, is now used in, I think, 42 different states.

Jessica Hamman: Wow.

Emerson Dickman: And there is a problem. Are children being denied services because they're not getting the diagnosis and therefore they're being told they're not eligible? So for services-

Jessica Hamman: On the flip side-

Emerson Dickman: Some children are; I see it myself in the state of New Jersey.



Jessica Hamman: On the flip side, there is a great positive to it that when you pair the definition with the support that will help students that fit that definition, you now have a recipe for support and intervention. Whereas before, it may be yes, the child struggles. Yes, the child is eligible because of the discrepancy. And yes, they will go into Special Ed, but there was no recipe for intervention if it's generalized. But when the word dyslexia and the definition that you've created comes along with it, it really helps funnel teachers and administrators into the path that may guide them toward the successful intervention. So that's a true positive there.

Emerson Dickman: Absolutely. It is helping. And I think it has helped cross the bridge, when you say proverbial bridge, from research to practice. And it's a very, very long bridge. Unfortunately. I mean, there's, I figure at the present time, in my opinion, that that bridge is from 15 to 20 years long. In other words, research takes 15 to 20 years to get into classroom. If you think about it, the researchers have to convince the professors in higher education to learn something new so that they can teach what's new to their students.

Emerson Dickman: And then the students who are teachers are coming into the system, but slowly because they have to replace teachers that were not exposed to the research. There is research on how to do professional development that works very well, but a lot of times it's overlooked. And therefore actually getting a knowledgeable cadre of teachers into the classroom-



Jessica Hamman: Is so critical.

Emerson Dickman: -on evidence-based research, it's incredible how long it is. It takes 15 to 20 years. That's why what you're doing is so tremendous because if the teachers are asking for the tools necessary to do the job that they're capable based on current research, then we're going to move across that bridge very quickly.

Jessica Hamman: And I think we just have such an awesome opportunity with technology these days, because people can jump over those hurdles and say, I'm personally interested in this. So how do I go about finding it? So it's a matter of making it accessible and making this wonderful research accessible, because there's so much to glean from it that you can bring into the classroom. I mean, it's just really exciting, actually. It's an exciting time, I think.

Emerson Dickman: Yes. Absolutely. I was thinking the other day that because knowledge is at our fingertips, it's on our telephone, it's on our computers, et cetera. Our education is not so much focused on filling our brain with knowledge, but filling, creating in our brain, the ability to ask the right question at the right time. The answer is there in our pocket. It's asking the right question that is becoming the issue for tomorrow. And if the teachers are asking the right question: how can I help these children? Then they can find it.



Jessica Hamman: So before we go, I'd like to ask my guests what they are excited about and what they're up to next. So what is interesting to you right now and kind of motivating the work you're doing?

Emerson Dickman: I-

Jessica Hamman: More of the same?

Emerson Dickman: Well it's a hard question to answer because education changes in response to what I call cultural imperatives. In other words, in the past, perhaps a sense of direction was something that was very important. And if you had difficulty with sense of direction, you had a learning disability. So a disability or a learning disability, or what we think of as a learning disability is a combination of some kind of natural variation in neuro-biological functioning that negatively impacts the ability to develop a skill that is important in the culture in which you live. It's a combination of both. It's that cultural imperative and the neuro-biological ability. So it's not really a disability. And it's unfortunate that we use that term, but I can't think of a better one. And the issue now is perhaps comorbidity. Dyslexia is a nice, neat area that we know what to do. And if we get the services to the child in time, they're not going to suffer any significant psychological consequences.

Emerson Dickman: But we see a lot of kids with comorbidity. They have [inaudible 00:16:32], they perhaps have a double deficit because they have



rapid naming difficulties. They have executive function problems; organizing, strategizing, predicting. They have difficulties with theory of mind. So there's so many. Our current culture is putting so much emphasis on communicating with our environment effectively and efficiently, that comorbidity in terms of meeting the needs of a child with a disability is becoming a critical issue. I see a great many children that have a variety of disabilities. And we can't respond to them all at once. We've got to triage the need; what's most important. And we've got to prioritize the intervention. So then, and a lot of times IEPs and school districts try to do too much. And as a result, end up doing very little.

Jessica Hamman: Yeah, it's really interesting. I was talking to a Special Ed teacher who's a friend of mine and she was saying, we were talking about dyslexia. And she had kind of said something similar herself, is that she rarely sees neat little dyslexia packages. They do occur every now and then, and they're just pure dyslexic. And that is what they are. But more often than not, it comes with lots of variation and lots of different strengths and weaknesses that go along with that. All right, Dad. Thanks. That was awesome.

Emerson Dickman: Okay. It's a pleasure.

Jessica Hamman: If you'd like to learn more about Emerson Dickman, you can visit his website at emersondickman.com or dickmanalliance.com. To find links and resources mentioned in this podcast, go to gleaneducation.com/podcast and access them in the show notes. Thanks for listening to Glean's research-to-practice podcast. If



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