

Lauren Clouser [00:00:06]:

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.

Dr. Monica McHale-Small [00:00:23]:

Hi, everyone. I am Monica McHale Small, the Director of Education for the Learning Disabilities Association of America. A few months back, I spoke with artist Mark Stoddart about his life as an individual with dyslexia and some of his struggles. And in that podcast, we spoke about the book that would be coming out, Making a Mark, that Mark co-authored with Kate McElderry. That book has since come out. And today, I am speaking with Kate and the publisher of the book, Priscilla Hannaford.

Kate McElderry [00:01:01]:

Words came as one daunting lump, and Mark really wasn't sure how to approach them. He too would become anxious, especially when Mrs. Thwart would demand him to repeat and memorize in her piercing pitch. Mrs. Thwart would preach that reading was just a matter of learning one's ABCs, and one must try harder. She demanded, therefore, that Mark repeat long and difficult words over and over again, always in one go. Worst of all, she would actually laugh as Mark stumbled. "Again, Mark. Discombobulated. Say it."

Kate McElderry [00:01:43]:

Mark wanted to shout,

Mark Stoddart (prerecorded) [00:01:46]:

"Disrespect. You are not respecting me nor how I learn, Mrs. Thwart."

Kate McElderry [00:01:57]:

But of course, Mark never said that aloud. And he really couldn't get the word discombobulated to come out either. Looking awkward on land, the hippo was surprisingly graceful in the water. Mark suddenly realized.

Mark Stoddart (prerecorded) [00:02:17]:

I'm just like this hippo, awkward in one place, at ease and successful in another.

Kate McElderry [00:02:26]:

He had a flashback to his own learning and thought to himself:

Mark Stoddart (prerecorded) [00:02:31]:

The right environment, habitat, for the hippo, and school for a student, can make all the difference.

Kate McElderry [00:02:41]:

It's true what Mrs. Briel used to say. Expect the unexpected in life because the view was spectacular. The water was as crystal clear as glass, and the sun was highlighting the hippo's head. The wild beauty of it all, Mark was completely inspired.

Dr. Monica McHale-Small [00:03:02]:

Kate, we just heard you and Mark reading from Making a Mark. Can you tell us how you and Mark met and tell us about how the idea for this book came about, and when did the two of you start discussing it?

Kate McElderry [00:03:17]:

Yes. Well, thanks for having me. And I thought I would actually share the foreword in the book that gives really nice context and an answer to your questions. It says here, dear reader, years back, I was invited to listen to Mark Stoddart speak. Mark talked about his life and the role that neurodiversity and art played in it. He showed examples of his beautiful bronze sculptures and clever designs, and he also talked about his journey of learning in life. There were so many great messages and lessons behind his work that I was instantly inspired. After about 10 minutes of listening to Mark share his story, especially about his struggles and triumphs with dyslexia,

Kate McElderry [00:04:01]:

I knew that my students and colleagues would also benefit from hearing him speak. As soon as the talk was over, I shared with my family and friends, everyone I knew, more about Mark. Indeed, Mark is not only a talented artist, but an ambassador for dyslexia and neurodiversity. An educational champion, he kindly gives back to the world through his art and many projects. I reached out to Mark to ask him if he would speak at my school, and he did. For weeks after that talk, students and staff stopped me in the hallway at school to chat about Mark. They wrote me notes and drew pictures for me to pass on to Mark expressing their heartfelt gratitude and enthusiasm for the sculptor's story and work. I shared all of this with Mark and the fact that several students asked me if someone would please write a book about what his talks were all about.

Kate McElderry [00:04:52]:

Well, reader, the rest is history. So, hopefully, that answers your question. And, just to say that, when Mark spoke at my school, this was the height of the pandemic, and so obviously, he couldn't come at first. He did eventually come in person. That talk, though, was in conjunction with World Creativity and Innovation Week, and that's something that is sponsored by the United Nations. And I thought that Mark would be the perfect person to talk to our school because the idea is that it's using creativity to help the world in some way, in terms of not just the arts, but maybe the environment or humanity, etcetera.

Kate McElderry [00:05:37]:

And I felt that he really embodied that, and so it was a really lovely talk. So after that and then the late spring of 2021, I started to meet with Mark on Zooms because he's in Scotland, and I'm here in the United States. And I interviewed him and took lots of notes, and he was very generous with sharing a lot about his artwork and photographs and so forth. And so I came up with an initial outline shortly after. And then in the summer of 2021, literally the day after school was out for me, I started writing because I realized that it was going to be a big process to get an entire book accomplished, and I started to map things out actually using the very strategies we teach our students with our writing because, by the way, I teach at a school that's for students with dyslexia and language based learning differences. So I started that outline. I started writing, and I found that the story part really flowed very naturally from the talks with Mark. So Mark tells a story very well, and that part was relatively effortless to capture.

Kate McElderry [00:06:53]:

It did require some weaving in of different characters, some who are based on real people and some who are fictitious, as a way to integrate different cognitive learning profiles. That was one of our goals, is to have dyslexia represented, but other learning differences as well and also different forms of dyslexia. Not everybody has the same degree and profile. So we discussed ways that we could have Mark featured, but also integrate students who had other dyslexic profiles, dyscalculia, dysgraphia, ADHD, and just, in general, even comorbid profiles with overlaps.

Dr. Monica McHale-Small [00:07:36]:

Okay. That's great. So you talked already a little bit about how the characters in the book were designed around educating people about different learning disabilities and neurodiversities. Were there other specific things that you and Mark were trying to accomplish with the book?

Kate McElderry [00:07:56]:

Yes. We wanted to show that there are different angles to a person, really. And that people are multidimensional. And that we all come with our own unique profiles of strengths and challenges, so that was very important for us to share, and we also didn't want dyslexia to be considered a sort of a catchall phrase that it sometimes is used to actually describe different learning differences. So this was one of our goals. We wanted to celebrate strengths that people with neurodiverse cognitive learning disabilities have, but we also didn't want to dismiss the real challenges. You know, your organization and my school would not exist if there were not true challenges. And so we wanted to acknowledge those and help people unpackage them. We also wanted people to feel inspired that they could also work through their challenges just like Mark did and find their path, find their way, and that art might be one of them.

Kate McElderry [00:09:05]:

But regardless, the journey can be creative and personal and exciting.

Dr. Monica McHale-Small [00:09:13]:

Great. Well, you already just mentioned that you are a teacher of students with learning disabilities and other learning differences and challenges. What are the components of this book that grew from your own experiences as an educator?

Kate McElderry [00:09:31]:

So one is that, you know, every single learner is different. I've taught for 27 years, and I will tell you no one child with dyslexia is the same as the next. So that's really important to impart to people. These learning differences are not a cookie cutter, you know, diagnosis. They just take different forms. So that was something I could draw upon from personal experience. Again, as I referred to before, this often overlaps with something else.

Kate McElderry [00:10:05]:

A lot of students with dyslexia also have dysgraphia, and there can be an interplay between them. The importance of executive functioning, the importance of growth mindset, self belief, and understanding that you can improve, and brain plasticity, these were all things that I could really speak to and integrate very naturally into the characters, but also the learning resource section of the book.

Dr. Monica McHale-Small [00:10:34]:

So, here's another follow-up question to that. Have you already used the book already in your teaching?

Kate McElderry [00:10:42]:

I have, and interestingly, it's being used in some local schools here and some afar. But just to backtrack actually, and share a little bit about the process of it. Before I even got to the learning resource section of the book, I decided that summer that I started to get all 15 chapters of the story that integrates the highlights and challenges of Mark's own story finished before the end of my summer and before a trip that I was taking to Ireland. And the reason was that I was hoping to be able to take advantage of the fact that I was conducting a workshop that had children who were Irish, American, and British. And I didn't want to tell the kids that I had written these excerpts because I wanted to just get their raw feedback. But I decided since the kids had learning disabilities that it was a great opportunity to just see. Did it resonate? Did they get it? Did they like it? Was it something they could grasp? And so I did that. And what I found is that they kept saying things like, that's me.

Kate McElderry [00:11:56]:

Oh my gosh. I'm like that. I think that way. Well, that was really helpful. And then the other part of that too was that I was very lucky to have the the guidance and, support of Jack Harte, who is a playwright and writer and mentor and founder of the Irish Writers center in Dublin and also of the Forged Corners Writers Writers Retreat in Sligo, and that was wonderful because he was the first reader and was able to give me feedback, so I was able to take advantage of that and actually do some writing in Sligo. And then also met with Rosie Bissett, who is the CEO of Dyslexia Association of Ireland and President of European Dyslexia Association, to kind of pick her brain a little bit, because we wanted the book to be international in flavor and not just for

Americans and not just for British and so forth. And she had a lot of great thoughts. And one was the idea that, well, something that she has said actually in one of her talks is that neurodiversity and learning disabilities and so forth all deserve ongoing conversations, and so we actually designed the book as a conversation.

Dr. Monica McHale-Small [00:13:09]:

Great. And you touched on in the beginning with the way you shared the characters with students that you were meeting with in Ireland. That's really what I was very curious about. Had children seen themselves in these characters and related that to you, and it sounds like they have.

Kate McElderry [00:13:29]:

Yes. And then, although there are a number of characters and they're purely fiction, I absolutely wove in kids' learning profiles that I have seen and worked with. So I think it makes sense that it seems really relatable. And then I have already worked with some students in a workshop, and then I have recently worked with some education students who were starting to use this themselves, and that's terrific. They're in education programs, special ed, mathematics. So not just the dyslexia and reading and writing arenas.

Dr. Monica McHale-Small [00:14:12]:

Great. So here's a question that I've thought about because I think this particular answer might be very relevant to individuals with learning disabilities and other learning differences. How long exactly did it take you to write it? And did you and or Mark ever feel like just giving up? Did it feel too overwhelming or too difficult at times?

Kate McElderry [00:14:41]:

Well, it was a real challenge. As I said, I realized that it was going to be very important that I maximize my summertime as a teacher because the school year is just jam packed, and I'm also a mother. So it was very much the goal that I would try to get the story part with Mark, as the focus finished that summer of 2021, and I accomplished that. So I felt really proud of myself because I went to my school, the head secretary, and I asked her, do we have any more of those planners that help us map out the different periods of the day, and I thought, you know, that is what I'm going to do. I'm literally going to do, like, this part of Mark's life, I'm gonna write at this point of this day. And so that's what I did. I literally took the approach we teach our children, chunk it out. And I chunked it out.

Kate McElderry [00:15:39]:

And I also took advantage of the fact that I knew that Mark and I would be able to meet during the summertime easily on Zooms and so forth because of our time zone difference. I was just foreseeing that could be a challenge during the school year. Now the learning resource section was very challenging because that required a lot of research and my weekends. And by that time, school was in full force, and that meant working in blocks of time that I don't really find very easy to come by, and I had to use a couple of vacations and a lot of weekends. And I'm very fortunate that my husband, mother, and kids were all on board and really supportive. But, yeah,

I would say that it was challenging, but taking things chunk by chunk and mapping it out and creating outlines and taking the time to think that through made it not feel so overwhelming, and I think made it really manageable to work with a coauthor and also, our illustrators. We had an initial illustrator, Rossi Stone, helped us get started, and then he led us to a fantastic illustrator, Rachel Kush. And, you know, she was doing work that is conceptual art, essentially, really showing processes and so forth.

Kate McElderry [00:17:05]:

So it took a lot of communicating back and forth and so forth. So in any case, yes, it was a challenge, but it was also an exciting one. And I should also add that, because there were a lot of people to collaborate with, the illustrators, but also working with the neuroscientist, Dr. Fumiko Haef from University of Connecticut and University of California San Francisco and Dr. Nurbay Yedav of Johns Hopkins, along with Cathy McGee, Dyslexia Scotland, and Rosie, because people like that, these people, you know, it meant working with their different schedules and time frames and so forth. So it was an exciting, multifaceted collaboration.

Dr. Monica McHale-Small [00:17:55]:

Yeah. And it sounds like you were using a lot of the strategies and skills that we teach our students.

Kate McElderry [00:18:05]:

I was. And, in fact, I would make these sequencing maps. And so it's fun because I've actually shown some of my students, like, look. The stuff we teach you is for the rest of your life. It's not just something you do at your school and then you call it good. It really doesn't work. And I found it not only helpful, but actually really exciting to sort of walk the talk.

Dr. Monica McHale-Small [00:18:32]:

Yeah. That's great. So writing a book is one thing, but actually getting it published is a whole other ordeal sometimes. And so thank you to Priscilla Hannaford for being with us. And I read a little bit about Brilliant Publications online, and you're an independent publishing company. And I want to know what drew you to this book. Can you tell us a little bit about your mission as a publisher and how you saw Making a Mark fit with that mission?

Priscilla Hannaford [00:19:03]:

Absolutely. And thank you very much for having me. So Brilliant Publications is an independent educational publishing company. We were founded 30 years ago. So our mission's always been to create books that will inspire and motivate children and, for that matter, to inspire and motivate the teachers as well. We look for books that have really creative approaches to learning. We really want the pupils, the students, to be engaged in their learning. It's really important to us.

Priscilla Hannaford [00:19:32]:

So although Making a Mark is our 1st neurodiversity book, it actually fits in really nicely because we have other books that are aimed at specific learners. So for example, we have books for teaching gifted and talented children. We've got books to support slower learners in All sorts of subjects. So it wasn't a great step for us to publish a book on neurodiversity, really.

Dr. Monica McHale-Small [00:19:58]:

I know that the goal is for making a mark to reach a wide audience, but the authors and the US publisher had a neurodiverse audience in mind. What did that mean to you, and what are some of the specific things about the books in terms of content format formatting illustrations that you and the co authors were thinking about when you put this book together.

Priscilla Hannaford [00:20:23]:

Right. That's a good question. And we've always paid a great deal of attention to the layout of the book. It's whoever we're publishing it for. Even if it's a book for teachers, we don't like to have large chunks of text because we don't think anyone finds that easy to read. So that's always been a big focus of us to make sure we're using clear fonts, clearly laid out, text with lots of tables, bullet points, etcetera. So when we came to Making a Mark, really, we were able to base the design on principles that we're already using in our design. So you'll see that the book has lots of leading.

Priscilla Hannaford [00:21:04]:

That's the amount of space in between the lines. And we also allowed an extra line of space in between each paragraph to help them stand out and be sort of individual units to make it easier for people to read. And of course, we thought a great deal about which fonts we should use to make it really clear. When it came to the editing, we looked especially carefully at each sentence to make sure the meaning couldn't be misconstrued in any way. If we felt the sentence was too complex, for example, we perhaps divide it into 2 smaller ones, but that sometimes having it in 2 smaller ones actually hinders the meaning, so then we might add conjunctions would be another thing we would do just to make sure that each sentence was easy to read and the text flowed better. And sometimes, when people are writing or speaking, they don't put the subject at the start of the sentence. And just making sure that the structure of the sentence so it's clear you had subject, verb, or whatever, and it just makes it much easier for the people to read if you have a simple layout that people understand so they don't get drawn down this rabbit hole of the sort of, adverbial at the beginning, and they sort of then they think, well, what's this sentence about? And so we thought a great deal about that. Rachel Cush and Rosie Stone as, Kate's already mentioned,

Priscilla Hannaford [00:22:44]:

and the illustrations had to, really we were very careful about our positioning of the illustrations so that they worked in conjunction with the text, so it all worked together as a whole, so they complimented and enhanced each other. I have to say we're particularly proud of our layout of the learning resources section, because there was a danger this section was going to look boring and unappealing in comparison to the rest of the book. So Kate and Mark had this great idea that it could be done, and narrated this whole section about learning resources that could be narrated by Mark and his friends. So the explanation of dyslexia is not only written in child

friendly language. It's also written from a child's point of view, which was super important, I felt. So it's how do we portray this visually? And the initial idea was you're gonna have a little picture of the child and then a speech bubble. There was just too much text to fit into speech bubbles, and it was looking really messy on the page. So we came up with this idea of having different borders of different colors going around each of the bits of text that each child was saying. So it wasn't exactly a speech bubble, but it was very clear which bit related to which child and what they were saying.

Priscilla Hannaford [00:24:04]:

So all the way through the book, whenever Mark is talking, there's a purple border, and wherever Brita's talking the border's green, etcetera. So it's come out looking like, if I dare say so myself, a really, really attractive bit in the book, and it's really lovely that we were able to do that, I think.

Dr. Monica McHale-Small [00:24:23]:

Yeah. For sure. And I forgot to mention when Kate was speaking that I have shared the book with several people and got lots of positive comments on the illustrations. People really found those illustrations very engaging as well as the format. And then one other thing I'll share is that, I haven't read it to my 7 year old grandson yet or read it with him, but I did show it to him, and they were the pages, those learning resources pages, they were where he was really studying very carefully, so I found that was pretty neat. He's 7, and he has a couple of his own struggles. And he was very interested in that section.

Dr. Monica McHale-Small [00:25:06]:

Kate, did you have a comment?

Kate McElderry [00:25:05]:

Yeah. I just wanted to say, I mean, truly, Brilliant Publications is brilliant because, this section, I couldn't agree more with Priscilla, could have easily been dry and boring, and no one wanted to look at it. And this section is absolutely as important and part of the book. And so the layout, Priscilla and team really found a wonderful way to do that. And I'll just say that, you know, one of the things I think is really neat about Mark Stoddart's work is that he blends form and function. He does these incredible, bronze sculptures that are often animals and then like his famous hippo tables, and then it's got the glass tabletop, and so it's also functional as a table. So it's beautiful art to look at, but it also has a function. And so, you know, the question is, is it art or, is it just kind of something to be pleasing or is it also something functional? And I felt it was really important that the Learning Resources was part of the actual story because, yes, it's entertaining and it's interesting to read Mark's story, but it also is something that teaches and could potentially flow into that, learning resources.

Kate McElderry [00:26:33]:

And so visually and through the layout and all the pains the publishers went through, really, I think, succeeded in doing that. It's quite a unique book in that way. I don't really know of any other book like that. And it also has a lot of wonderful information about the brain that is good for

anyone because, in essence, everyone's neurodiverse in the sense that everyone's is unique, and that is absolutely one of the themes and goals of us writing this book is to impart that and inspire with that knowledge.

Dr. Monica McHale-Small [00:27:11]:

Yes. So, Priscilla, you know, clearly, You put a lot of thought into this and not just appealing to a wider audience, but really being very specifically appealing and relevant to children with learning disabilities and learning challenges. Did you find other books that target this population? And did you learn from those, or was this brilliance Completely on your own?

Priscilla Hannaford [00:27:40]:

We did quite a bit of research prior you know, when we're coming up with design. Like any good design, I think it evolves. It starts off, and then it evolves as you go on. Having said that, you know, we because we had such good principles for brilliant publications about what a good learning resource or book looks like and what actually works and helps the reader. We were able to build on what we knew. We did look at books that are aimed at people with different neurodiverse Profiles, and also, we in fact, the Dyslexia Scotland produces a marvelous handout for Publishers. I'd reckon anyone thinking of publishing a book. It's a useful handout for publishers on things you should consider, so to do with The the fonts, the type size, the, not having black write black text on white, which was a bit of a challenge for us that that issue, actually, because to get the book out, we were having to run a very short type time scale, and so we had to get out really quickly.

Priscilla Hannaford [00:28:49]:

So we had to use a number of different printers in the UK and in the US. And so one solution is to do it on the cream colored paper, but we couldn't guarantee you know, it was hard for the different printers printing it to make sure that that would work. So we went down, we tried doing a sort of blue type, and then in the end, we went for a sort of a dark gray type on white paper, which everyone was pleased with in the end. So but that was one of the things that Dyslexia Scotland, this handout was one of the things they suggested, which was really helpful for us. So yes. I wouldn't say we tried to take books that are out there already and said, oh, we must use that. But we picked, we saw things in different books and said, oh, yes.

Priscilla Hannaford [00:29:38]:

That's useful. And, you know, that's that I like the way they've done that. But having said that, as I say, a lot of things that we did off we do automatically. Like, we automatically think, is there any bit of text that can be put in a box separately. So in the book, for example, there's some letters that Mark receives, and we thought, well, let's put that in a separate book and in different font to make it look as if it is a letter. Again, making sure the font is clear and easy to read still, but to help separate it out just to make the book Look more visually attractive, but also to help distinguish that bit of the text. So we did various things like that as well. Great.

Dr. Monica McHale-Small [00:30:16]:

And do you have plans to publish other books with a neurodiverse audience in mind?

Priscilla Hannaford [00:30:22]:

We don't have any immediate plans, but we're always open to new publishing ideas. And, yes, I'd love to do more books for a neurodiverse audience. We're a relatively small company, so we're very selective in what we decide to publish. So, you know, before we take on a project, we really have to feel that it's a good project and that we can add value to it. So we were delighted to take on Making a Mark, and I think we've been able to work really well with Kate and Mark and produce a really special product in the end. Whatever product we do, we want to make sure that that's the case as well. So we don't just take anything just because, oh, we're into neurodiversity now. Let's publish that to neurodiversity.

Priscilla Hannaford [00:31:03]:

That's not our approach. We really say, well, what can we publish which is unique and special that will help neurodiverse people?

Dr. Monica McHale-Small [00:31:11]:

Great. Okay. And this last question, really, I think, could be for both of you. Do you have a sense yet of the impact that the book is having?

Priscilla Hannaford [00:31:19]:

Well, it's early. If you don't mind, Kate, I'll talk first.

Kate McElderry [00:31:23]:

Yeah. No. Do.

Priscilla Hannaford [00:31:25]:

It's very early days, but, I mean, we've been absolutely delighted with all the reviews we've been getting and all the letters and comments we've been having. We've heard from high file educationalists, but also from teachers and parents. And I was delighted to hear you, Monica, say about talking to your grandchild because we've actually had people who had written saying, oh, this is great. I'm gonna share it with my grandchild, which is lovely. The people are seeing this is something they can share with their families, which is wonderful. And also people from around the world. So from the United States and the UK, Australia, Kenya, Germany, Spain, all over the place, people are sending in comments, and they're all universally complimentary, which is absolutely wonderful.

Priscilla Hannaford [00:32:09]:

So, I think it's very exciting.

Dr. Monica McHale-Small [00:32:13]:

Yeah. For sure. Go ahead, Kate.

Kate McElderry [00:32:08]:

So I agree that it's early days. I don't have numbers or statistics as such, but I will say that the comments that I've been receiving have delighted me in that they are finding the book useful in ways I hadn't really thought about. For example, I know an English teacher, he's using it for readers' theater because there's really great dialogue in the book. Again, it was designed as a conversation, and there's another teacher teaching a strategy called signposting, which is really helpful for anyone, but particularly for students with dyslexia and ADHD because it helps you look for signposts. It looks for certain words and trigger quotations and things like that that happen in a story or just a text. And so the very beginning of the book is a memory moment, so that's a memory moment signpost. And so just lots of things like that, that I'm just delighted to hear. A teacher who has a math class of varying ability and some of them who need some support with really kind of growing a math mindset and talking about the character, Brida, who has dyscalculia and sort of evolves in her math mindset and employs strategies that Joe Goler, who is an expert in mathematics, talks about. So, I'm just delighted to hear those kinds of comments coming in of concrete ways that it's being used in the classroom and or tutoring. I have 2 schools that have told me they're gonna do it for summer reading for faculty to talk a little bit about what our role is as teachers and to think about, choose words.

Kate McElderry [00:34:11]:

You know, what we say and what we don't say, and I am delighted to learn that too. So I think it is having an impact, and I think that's great.

Dr. Monica McHale-Small [00:34:21]:

Yeah. I think it's a beautiful book, and I'm really thrilled that we got to talk today about how it all came to be. Anything that you would want to share before we end for today? Either of you.

Kate McElderry [00:34:35]:

Well, I just thank you for this opportunity, and Priscilla for brilliantly making this come to fruition. It's been truly a safari and exciting and, yeah, I'm full of gratitude. Thank you.

Priscilla Hannaford [00:34:52]:

Yes. Thank you very much for giving us this opportunity to talk about the book. It's always fun to actually sit back and think about how the process went, so when I was preparing for today's talk, I was sort of reviewing, well, what did we do and what went well? And it was actually a really pleasant process, so thank you very much. And I hope people find the book really useful.

Dr. Monica McHale-Small [00:35:17]:

Yeah. I'm sure they will. Thank you both so much for your time today. Thank you.

Lauren Clouser [00:35:30]:

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