

Dyslexia in French Immersion: *Believe It or Not, It is Still Okay*



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You know how at kindergarten orientation night, they say French Immersion is good for everyone except for the kids with Language-Based Learning Disabilities? Well, my kid falls into that category in a pretty real way, although I did not know it at the time. It has not been explicitly stated but my maternal radar says he is probably a worst-case scenario for the program. Oops. Sorry Bud. Probably a first in one of many future parenting fails. Well, not quite.

Mark and I sat in Cam's third grade IEP meeting and we no longer could live in denial – Cam has serious reading issues that fall outside of 'he is behind because he is in French'. His decoding is BAD, which means he cannot make sense of the sounds that go along with letters. Long and short of it, he can't read on his own. And now in third grade when the program moves to 50% English, his deficit is glaringly obvious.

I felt like we had done all the right things, focusing on just one language (French because he was already in it when the reading issues were suspected halfway through first grade), private weekly French tutoring for 2 years, regular reading support in class, French camps. The works. Emmanuel Macron would be pleased in my little Francophile. Unfortunately, it has been at the complete detriment of his English, and now the gap between the other kids and he has widened. Ugh.

Although I spent the first weeks after the IEP meeting on every Dyslexia blog possible and thankfully went as far as to meet with Thomas Hehir, the ex-director of the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education and who responsible for federal leadership in implementing the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). He helped me re-direct the mother ship that was quickly sinking.

During our talk, it became clear to me that despite Cam's reading challenges, there are many successes – he is well-liked by teachers and peers, he is hard working, motivated, and most importantly, he loves French. My view of success and academic goals widened. Dr. Hehir gently let me know that Cam's reading issues are going to be lifelong and although it is crucial that we intervene aggressively, his happiness and willingness to do school is paramount. "Our prisons are filled with dyslexics", he said, as these kids end up hating school, acting out, and unfortunately leave as soon as they can. Unfortunately, many kids do not have the support they absolutely need to flourish. He also shared some of his research from his book *How Did You Get Here? Students with Disabilities and Their Journeys to Harvard*; what he found was that one important factor in helping kids succeed is having a "caring mother."

I felt sad that my little boy will always struggle with reading, but my hope for Cam blossomed. Dr. Hehir helped me think about how to support Cam through tutoring and accommodations (text to speech, speech to text, Learning Ally, C Pen, Lexia, Chrome book/iPad), and the school suggested we focus on bilingualism rather than biliteracy.

My job is not to close the reading gap per se but to help Cam read as best as he can while "not burning him out" and help him understand how to use tools that he will probably need forever. That I can do. My role was more clearly defined, I felt empowered, and now I can empower Cam. Despite mourning

the loss of Cam being a natural reader, his picture is clearer, my maternal hunch was validated, and we have an achievable plan. I know he can have academic success despite reading struggles, and most importantly, I can help him see this in himself.

So, for all you parents out there with struggling readers, who either know their kids have language-based learning issues or have a hunch they aren't reading like their peer, don't panic. Here are some suggestions:

- Ask the school to evaluate.
- Get an outside neuropsychological evaluation, if possible. They are expensive 1k-5k, and most often are not covered by insurance. You can petition the school system to help cover the cost and the neuropsychologist should be able to help you fill out the forms.
- Join a group and get informed as a parent Decoding Dyslexia is a MA-based Dyslexia Group and Dyslexia Support for Parents of Dyslexic Children, both are on Facebook. International Dyslexia Association is also good.
- Know that you are your child's advocate. We have a wonderfully collaborative relationship with Cam's IEP team which has served him in getting his needs met. The school can be both on your side and at times, in opposition. Empathize with each member of the team and their limits, and know your rights (the law).
- Be realistic about your child's needs and where to find support. Support groups help with this. Lean on people who have already gone through this
- Intervene as soon as possible. We use Nicole Debassio from The Purple Cow Reads (<http://www.thepurplecowreads.com>) and she has helped Cam make HUGE gains. Use a program like Wilson or Orton-Gillingham.
- Get informed. There is a lot of information out there. Sort through what fits your child.
- Make homework time as tolerable as possible – snacks, breaks (work 15 mins, 3 min break), dare I say fun. In our house, it is when Cam gets the most 1:1 attention. We both do our "work" together. He actually does 15 minutes of homework followed by 3-5 minutes of biofeedback (which greatly helps keep him focused). It is something I am trained in as a clinical psychologist but is very useable at home. If you are interested in learning more, check out Boston Behavioral Medicine in Brookline. <https://www.mayoclinic.org/tests-procedures/biofeedback/about/pac-20384664>
- Utilize tools. Accommodations are your friend.
- Reward the work ethic and study habits (not the spelling grade).
- And, don't panic. This will all be okay with proper intervention. There is no right answer. Stay in French, or not. But build a strong collaborative network around you and your child and communicate. ■