

## Interview With A Reading Coach: The Truth About Dyslexia

**\*\*interview by Bruce Deitrick Price\*\*** Experts say there are tens of millions of functional illiterates. What are the schools doing to our children? Kim Latta runs reading clinics named Exceeding Reading in Halifax, Nova Scotia. She wrote me a note about her experiences with dyslexic children; and I thought, &quot;This is the perfect person to tell us what's going on in the reading wars. She's in the trenches every day.&quot;

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BDP: So you run two clinics. Who comes to them?

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Kim Latta: Most of my students are elementary school age, first grade through sixth grade. I also see preschoolers, teens, and adults. The majority of students are brought in by their parents, who finally figure out that their child can't read, not in any real sense of the word.

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BDP: That has to be a depressing discovery. Talk about the kinds of problems you encounter.

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Kim Latta: Everything, from mild to severe. One of the worst cases I've seen is a 13-year-old boy in sixth grade (he should be in seventh grade by his age) but when he came to me, he could not read beginning readers, except for a few dozen &quot;sight words.&quot; No writing ability except being able to write his own name in mixed upper and lower case letters. He hated reading. He told me right off, &quot;Just so you know, I can't read. I'm really stupid.&quot;

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BDP: But he's in school? That has to be devastating for him.

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Kim Latta: Oh yes. He knows he is nowhere near his peers and falling further behind each year. To see a child like him being pushed through year after year to &quot;spare damage to his self-esteem&quot; is maddening. It's the worst thing for his self-esteem. Remember, this is a boy with perfectly normal intelligence and awareness.

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BDP: So what was the first step?

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Kim Latta: The biggest hurdle with this boy, and all my students, is to earn his trust. To persuade him to take a chance on me. He had been let down by so many attempts. Year after year. &quot;No matter,&quot; as he says, &quot;how hard I tried.&quot; The frustration these children experience is heartbreaking.

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BDP: Do you have a technique or is each student's treatment different?

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Kim Latta:&nbsp;The common theme is teaching them how to experience print in a completely new way. They have to stop looking at words as objects or shapes you memorize. We show them that letters represent speech sounds, that letters can speak to them. Some students catch on very quickly; some need long-term help. Generally the older the student is, the longer it takes.

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BDP: Were you able to make progress with this boy?

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Kim Latta: It was hard work. I often assured him that if I tried to read the same way he was, I wouldn't be able to do it either. I kept saying, &quot;It's NOT your fault.&quot; After 20 hours of instruction, he started to see that print can make sense. It can be figured out without memorizing thousands of words. Or relying on pictures or guessing the words that come next. He was in shock when he used his new skills to spell words correctly.&nbsp;

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BDP: In shock, you say? Fascinating.

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Kim Latta: Yes, you see we use "silly" or nonsense words because students haven't had to memorize them. He thought he was wasting his time, but when I changed the 'silly' words to real ones, he was in shock that he could use the same technique to spell the real ones. For example, he spelled "tosh" easily, using his new skills. But when I said "shot"--which is the same sounds but in reverse--he started to panic, thinking he couldn't do it. When I prompted him to use the same skills, he spelled "shot" correctly. He realized he was learning an easier way. That was a huge "light bulb" moment. He announced: &quot;I didn't even have to study to get them right!!&quot;

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BDP: That's wonderful. But 20 hours? Maybe it's a dumb question but why does it take so long?

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Kim Latta: Parents ask the same thing. As you might imagine! But think about it. The school system's method has taken hundreds of hours to cause the "reading inability" in the first place. So I consider 20 hours a short time to break bad habits and teach effective ones.

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BDP: You said "reading inability"--is that synonymous with dyslexia? I've been wondering about the terms used in Canada. When these children come to you, how have they been labeled by the school system?

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Kim Latta: Dyslexia is used loosely, for any kind of reading problem. The other term I see is Language-Based Learning Disability. In my experience, the important distinction is between "inability" and "disability." Inability is not being able to do it now or temporarily. I see reading inability every day and I can help. On the other hand, disability is more serious, more long-term. It's also very rare. I can think of only six students over the past eight years.

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BDP: That's exactly the question Rudolph Flesch struggled with: how many children are genuinely damaged, and how many have been superficially damaged by bad methods?

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Kim Latta: I'd say less than 5% of the problems I encounter are the serious, long-term kind. But the school system uses the phrase "learning disabled" for almost all the children I see. This label means that these children are given up on, sometimes when they are only eight years old! Parents are told that their children have to be placed on a separate track, and given "crutches" like books on tape, exams completed orally, etc, which means they are not helped but pushed through the system. They finish school illiterate.

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BDP: Can you tell right off which children you can help and which you can't?

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Kim Latta: The standardized assessment takes about an hour. Then I know which students have serious problems, probably genetic, and which have been incorrectly taught. (Perhaps I should mention the best all-purpose indicator: the flipping of words like "was" and "saw," and "felt" and "left." These are examples of whole-word memorization gone wrong. Simple phonemic awareness or being taught the alphabetic principle would tell children that "was" could not say "saw.")

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BDP: What about all the students you don't see? The ones who read all right, the ones for whom Whole Word works?

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Kim Latta: Works? That's a stretch. Reading by Whole Language is a very ineffective, taxing way to read. I have yet to meet a great reader who reads by memory (which is the essence of Whole Word or Whole Language). Some of these readers can "read" grade level text; but they don't comprehend what they've read, they read slowly and often have to reread several times for comprehension, and they can't read long passages without exhaustion. They certainly don't read for pleasure. These students get to university and can't handle the amount of reading and writing expected for each course. Many end up dropping out.

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BDP: How do you know this?

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Kim Latta: I've spoken to dozens of professors from universities all over Canada and the US. They complain about the schools turning out poor readers/writers who are ill-prepared for college work. I've also seen these problems discussed on the internet.

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BDP: As for those students who drop out after a year or two, or the ones who graduate but can't read for pleasure--do they ever realize what has been done to them? Is there a day when they realize that other people are using other strategies?

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Kim Latta: Many adults just consider themselves poor readers and accept this as a bitter fact of life. They've been told they were "born" dyslexic. They don't realize that the way they have been taught to read is the reason they are not good readers and writers. A lot of time they realize the difference only when their own children experience problems, and then they are motivated to become informed about reading methodologies.

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BDP: Well, do the parents themselves ever come to you? What's the oldest person you've worked with?

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Kim Latta: I have worked with adults as old as 60 and I am currently working with a 46-year-old man. He is very bright, but has been held back by his

inability to read and write. In the past, he has declined several substantial promotions because of his inability to perform the reading and writing required to do the job. He started with me four weeks ago and is excited that what he is learning "finally makes sense." He sees how these skills will transfer to his work. It is very rewarding to see adults succeed where they thought they never would.

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BDP: What about the local school officials? Do they appreciate your help? Or resent your intrusion?

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Kim Latta: Typically, they blame a child's inability to read on laziness, lack of intelligence, or the parents not doing enough at home. When the parent seeks outside help, many teachers and school officials view this as insulting. When I tell the parents that their child can be helped tremendously, but the child needs to start over and learn how to read phonetically, then the parents are often angry. Actually, it's a difficult situation for everyone. Most parents suspected that the Whole Language strategies their child was using didn't make sense and were failing their child. But parents naturally want to trust the teachers and school officials.

BDP:&nbsp; Here's the \$64,000 question. If this methodology--memorizing whole words--doesn't work, why do the schools use it?

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Kim Latta: I'm not sure of the true reason. I feel that Whole Language has been preached through the education system. It is truly a "religion" for many educators. It sounds so wonderful in theory, but is just that. There has been so much time and money spent on Whole Language that I feel the system is afraid to admit they are wrong. The fact that they don't care about the illiterate generations they are turning out is very sad. Whatever the reason, enough is enough. I'm only one person and I can't, as my husband puts it, save the Titanic with a row boat. I am trying to do what I can; one child at a time.

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BDP: Here's something I just ran across on the internet: a neurologist who asserts that the typical human brain can retain only 2500 nonphonetic symbols. This limitation--all by itself--renders Whole Word nonsensical. English has a lot of words!...Let's wrap up by looking back to the beginning. You've been a reading tutor for eight years. What got you started?

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Kim Latta: I knew my first year of university that I wanted to teach, but I really focused on reading methodology when my own daughter experienced difficulty learning to read. By the end of third grade she was assessed as unable to read at kindergarten level. It was because of my own anger, frustration, and heartache that I began learning and researching every aspect of reading methodology. The success of phonics with my daughter started me off tutoring other children. Teaching phonics and helping struggling readers has become my passion. By the way, I hear that the trend is back towards phonics in the US. Is this true?

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BDP: Yes. In the early 1990s, California's test scores dropped so low they were tied with Mississippi. If you know American society, you can imagine how the haughty Californians felt about that! So the tide started to turn about 1995. Problem is, American educators--still deeply influenced by the "progressive" John Dewey--are now fighting what seems to me a strategic retreat, under the banner of Balanced Literacy. In practice, this means they let phonics in but keep as much Whole Word and Whole Language as they can get away with. I bet you start seeing this in Canada. Your final thoughts?

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Kim Latta: Oh, so many! Here's a factoid I can't get out of my mind. Some US states base future prison population needs on the results of fourth grade reading assessments. Bureaucrats know if a child is not reading proficiently in fourth grade that he/she will not be reading at the end of high school. The early years are crucial and that's when Whole Word can do so much damage. Just think. They could create better schools--instead they build another prison.

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I sometimes think it would be nice to retire early and really be out of a job. But even if the schools started doing their jobs properly, I would still have enough work with older students and adults.&nbsp;

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The more research that comes in certainly validates my own experience. I just hope educators finally start acknowledging these facts and drop this failed methodology. Most teachers are passionate about their jobs, but don't have any chance of helping students with the mandated curriculum they are teaching.

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BDP: I've found that even well-educated people, such as lawyers and psychologists, are deeply confused about these issues. Rudolph Flesch explained

the dangers of Whole Word 50 years ago; but the educators counterattacked with misleading arguments we're still trying to escape from. I'm sure your in-the-trenches perspective will be very helpful. Thank you.

&nbsp;-----Bruce Deitrick Price is a novelist, artist, poet and education activist. He writes about education on [Improve-Education.org](http://www.improve-education.org). (Essay &quot;21: A Tribute to Rudolph Flesch&quot; on that site complements this interview.)

### About the Author

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