

A-laure steiner (blue type): Diversity and Equity Insights contributing editor.

Angie Kastner (AK): English Language and Literacy Specialist.

Kristi Fish (KF): Hidden Valley Principal.

What an uplifting way to start this very first podcast of diversity and equity insight. The Hidden Valley Elementary song was performed by the kindergarteners and 1st graders under the direction of mister Santucci.

Hello, and welcome. I am Anne-Laure Steiner, the contributing editor. I am so happy to have you here to talk about this new universal dyslexia screening pilot with Angie Kastner, our English literacy specialist. This episode has been made with Ms. Fish's contribution and supervision and with the technical support of Mr. Donni, who is the webmaster for the HV PTO website.

Hello, Angie. Thank you for having me in your beautiful room, and I think it's number 19 at Hidden Valley. So just to get us started, tell us a little bit about yourself.

AK: Yes, so I'm the English language teacher here at Hidden Valley and I'm also the literacy specialist. I also work at Brookside in the English language, but I also work for the whole school district working with English learners and assessing for the LPAC. I've been in the district for about nine years, and then I'm also part of the MTSS team of coaches and EL teachers, and intervention teachers for the whole district.

And so, what is your professional relationship with Dyslexia?

AK: So, as a reading specialist, I see many students who struggle in reading that's kind of what I do all day. And over the years, I can see some have dyslexia, some do not. So I have done a ton of research and learning about dyslexia. What it is and what methods work for struggling readers. And I'm also in a program outside of school, in my own school to become a dyslexia practitioner.

Oh, wow, that's exciting. So in just one word, what is your first impression of this Universal dyslexia screening pilot?

AK: Yeah, one word, hopeful. Hopeful because I just think that it's something new we're doing. Something we've been working on implementing, and I think there's a big shift in the whole

world of education to understand dyslexia. So, I think with this screener that we're doing, I've been very hopeful that there will be more changes.

Great. Dyslexia concerns 10-15% of the general population, which means that in any classroom of 20 kids, statistically, 2 or 3 kids are on the dyslexia spectrum. So Angie, how do you define Dyslexia?

AK: So, Dyslexia, I should say in the beginning, presents itself differently in every student. It can be severe. It can be mild and anything in between. And there are different kinds of dyslexia, but in general, everyone's brains are different and we all learn in different ways. Dyslexia is a specific learning disability that affects learning how we read, spell, and sometimes write. People with dyslexia need to be taught certain ways to learn how to read and spell. It's not related to intelligence. Very often, they have really high IQs. Reading and spelling can just be more challenging to learn. But it also sort of means that they might have gifts in other things. They might be really good at math. They often are. They think differently.

They're like outside-of-the-box thinkers. Many people who have dyslexia go on to be successful architects or engineers. They might be really good at building things and doing math, as I said, so it's just their brain works differently.

How and when is Dyslexia usually diagnosed in a student?

AK: Every year, students undergo assessments by their classroom teacher. If the teacher sees that the student is not making expected progress, the student receives strategic instruction within the classroom. If the student continues to struggle and the student doesn't meet the benchmarks, their teacher refers them to me, as the reading specialist, for further assessment and most likely more interventions in small group and I monitor the progress. If the student is not making progress, with the proper interventions then we'll have some meetings with the Student Study Team along with the parents and in some cases, the child will then be then referred to more comprehensive testing by the Special Ed team. That is the resource teacher and the school psychologist. The assessment process will evaluate for Dyslexia and reading or learning disabilities and see if there are areas of weakness. It is not a medical diagnosis.

What's new this year regarding Dyslexia screening?

AK: Well, first of all, the screening is very exciting because it will help us hopefully catch students early on because the earlier the better. This is a universal screener, and we're doing it as a pilot initiative within the MTSS team, which is a multi-tiered system of support, and the screener we are using is called DIBELS. That stands for dynamic indicator of basic early literacy skills. And we're also using something called MCLASS that helps us to compile the data. And so it's a universal screener, and it's given this year as a pilot to all second graders in the district at all elementary schools. And it's the same team, giving the screeners so. And then we're really focusing this year on second grade and then hoping to add kinder and first next year. But the earlier, the better, and that's the whole point of a screener to sort of catch some kids that need intervention or needs support early on. The screener that we chose is quick and it, but it looks at all components of reading. The purpose is not to diagnose dyslexia. So we are calling it a universal dyslexia screener, but it can also be called a universal screener. It's to identify students who are at risk or struggling with reading. That's the whole point. So it's not diagnosing anyone. It's just sort of figure out who needs extra support

Basically, if I understood properly, this year, Universal Dyslexia Screener can help the MTSS team to identify any 2nd graders with writing and reading difficulties inside the RVSD regardless if they have or not dyslexia.

If we consider the universality and the timing of this screener's implementation and the information it provides, could we say we are in the presence of an American with Disabilities Act type of impact? Meaning measures initiated for a specific population actually benefit a larger group of people outside this specific group.

AK: Yes. I definitely think those can be related because the screener is done to everybody, and then we will identify students who need support, whether they have dyslexia or not. And the earlier the treatment, the better. So if they, they might get the support they need and then be at the benchmark, from there on out, so yeah, I think it is related.

One of the criticisms against universal dyslexia screening is that it could potentially over-identified English learners creating stigma and costing districts extra money. The reason is that English learners could not perform the test because they are not fluent in English yet.

What do you think? What did you observe when evaluating English learners?

AK: Dyslexia concerns all populations without distinction of race. I understand the concerns, but a screener doesn't diagnose dyslexia. So I think people are resistant to it because they think that all sudden, these students will be diagnosed with dyslexia. And it is not the case. It is just identifying students at risk. So, if an English learner comes up through the screener as at risk. This is just an indicator that we, the school and teachers, need to have strategic support in reading and spelling for that student. There are also screeners in Spanish and other languages we can do to check in their home language.

And then we also have some other assessments for English learners called the ELPAC that we do every year, and it is another set of data to evaluate the students.

So basically, for the English learner, you will have two data sets, and then you can you know compile both of them and really know where the kid is at. If it is really something to do with disability or trouble reading or writing or if it's just because he's learning English, and he doesn't have, you know, the support in English at home.

So scientific researches show that early identification followed by interventions using structured literacy instruction can significantly improve literacy outcome. Structured literacy is described as systematic, explicit, multisensory direct, and sequential instruction. What does that mean? Could you please give us some examples of what it is?

AK: Yes. so you hear the term of structured literacy a lot and it is kind of a mouthful because it's taking a lot of components of literacy and putting them together. So it's teaching the most important components of literacy. So these include the foundational skills of decoding and spelling and higher level skills of reading comprehension and writing. So, for example, if you're teaching the sound "sh". This is within a scope and sequence of all the sounds to teach. But so if you're specifically teaching that, you would teach it explicitly, and using multi-sensory, you'll say it, you'll hear it, the student will see it, skywrite it, move to spell it. And you would also read words in context. Words that have the "sh" sound in it. And then all the spelling words are going

to focus on the “sh” sound, and then you repeat this until the student really has mastered it. Then you add another sound.

So structured, literacy is what it sounds. It's very structured, there's a scope and sequence. It's very strategic and has lots of repetition. And another thing related to that is that our brains are human brains are naturally wired to speak. And we're not naturally wired to read and write. So we need to teach explicitly spelling, reading, and writing. Structured literacy helps do that for our little brains.

[Could this approach be useful for all students in a regular classroom?](#)

AK: Yes. Structured literacy is good for everyone, absolutely. And we've already started implementing some in regular classrooms. The approaches or teaching methods, use for struggling students, even with dyslexia or other disabilities , research has shown, they can be very effective for all students even non-dyslexic students.

[Okay, so once again, e we are inside ADA impact where something that have been developed for dyslexic kid, or for kids who have disabilities or just trouble reading and writing can be actually used for all students and provide actually everybody with another way to learn because this is different. This is something new. This is something that has you said may involve another part of their brain and so they can learn differently and maybe better even if they are not dyslexic or even if they don't have any disability or trouble reading and writing. So I think it's really, really exciting to see how diversity is for everyone to enjoy.](#)

[School failure is one of the Dyslexia trademarks. So ultimately, dyslexic kids will be diagnosed during their school years. The when depends on the severity of their conditions. The hope brought by this screener is that early identification would allow school staff to deliver an early structured literacy-based intervention lowering the academic gap to close when the student faces an academic block road in the future. So, one question that comes to mind is : does RVSD have the staff and monetary resources to provide early structured literacy-based interventions to all the students?This is a question that I actually asked Kristi. , and so she recorded her answer so we are going just to listen to it.](#)

KF: Great question. Yes, there are multiple layers that address reading difficulties dyslexia is one

of them.

The first and most important is hiring highly qualified classroom teachers and then providing continued professional development and support. So that our teachers have the tools to address student needs no matter what they are. RVSD schools utilize an evidence-based curriculum that's been tested over time to support students with very learning differences and has proven to be successful when implemented with fidelity. The literacy curriculum selected works specifically to support students with dyslexia while also supporting all students in general. The teachers within the classroom progress monitor to ensure that students are making adequate progress. If not, they provide intervention, which means lessons that are specific to that student's needs within the classroom.

If more intervention is needed because a student isn't making expected progress, we meet with the parents to discuss possible plans of support. One possible plan is working with a reading specialist on their specific challenges. And this is Angie Kastner at our school. We continue to progress monitor and adjust as needed, always including the parents in the process. This is already a funded system in place.

Thank you, Kristi, I would like to follow up on what you said. The redistribution of resources you mentioned, meaning the teachers and staff focus on students that need support at the beginning of their academic journey, when interventions are the most impactful, is an example of equity. Families of students with difficulties reading and writing based or not on disabilities like dyslexia won't have to turn to external educational providers. Students will have their educational needs met at their public school, which is the core mission of any public education system.

Hi. So we're back in room 19. And do you have something else to tell us?

Yeah, I just wanted to, I guess add one more thing that having a dyslexic student in class is actually very beneficial because they think differently. They're the students that are super creative and thinking outside of the box and they just add something that may be other students don't. So it really does add to a diverse classroom.

Thank you so much. Angie, for this great conversation. I learned a lot today and the days before because we have been working on this for so long.

And I'm very excited. I really love learning everything and I would like to thank you for the good, great, awesome work you're doing here at Hidden Valley and for all the kids. I am and I'm sure everybody is very grateful to have you here with us . So thank you very much.

AK: Yeah, thank you so much for taking the time to learn about a pretty complex topic that affects so many of our students and people in general and putting this all together. So, thank you.

I'll be back. Oct 6 is world dyslexia awareness day. So, I'll be back. And we're gonna talk again about Dyslexia, and you let us know what's going on.

AK:Yes, all the progress we made. Yeah, yeah.

So see you then.

Thank you very much for listening. I hope you enjoyed this episode as much as I did. If you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to contact Angie Kastner. Her email address is listed in the box below, and if you want to learn more about dyslexia, please check out our resource page. The link is also listed in the box below. You will find there information about screeners, structured literacy instructions, and the scientific research led at the UCSF dyslexia center. You will also find the statutes of laws in California regarding dyslexia screening. As you may know, California is one of the 11 states that do not require a universal dyslexia screening.

My email address is also listed in the box below, so if you have comments or feedback, don't be shy. I really want to hear from you. So just send me an email. Also, if you have a subject you would like to learn more about, let me know. Well, that's it for today. See you around campus and till then take care.

Opinion Disclaimer: The opinions, perspectives, and recommendations shared in this podcast belong to the authors and do not necessarily represent the views or opinions or engage the responsibility of the RVSD, its affiliates, or employees in any way.