My Story

I would like to share with you my personal story in an attempt to explain my passion for what I do and to give you hope for your child who, with proper reading instruction, will never have to suffer as I did as a child in school and adult in society.

The year 1967 found me on a small family farm 10 miles outside the rural town of Edgeley, North Dakota. I was the third child of four, with two older sisters and a younger brother. I had no expectations of school as I started my educational journey; although, many of my classmates most likely were eager to begin 1st grade with the anticipation that they would finally learn to read.

The world I lived in was full of farm animals, pets, siblings, parents, and grandparents and consisted of exploration, games, and fun. Literacy held no value to me and although I understood the spoken word and loved to listen to stories my first grade teacher quickly discovered that I could not decipher the same words when they were written on a page. Unfortunately my first grade teacher was using a look-say or whole word approach to teach us how to read. The premise of this method was to teach us how to read by looking at words again and again until we knew them by sight. Memories of sitting amongst my peers on small wooden chairs while reading Dick and Jane stories from the Scott, Forseman basal series still reverberate from my past. Although I managed to memorize a few of these stories my reading skills did not progress and spelling was a disaster. It was strongly suggested that I repeat 1st grade; therefore, I found myself back in 1st grade in 1968 still attempting to learn to read by the look-say method.

At the age of six, then, the struggle with reading had begun. 1st grade was "too hard"; to me it felt like I could never succeed. I was over my head and I knew it. In my frustration I chose to turn myself off to reading and school.

Supposedly, I learned to "do school" well enough to be passed onto 2nd grade. In other words, I knew how to fill in blanks or circle words on worksheets, pay attention to the teacher, and follow along in the books as the teacher read. I remember how important it was to not be acknowledged by the teacher. Simple strategies guided each day; avoid my teacher's eyes, remain quiet and never break a rule, and stare at the page long enough so that the teacher would eventually provide the answer or pronounce the word.

School was not a place to learn; it was a place to survive. As the big words multiplied, it became harder and harder for me to keep up with my work. Big words led to big books, the logical next stumbling block for struggling readers such as me. The tension increased, and so did my frustration. The challenge of longer and thicker books was overwhelming and downright scary. At times teachers would

become exasperated with me and pulled my ears, slapped the back of my head, ridiculed my poor performance on a worksheet, or asked me silly questions such as "Why don't you know this?". Most of my teachers felt sorry for me; assigned me Cs and Ds and passed me on to the next grade.

It never occurred to me to learn while attending school. My objective was to complete the teachers' assignments with a minimum success rate of an assigned grade of a 'D'. If earning a 'D' wasn't possible I made every attempt to be a 'nice' enough student so that the teachers would have pity on me and assign me the unearned 'D'. I slipped effortlessly into something referred to as learned helplessness as I began to believe that I was incapable of doing the work assigned to my peers. That I felt confused shouldn't be a surprise; after all, each step up the educational ladder left me farther and farther behind. And yet I kept stumbling on.

Upon entering 3rd grade I was introduced to the world of pullout help. The pullout teacher gave a few classmates and me worksheets, read books to us, and helped us with words we didn't know. Day after day and year after year we received special help through the pullout program. All too often, though, the teacher did little more than water down the work in order for us to be "successful".

By the time I was in 8th grade there were one-hundred-page books I was expected to read on my own. But by this time in my educational career there seemed to be no way for the classroom teachers to truly "help me out". I had fallen so far behind in my reading abilities that the intensive reading instruction I so desperately needed was rarely offered. Instead, well-meaning teachers helped me complete assigned work. I never caught up, but I did move on.

Miraculously, I graduated from high school in 1980 with 35 other students. Even more amazing was the fact that I was not the lowest in my class. There were eight or ten students behind me and a few didn't obtain a signed diploma; two had dropped out of school in 10th grade. In other words, approximately ¼ my classmates did not achieve higher than a 'D' average upon graduation.

I believe my peers and me, who struggled with reading and academics, sensed the disconnectedness between us, our teachers, and the classroom curriculum. As early as 1st grade I remember "bad experiences" with learning, times when the teacher didn't really want to explain how to read. Our first grade teacher didn't sound out anything for us and there seemed to have been no sensitivity to, or understanding of, our need to know the sounds of our language so as to successfully read and spell. In fact, effective support or encouragement for any of us, who were all but invisible in the classroom, was little or ineffective as we slipped farther and farther into our nightmares of failure.

The sad thing is that the less we improved the farther behind we fell. It was not that we didn't want to succeed as readers; none of us stood around and said, "I like not being able to successfully read and understand. I like being unsuccessful in school." But I did say things such as, "What is the point of all this? I have been trying and trying for years and years but still nothing good happens with my reading or spelling." Mired in a quagmire of failure over which we had little or no control, we seemed to have no way out. Some of my peers turned to drugs, and as I said, two dropped out of school.

The desire for choice and the ability to pursue my career interests as an exercise of freedom and possibility was elusive throughout the two years following high school graduation. My functional illiteracy (the inability to read and write above the 8th or 9th grade) denied me choice and therefore any sense of personal activity or competence. I worked at jobs that paid minimum wages with little hope of advancement and after realizing there was no hope for a sustainable lifestyle, I enlisted in the Army.

Perhaps, many people would be reluctant to bestow the term "satisfying" on their military stint, and reserve the word for recreational activities such as skiing, boating, hunting, etc. The satisfaction of manifesting oneself concretely in the world of order, discipline, and uniformity may seem unprecedented; however, serving in the army relieved me of the need to offer an academic interpretation of myself to vindicate my worth. I could simply perform duties alongside others who were dressed like me, acted like me, and found pride in working as one. My military duties offered me intrinsic satisfaction, character frustration, and cognitive challenges. I was proud to serve my country, but was told upon reenlistment that the option had been eliminated because my reading, writing, and math scores on a standardized test, taken prior to enlisting, demonstrated my intellectual weaknesses.

Although this test of basic skills was a prerequisite upon enlisting, a minimum score had not been established; however, sometime during my service a minimum score was set and my scores were substandard. I had always been a slow reader and did poorly on these kinds of tests; however, this failure was the starting point for a process of learning and discovery. Even after being told I was not "intelligent enough" to remain in the army and being strongly advised not to enroll in college by my family, who had my best interest in mind, I did not give up, nor did I lose sight of a dream to somehow assist others with avoiding the pain and embarrassment of poor literacy skills.

My time in the army had been an unexpected positive life-changing experience that led me to feeling success and gaining a sense of self-competence. After my discharge I was eager to give college a try. Always a slow reader and poor speller,

I found that my particular knack for memorizing was going to be my key to maintaining passing grades. I rented a room with a bed, hotplate, and restroom down the hall for $60.00 a month. Inside that room I spent hours and hours reading and rereading pages of each text assigned by the professors. Each vocabulary word was written on an index card alongside its dictionary pronunciation key and taped to the walls so as to allow me to review and pronounce the sounds upon leaving for, and arriving from, school. I found that as I progressed, reading and spelling got better and better each semester. Finally, in my last year, I was able to sound out words, read faster and accurately, and easily spell two, three, and four syllable words.

When I began teaching there was an extreme desire to prevent any child from experiencing reading and spelling difficulties. However, I was trained to use a Whole Language literacy instructional approach. This method of teaching reading ignored phonics and expressed a need to focus on providing students with interesting, comprehensible texts. My job as a teacher was to help children read these texts, that is, help make them comprehensible. The direct teaching of "phonetic skills" was helpful only when it made texts more comprehensible.

I began to see a tremendous variety of reading and spelling accomplishments among the children who were in my 2nd grade classroom during my first year of teaching. I was shocked. I didn't think this was something to be proud of; I thought it was deplorable. This came directly from the Whole Language instruction that insisted phonics was not to be taught first and foremost but on an "as need" basis. By the end of that first year of teaching I realized I had failed those children just like my teachers had failed me. After reflecting on how I learned, as an adult, to read fluently and accurately it was obvious that learning the sounds of our language was the key. I began truly believing that ALL children can learn to read and organized my instruction around a phonics-first program and for the next eleven years observed the phenomenal results with children in my 1st and 2nd grade classrooms.

After reading my story, I hope you will never doubt that your child can be a winner in any field which he or she has an interest or talent. This is a story of my triumph over innate, as well as those created by misunderstandings, inappropriate instruction, and stereotyped views of what constituted as successful literacy skills for all children. For me, and thousands of others, the obstacles to success were not our inherent physiologic weaknesses but the misguided perceptions of teachers; those who believed that our sluggish beginning to learning how to read and spell predicted performance in real life. I was made to feel stupid or incapable and almost didn't realize my dream; thus, my strong conviction that there is a relationship between successfully teaching children to read and democracy. Rudolf Flesch stated in his book *Why Johnny Can't Read and What You can do About It*

that equal opportunity for all is one America's inalienable rights, and the inability to successfully read and spell interferes with that right. This truth has driven my literacy instruction. Although I have never maintained an objective of assisting children with becoming obsessive recreational readers; I have insisted that all children are taught HOW to read and spell so they can have the same opportunities as all Americans.