

[00:00:06.250] - Lauren Clouser

Welcome to the LDA podcast, a series by the Learning Disabilities Association of America. Our podcast is dedicated to exploring topics of interest to educators, individuals with learning disabilities, parents, and professionals to work towards our goal of creating a more equitable world.

[00:00:26.850] - Dr. Monica McHale-Small

Hi, everyone. I'm Monica McHale Small and I am currently the President of the Learning Disabilities Association of America, and I am here today with Dr. Lauren McClenney-Rosenstein of Think Dyslexia.

[00:00:41.080] - Dr. Lauren McClenney-Rosenstein

Hi. I'm really excited to be here and to have this really rich discussion about dyslexia, race and literacy. I've been in education for ten years. I am a special educator and I've been in private schools, I've been in public schools. I've worked at a nonprofit organization, and I'm currently a learning specialist at a private Quaker school in Baltimore. I've also taught at the elementary level and I have taught in the middle school level. And I started my career at a private dyslexic school, so that was kind of the start of where this love came from. And I'm also Orton Gillingham trained and certified through the Academy at the Associate level.

[00:01:21.030] - Dr. Monica McHale-Small

Lots of rich experiences to draw from. And Lauren, you and I connected after I saw a tweet that you shared which spoke to the idea of black students, and especially black male students often being misidentified as emotionally disturbed or intellectually disabled when in fact, they had dyslexia. And I'm very interested in what led you to tweet that.

[00:01:46.470] - Dr. Lauren McClenney-Rosenstein

Sure. So just so everyone knows what that tweet was, I posted this tweet on Christmas Eve, actually, and I stated, "Why is it when Black males qualify for special education, they qualify under intellectual or emotional disability? Oftentimes they're misunderstood and misdiagnosed, and this could be the root cause of dyslexia." So what inspired me to post this was I actually originally posted this on a whiteboard back in June on my Instagram page. And this was really based around the unrest of what was going on in our country with George Floyd and the Black Lives Matter movement. And I just thought as a special educator myself, why is that? Why is this the case? In July, I actually did a presentation with Dyslexia Institute UK, and the topic was actually the under representation of black students in American schools. And so I delved into what that looked like and just kind of the disparities in this country and what this country was based on and built on. So I felt even more inspired to repost it on Twitter when you found in

December, because I had just done an interview with Hilderbrand Pelzer III back in December on incarcerated youth and literacy.

[00:03:04.240] - Dr. Lauren McClenney-Rosenstein

And if you aren't familiar with his work, he's great. He used to be a principal in a juvenile system, I think in Philadelphia. I'm not quite sure where exactly, but his work is heavily steeped in literacy and incarcerated youth. So I felt it was time to bring that conversation to the forefront again. And hopefully we can change that narrative and we can have that systemic change.

[00:03:29.310] - Dr. Monica McHale-Small

Recently, I shared with you two different papers. One was LDA's recent core principle on disproportionality and identification, and the other was the testimony that I gave to the Pennsylvania Advisory Committee to the Human Rights Commission around the issue of the school to prison pipeline. I'm wondering what, if anything, from those papers resonated with you?

[00:03:56.270] - Dr. Lauren McClenney-Rosenstein

Well, I think the biggest thing that I know you touched on was relationships, the determining factor of the connections to the school and school success and student success. So I found this to be a really big area for me personally when I was co-teaching with teachers and then also just coaching teachers into how you can build those relationships with those students that I think some teachers might find that are more troubled or more harder to handle based on their behavior. And I know that class size and curriculum shifts and changes in whatever the direction the school district is kind of going and can make that difficult for public school teachers to say, 'Well, I don't have time to have relationships with 120 students,' but really that is the determining factor to unlocking student potential and that connection of building relationships as adults really think about themselves in the workplace. I feel like you thrive best when you know that someone actually is taking an interest in who you are as a person, what your likes are, what your interests are. So it's the same thing in the classroom. I feel like when you have that relationship building aspect of that.

[00:05:10.260] - Dr. Lauren McClenney-Rosenstein

And also I know there was a point in the piece that you sent me about student resource officers or the SROs, and how they're essentially trained to do what they're told, which is when there's some sort of criminal behavior, an action is then taken, which could be maybe the student is removed from the school or they're arrested or something that then puts that student, which could be more likely a student of color at risk of criminal behavior. And I think that, you know, when you think about students of color and their success rate and how schools handle the disciplinary actions, I think that kind of changes the narrative of if kids are constantly seeing a reflection of themselves being pulled out of the classrooms or they're not

really seeing their counterparts being treated the same way, it kind of puts in their head like, oh, well, I'm supposed to end up in prison or I'm supposed to just goof off in class, and then I can go hang out in the front office. So I think those points of relationship building the SRO officers and kind of their actions and how that can lead to criminal behavior really stuck out to me the most.

[00:06:25.280] - Dr. Lauren McClenny-Rosenstein

And it also just kind of made me think about some of my personal experiences in public school. And when I did see those students, they were always the students of color, right?

[00:06:35.690] - Dr. Monica McHale-Small

Yeah. And I can speak to my own experiences. I spent 27 years in public education. And what I saw so often was that some of those students who end up getting really heavily subjected to exclusionary discipline, most often the students of color and Black males, it almost seemed as if for them it was to save face rather than admit that they were really struggling to read and to perform what was expected of them in the classroom, they acted out so that they wouldn't look like they were dumb or incapable. And I think people hyper focused on their behaviors and never really dug deep enough to get to those root causes.

[00:07:22.410] - Dr. Lauren McClenny-Rosenstein

Yeah, I would agree with that. And I just comment on what you just said. I think often times teachers are overworked and as we know, underpaid. And so when they see students that are flipping a desk or passing notes or doing things when it could be a sign of this is happening whenever we're doing literature studies or this is happening, whenever we're doing circle time or whatever the case is, I'm sure it's from K-12 that you see these behaviors, but I think teachers aren't paying attention to that. And I know we'll touch on this later, but they don't know what they don't know. So they don't know what they're identifying to know. Oh, this could be a literacy issue rather than a behavior issue, right?

[00:08:03.490] - Dr. Monica McHale-Small

Absolutely. So let's talk a little bit more about dyslexia. And do you think dyslexia is in some ways distinct from other learning disabilities in terms of misidentification or under identification, especially in students of color, and if so, how?

[00:08:23.350] - Dr. Lauren McClenny-Rosenstein

Sure. Well, I think there are two factors that are an issue. So the lack of teachers of color in public school, in the public school system and the lack of knowledge about dyslexia. So if you take a step back and look at data, obviously, we know data tells stories. So in the National Center for Education Statistics, the breakdown of the percentage of teachers in the public and secondary schools in the years 1999 to 2000

and 2017 and 2018. So those are the two different data points. So in the 1999-2000, there were 84 teachers that 84% teachers that were white and 8% that were Black. So if you fast forward 2017 to 2018 school year, 79% teachers were white and 7% were Black. So there's a discrepancy right there where most of the teachers are white, probably white males, and the rate of Black teachers went down by 1%. So that I think right there is problematic within itself because I think teachers need to kind of look at their own implicit biases and where they come from, where they're teaching, how they're connecting with the BIPOC students. And then I also think most public school teachers, and let's just say common USA, this could be anywhere in this country really, can't tell you much about dyslexia in general.

[00:09:46.270] - Dr. Lauren McClenney-Rosenstein

And so elementary school teachers might know a little bit more than secondary colleagues, but not by much. So if they know more, it's probably because their school district is educating and training them, their in-service teachers on dyslexia or some sort of multisensory teaching to identify these students for special ed. But if you really take a look at the confluence of race and dyslexia, it's almost nonexistent in research. And when I was looking at race and dyslexia, probably around the time of when I originally posted a tweet in June, it was on Instagram. I was really looking for research. Like, what are the numbers? How many students of color do have dyslexia? How are these students being serviced? And there really was not a lot of data there. So I think it's easy to believe that dyslexia is really only prevalent in white people because in the American school systems, I feel like the white students are treated and kind of serviced differently than the BIPOC students.

[00:10:50.620] - Dr. Monica McHale-Small

Yeah. And as I shared with you in another conversation, I started my career as a school psychologist, and I have found that it's almost like at different times there are different disabilities that are popular or maybe not popular but are acceptable right now. Dyslexia is a socially acceptable disability. And I think in a way that has almost made it worse for students of color because it's an entitlement and it's an entitlement that a lot of our more affluent white parents are very aware of. And it's the disability that they're okay with their child having probably because so many really famous and accomplished people have come out to say that they're dyslexic. And I wonder, too, if maybe that's even playing into the under identification because we don't elevate as many famous and accomplished people of color in our society as we do white people. So maybe that is kind of playing into why it is that we're seeing this clear under identification.

[00:12:03.030] - Dr. Lauren McClenney-Rosenstein

I would definitely agree with that for sure, because in my own journey and I always like to make sure that people that are listening to my work know I'm not an adult with dyslexia. I'm just very passionate because I know I struggled in school and I was late diagnosed with ADHD and anxiety in my senior year of college. And so I think that was mostly why I went into special ed. And so I feel like I really didn't see a lot of representation for me as a student of color just in general, let alone adults or famous people of color that

have ADHD. So I think as I've been exploring, who are these people of color that do have dyslexia? And I found a few, not a lot. And I feel like they're names that people just don't know. So I think that does play into that underrepresentation for sure.

[00:12:57.880] - Dr. Monica McHale-Small

How about other learning disabilities? Do you have any thoughts about learning disabilities other than dyslexia and how that may intersect with race, things like dyscalculia and dysgraphia and oral and written language disorders.

[00:13:11.970] - Dr. Lauren McClenny-Rosenstein

You know, I feel like dysgraphia and dyscalculia, they're not new, but I feel like they are new in the special education field of like, no one really sees that on an IEP. Actually, let me take that back. In the school district where I worked, those were not labels that were on IEP. We saw specific learning disability. And I always joke that some of my co-teachers or other teachers on the team would be like, what's so specific about it? How can I help the student if I don't know what the specificity is? I think it connects a lot to dyslexia in that social justice piece, because I feel, speaking from my own experience as a woman of color, I was not good at math. And I feel like there is some sort of subliminal message for students of color, at least African American students. I can't speak for African students, but they're not good at math. That's more of the Asian realm. That's where some of the African descent Nigerians, like, they're good at math, they're good at those kinds of things. So I feel like there is this stigma for kids of color where it's like, well, I'm just not good.

[00:14:30.270] - Dr. Lauren McClenny-Rosenstein

I can't multiply. I'm going to just use my fingers, you know, things that I feel like I was guilty of as well. And then, same with dysgraphia. I think that learning how to write and being articulate in what you're saying and clear on paper can be difficult because I think if you take some places, like urban areas where there's slang and there's a different way of communicating that some teachers and again, if we look back at the percentage of teachers in American schools, they're white, they may not understand that. I guess you considered African American slang. Some of the broken English and things that are said spoken at home, it's different at school. So I think it could be perceived that maybe the student can't write well because of maybe what's happening at school, or maybe the student isn't capable because they're not getting the support of what's happening at home. I think I said at school the first time I met home.

[00:15:28.370] - Dr. Monica McHale-Small

Right.

[00:15:29.090] - Dr. Lauren McClenny-Rosenstein

So, yeah, I definitely think there is a race component to that, for sure.

[00:15:36.070] - Dr. Monica McHale-Small

Yes. And in my own experience, when I did work in public schools, and then now I'm an adjunct at Temple University, and we have a clinic that services a lot of families in a pretty high poverty urban area that surrounds the University. And we're often encountering kids who have gotten into upper elementary, even into high school, who have clear learning disabilities. But it's almost as if it's like, oh, well, you're poor, you're Black. And we didn't really think about that. That's kind of where we expect you to be because you're poor and you're Black, which is very heartbreaking because these kids are not getting the intervention that if they were just classified serviced early on, that would be a way to get themselves out of the poverty situations that they find themselves in. Right?

[00:16:32.840] - Dr. Lauren McClenny-Rosenstein

Right.

[00:16:34.390] - Dr. Monica McHale-Small

Yeah, we kind of dismissed it and just. Well, I think we have a very high tolerance for accepting low achievement amongst poor students, no matter what color they are. And I don't think that's okay. No. So we're having this conversation on the day that we honor the legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King, who said in one of his speeches, the field of education has been a battleground in the freedom struggle. And then just last week, it was announced that Rick Snyder, the former governor of Michigan, was criminally charged in connection with the Flint water crisis. Parents in that community had to file legal action to get their children evaluated for special education. So in this week, where social justice is really very much at the forefront of the news, and I'm thinking, what are your thoughts on if or how environmental justice and disproportionality in special education intersect?

[00:17:35.180] - Dr. Lauren McClenny-Rosenstein

So I think environmental justice is huge and the disproportionality do intersect. Typically, when I think of environmental circumstances and families of color, I usually think of urban populations which impact quality of living in ways that don't necessarily impact white families with cultural capital. And so I was looking at Flint's makeup of their city. The 2010 census had said 56% African American, 37% white. And I'm not really familiar with the quality of living in Flint, but I can only imagine that the parents are taking legal action to file for legal action for their children to get evaluated for the school system, for potential lead poisoning in the water. That really goes to show just how dire their circumstances are. I don't want to have a sweeping generalization comment, but I do want to say I feel like you don't typically see these

cases happening in white rural areas in America. Maybe they happen, but it's different. And I just think about we have a house in West Virginia, and the school district is really far away from our cabin, and that's a vacation home, but it's pretty rural out there. And so I wonder what their quality of living is like as well.

[00:18:52.000] - Dr. Lauren McClenney-Rosenstein

But to kind of bring it back to Flint, I think in terms of filing for the legal actions, it's just one step in the process. So for me, I ask questions like, what type of lawyers are the Flint residents going to get? Are they going to be top notch lawyers? Are they just going to be those pro bono case lawyers where they only have 15 minutes per case type thing? Will these parents win the case? And if the families do get what they're asking for special education testing and that nature, are these kids really receiving the best education possible? And, of course, that's all subjective. What is the free, appropriate public education? That varies. So I think in general, the process is good, but in some ways, I think it could be discouraging to kind of get stuck in that system. But I'm not saying these families shouldn't fight because they should. But this is a continuous issue that just keeps unfolding, right?

[00:19:47.260] - Dr. Monica McHale-Small

Yeah. And I completely agree that evaluation is just the first step. And if you're evaluated and identified and you still receive substandard education, then it's not necessarily going to solve the problem. To me, though, it just speaks to the whole idea that the entire world knew that these children were poisoned with lead, and yet they still had to fight for their rights, their legal rights to a free and appropriate public education. So it was disheartening to me. And I do fear sometimes that when we are solely focused on ideas like over identification and too many kids of color are over identified for special ed. And yet we know that children of color are more likely than their white counterparts to live in highly toxic environments, lead and air pollution, and other things that impact brain development. We're kind of trying to solve the problem by saying, oh, we just won't evaluate so many kids for special ed when we haven't really dug down to what are the root causes of why these children may be underachieving or may have a higher rate of disability. Right? Sweeping it under the rug.

[00:21:10.080] - Dr. Lauren McClenney-Rosenstein

No, I agree with that completely.

[00:21:13.330] - Dr. Monica McHale-Small

When I read the article that you had shared with me, a lot of ideas resonated. But one quote that I pulled out, you said, "Why should many Black communities suffer and not have the same access and opportunities that significant numbers of white families can leverage?" Let's circle back to dyslexia and

talk about how that idea connects to dyslexia and students of color and what resources they may not be able to leverage.

[00:21:42.430] - Dr. Lauren McClenney-Rosenstein

Sure. So when I wrote this, I was thinking a lot about my first job in my private dyslexic school in the suburbs of Atlanta. So this was ten years ago, and I believe I was the first Black teacher hired. And I noticed that there weren't a lot of Black students there my first year. Now, second, third year, there were more students of color. On my first year, I felt like I kind of stood out and I didn't feel like I was being discriminated against. But I noticed that there wasn't a lot of me there. And so it really made me think about the Atlanta Public Schools and their demographics. And of course, I just like to know the percentages. So 54% Black people lived in Atlanta. This is 2010 data and 38%. I'm sure it's the same, if not a little bit higher for Blacks now in 2021. But I'm sure that there are a lot of students of color in the Atlanta Public Schools. And so when I think about the school where I work. I don't think they were really scholarships put in place. So if you are familiar with Atlanta, it's Fulton County is pretty large and it used to a long time ago, we divided into three different counties, but they went bankrupt.

[00:23:05.020] - Dr. Lauren McClenney-Rosenstein

And so it turned into this one long county. But you get to a place where Northern Fulton County is mostly white. And that's where there were a lot of the private schools, private dyslexic schools, and then south of Fulton County, depending on where you were, you kind of had to be careful with, 'oh, I'm going into this part of town' or 'this is where this school is.' And so I really couldn't help but think about the private school tuition, the barriers that it presents to probably some of those South Fulton families that maybe they weren't as educated to know about dyslexia or why their child was reading two or three grade levels below where they should be to know, like, 'Hey, I really want to send my child to a school where they can get what they need, they can get identified, they can have those supports.' And so it really made me think about why is it that most of these private schools have students that are mostly white? And I think a lot of it is because of the cultural capital, because of the knowledge, because of the education to know, okay, something's not right.

[00:24:10.620] - Dr. Lauren McClenney-Rosenstein

Let's get my child evaluated. And as you know, outside evaluation, testing can run up to \$3,000 and families just can't afford it if their insurance isn't covering it. So the other thing I did want to say was there was an article I read from KQED News, which is, I think, a radio station based out of San Francisco. And they put out an article I think this article was from a few months ago, but the journalist interviewed the Larry P, which this was a lawsuit court case in 1979, and it was based on the discrimination of an IQ test against Black students. And so if the student tested below whatever their idea of an IQ test was, they were then deemed mentally retarded and then they were then put in special education. And so this, the real life Larry P., Darrell Lester, he ended up living his life in and out of jobs, on drugs, really struggled.

And he's now 62 years old. And it's because he was dyslexic. But the bar was set low for him. I think his mom didn't know what she didn't know and she thought the school was doing the best for him to provide the best education.

[00:25:25.450] - Dr. Lauren McClenny-Rosenstein

And once he was in the special education classes and thankfully, we don't have this everywhere now, but he was put in those life skills classes. So his expectation of being successful in school was very low. It was assumed that he was not smart enough. So then he just had to learn how to fold clothes or whatever those life skills classes were. So it really makes me think this man is 62 years old and he's dyslexic and still can't read and write very well, and he grew up in not having an abundant amount of money and resources. This is still happening today, and there's still that discrimination piece or that divide where you have these exclusive private schools, which I'm all for it because I've worked in three private schools. But where is the equal opportunity for those students to get the same kind of services that the white students are receiving?

[00:26:22.290] - Dr. Monica McHale-Small

Right. And kids shouldn't have to. I mean, the law says a free and appropriate public education for all students with disabilities. And recent Supreme Court cases have really affirmed that that progress the kids make needs to be meaningful and consistent with what we would expect based on their disability. But maybe that's the whole issue, maybe cause of the color of some students. Again, our expectations are just set too low, and therefore, we don't really make sure we have the right diagnostic category and we don't really make sure that those kids have the highest quality evidence based instruction. Maybe a final idea here is you also talk about reading and writing as civil rights, and that everyone and that kind of goes along with what I was saying. Right. You shouldn't have to have the money to get yourself into a private LD or dyslexia school in order to get the education that you need and that everyone should receive the support that they need to be successful. LDA, as an organization wholeheartedly supports that idea of reading as a civil right, because most, not all, but most students with learning disabilities struggle to read. In your opinion, how would things change for students with dyslexia if policymakers truly embrace this idea?

[00:27:48.550] - Dr. Lauren McClenny-Rosenstein

I mean, I think the answer is simple. Like they would finally get what they need, but it's not that simple. So if I think about policymakers and then you think about governors and mayors, I know the governor of California Gavin Newsome, he's dyslexic, and I think he's pushing out some good policies in the state of California to support kids because it's personal to him. And I think the biggest thing I'm realizing just in my own research and just in public versus private school, if it's not personal, people don't really care. And I know that sounds awful, but I think it's true. I know you've been in education longer than me, but in the ten years that I've been in this field, I'm like, how do we get people to see that this is something, first of all,

that needs to change at the University level? Preservice teachers need to know how to identify and need to understand how to support these students. But then when you take it, you know, you scale it back to the policy level who is out there where they can say, you know, what this impacted me personally, this was something that was difficult for me.

[00:28:54.480] - Dr. Lauren McClenny-Rosenstein

We have to change the narrative for these kids. And I think it has to come from the governors and the mayors and the people that actually made it to the top per se, but probably struggled their way through. So I think until there is a child or an actual adult or a grandchild or someone out there where they're seeing the struggle and they're seeing how difficult it is, that's when it'll really hopefully change the narrative. But I'm hoping that there is some sort of change or deep understanding in the BIPOC community. So I don't know if there has to be a mayor or governor or someone of power that's of color to say this has impacted me and my community and we have to make a difference, but we have to make a difference at the policy level. So I think that's my answer. It's got to be personal to somebody.

[00:29:52.210] - Dr. Monica McHale-Small

Yeah, you're probably right. I think that there's personal stories. Having been involved in passing some legislation in Pennsylvania, it really was the personal stories. And when the stories that the parents told connected with the stories of the policymakers and the experiences that's when we saw movement happen. I'm wondering, though, going back, you mentioned policymakers who are BIPOC and how we have to connect them to it. I'm wondering if that whole idea of over identification and too many kids being in dead end special education programs, do you think that has caused any resistance in that community to be open to the idea that dyslexia may be as prevalent or maybe even more prevalent in certain communities of color as in the white community? Do you think there's any uneasiness with that concept?

[00:30:56.010] - Dr. Lauren McClenny-Rosenstein

Absolutely. I think that there is a huge stigma. I tutored a student of color a few years back, and I think within this student's culture and this student was not dyslexic, they had a physical disability that impacted their...well it was physical and it was cognitive, but it was the kind of thing where the family, you could tell they were uncomfortable with the idea of special education, but they realized that my child needs these supports. But culturally it was like, no, if there was a way that they couldn't see this, then we're not really going to address it. And I think that that can be the over identification. I do think there is this not stigma but this perception, this misconception that you'll get teachers that will say to some Black families or some poor families, well, you're just not reading enough at home. That's why your child is not able to read. And it's like, how do you know what's really happening? And so I think at least the in Black community. I think I can speak on that. It's like, I think we get offended by that, then it's just like, what? We don't need you're fine, you're good.

[00:32:12.540] - Dr. Lauren McClenney-Rosenstein

You'll grow out of it or we'll fix the problem or we'll get a tutor or whatever it is. And I think that definitely plays into it and I also think that a lot of people have been hurt by the system and the system has been put in place to support, but I mean, look at special education history and how long it took for special education rights to kind of come to fruition and even still now, depending on what school district and where you are, there's still issues yeah.

[00:32:42.200] - Dr. Monica McHale-Small

There's still huge issues. Hence, LDA continues to still exist, right? If everything was hunky Dory, we wouldn't have a reason to continue.

[00:33:00.230] - Speaker 4

Thank you for listening to the LDA podcast to learn more about LDA and to get valuable resources and support visit Idamerica.org.