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The Ontario Right to Read Inquiry and the Social Model of Disability

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Introduction

Dyslexia is defined by the International Dyslexia Association as “a specific learning disability that is neurobiological in origin. It is characterized by *difficulties* [my emphasis] with accurate and/or fluent word recognition and by poor spelling and decoding abilities. These *difficulties* [my emphasis] typically result from a deficit in the phonological component of language that is often unexpected in relation to other cognitive abilities and the provision of effective classroom instruction.” (International Dyslexia Association, 2002). While individuals with dyslexia experience *difficulties* learning to read, they can learn to read. In 2012, a milestone Supreme Court of Canada case, *Moore v British Columbia (Education)*, upheld the decision that a student with dyslexia was denied access to education (*Moore vs British Columbia (Education)*, 2012). This decision provided the framework for multiple Human Rights Commission Inquiries in Canada regarding children with reading disabilities and reading instruction in Saskatchewan (Saskatchewan Human Rights Commission, 2023), Manitoba (The Manitoba Human Rights Commission, n.d.; which is in progress), and Ontario (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2022). Therefore, how representations of disability are constructed in this context are of considerable legal, educational, social, and economic consequence.

Recently, Christine Caughill published an article in the *Canadian Journal of Disability Studies*, critiquing the Ontario Human Rights Commission (OHRC) Report of the Right to Read Inquiry (herein referred to as “the report”), titled “Managing the problem of dyslexia: a review of

the Ontario Human Rights Commission Report of the Right to Read Inquiry” (Caughill, 2024). As a scholar of health equity, literacy advocate, and mother of children with dyslexia, I read this article with interest and concern. Caughill (2024) argues that the report utilizes a medical model of disability, was conducted in response to a “science of reading movement” (Caughill 2024, p. 38), frames children with reading disabilities as “a problem to be solved” (Caughill, 2024, p. 40), and is ultimately, “dehumanizing” of individuals with reading disabilities (Caughill, 2024, p. 38). However, Caughill misinterpreted and decontextualized aspects of the report, and in the process failed to recognize that the report is largely based on a social model of disability. In doing so, Caughill reinforces circulating narratives of dyslexia and disability that are harmful. The report does not in fact tell a “story of disability as a problem to be solved”, as asserted by Caughill (2024, p. 40), rather it tells a story of an education system that fails to provide the necessary instruction and supports to students who struggle to learn to read to become literate. In this way, the report is aligned with a social model of disability, first described by Oliver (1983), and which has previously been applied to dyslexia by McDonald (2009). Notably, Caughill identifies with a Faculty of Education as indicated by their degree and affiliation, who are among the subjects of the inquiry and described as “most often resistant to provide adequate education to pre-service teachers on the science of reading” (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2022, p. 218). I aim to unpack the misinterpretations made by Caughill and offer contextualization to their critique of the report that they omitted using a social model of disability.

The Impetus for the Human Rights Investigation

The OHRC Report of the Right to Read Inquiry investigation was launched because “the OHRC has continued to hear concerns about students’ experiences in Ontario’s public education

system, particularly related to the largest special education exceptionality in Ontario – learning disabilities, and especially reading disabilities/dyslexia” (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2022b, p. 8), which is echoed in similar Human Rights investigations in Manitoba (The Manitoba Human Rights Commission, n.d.) and Saskatchewan (Saskatchewan Human Rights Commission, 2023). The investigation in Ontario confirmed those experiences, as children with dyslexia were not provided with evidence-based instruction to learn to read. This underscores how central the voices of the disability community were in initiating and informing the investigation. Including and privileging the voices of people with lived experience of dyslexia is central to a social model of disability (Oliver, 2004).

Notably, Caughill chose not to acknowledge both this aspect of the report or discuss any voices of people with lived experience of dyslexia in their analysis. The impetus for the investigation was not in response to a “science of reading movement”, as asserted by Caughill (2024), although I acknowledge this movement’s’ existence along with the report’s numerous references to the “science of reading” (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2022). Highlighting a “movement” as informing the investigation dismisses the myriad harms *experienced* by children with dyslexia in public schools in Ontario, their families, and the profound negative impacts this has had on their lives and futures.

Impairment vs. Disability

Another central feature of a social model of disability is the differentiation of an impairment from a disability, which results from a negative interaction between the impairment and the environment (Oliver, 2004). The report does acknowledge the biological basis of struggles with phonemic awareness, but Caughill (2024) misattributes this acknowledgement as

being foundational to a medical model of disability. The biological basis of dyslexia can be recognized as an impairment. Given that dyslexia is an invisible disability or learning difference, many individuals with dyslexia find the diagnosis and the acknowledgement of a biological aspect an important part of making sense of their reading struggles (e.g. Wilmot et al., 2022; Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2022).

Many respondents reported some relief from mental health issues once the reading disability was identified. In some cases, when students learned they had a reading disability, this self-knowledge motivated them to know that it was possible to catch up: ‘Once he was given the tools to manage the [learning disability], his behaviour, mental health and confidence has improved – which has helped the entire family.’ (p. 96)

The impairment, at least partially, becomes a disability due to the education system’s documented failure to provide evidence-based reading instruction or provide students with the necessary accommodations (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2022).

Dyslexia as a Social Construction

Rather than focusing on the failures of the education system to provide the necessary instruction to children with reading disabilities and the associated 157 recommendations directed at the education system (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2022), Caughill (2024) suggests the “problem” lies in how society constructs word reading as the dominant mode of literacy. The dyslexia community largely accepts that dyslexia is at least partially socially constructed through the development of an alphabetic code, the embeddedness of literacy in society, and that some languages, such as English, are not wholly phonetic. However, I think most would agree that society is highly unlikely to abandon print, either on paper or online, and the dyslexia

community is not advocating for this. Suggesting that because reading is a social construction, public schools should not be obligated to teach reading, including decoding skills as its foundation, as in Caughill (2024), ignores the sociocultural context of the power of reading in social mobility and its role in maintaining or narrowing social, economic, and health inequalities among various groups.

Ableism and Intent to Read

It is dehumanizing for Caughill to suggest that people with dyslexia should somehow be satisfied with storytelling as an appropriate substitute to learning to read print because society should value all forms of “reading” (Caughill, 2024). This assertion echoes the substantial ableism and low expectations documented in the report within the Ontario education system (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2022). One such instance was that educators ascribed to the belief that many students cannot and will not learn to read, which reinforces negative stereotypes of people with dyslexia as lazy, unmotivated, or stupid, previously reported (McDonald, 2009). The report sought to counter these stereotypes by asserting that “everyone wants and needs to be able to read words to function in school and life” (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2022, p. 4), which Caughill critiqued as “rais[ing] questions about the humanity of those who do not access text via print” (2024, p. 39). Certainly, society should make print more accessible, and accommodations, for example, screen readers are important modes of accessibility. However, reading, including prescription instructions, food labels, phone contracts, bank statements, board games, street signs, and myriad other texts, is a critical aspect of independence, functioning, and inclusion in society. Individuals with dyslexia want to and *can* learn to read, with appropriate evidenced-based instruction, if schools will provide it. The report

also acknowledges and celebrates other forms of communication, such as storytelling as remaining vital to children's education (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2022), which I also agree with. However, in keeping with the purpose of the inquiry and in line with the experiences and perspectives of children and families of children with reading difficulties, children are not receiving evidence-based reading instruction to learn to decode print.

Dominant Perspectives of Literacy

Curiously, Caughill (2024) critiques the absence of sociocultural perspectives of literacy in the report, without acknowledging that the report does not critique, nor suggest removing sociocultural perspectives. Rather, the report states some school boards have an “exclusive focus on socio-cultural approaches to teaching [reading] and culturally responsive pedagogy to the exclusion of all else, including instruction in foundational reading skills” (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2022, p. 185). The report also notes that attempts to broaden reading instruction in the education system to recognize structured literacy are often met with “intimidation” (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2022, p. 185). Caughill suggests that there is a “dominant perspective of science”, as opposed to sociocultural perspectives, in reading instruction in education systems, but all evidence in the report suggests the opposite. The report instead describes decoding as an essential element of reading and its instruction, because that is the element in which people with dyslexia experience impairment, and how decoding is not currently universally taught in schools, as outlined throughout the report (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2022). Certainly, the report does draw on scientific literature to support instruction in decoding. What is not clear, is why Caughill is resistant to any scientific evidence informing

reading instruction? Or why both sociocultural and scientific perspectives cannot coexist, as recommended in the report?

Misattributing Associated Outcomes as Biomedical Model

Caughill critiques the references in the report to negative impacts of reading disabilities on employment, income, poverty, homelessness, crime, incarceration, mental health, and substance abuse (2024, p. 43) as suggesting that individuals with reading disabilities are a burden to society and that dyslexia is “reduced to biological deficits that reside in the individual”. However, the report does not indicate that any of these adverse outcomes are in any way biologically related to dyslexia. These health, economic, and social outcomes instead result from individuals with dyslexia not receiving evidence-based reading instruction, being provided limited accommodations, resultant illiteracy and associated social exclusion, in addition to wider forces of ableism and associated negative stereotypes (previously listed). In fact, these outcomes are highlighted in the report under the sub-title, “The consequences of not teaching children to read” (p. 33).

Caughill also suggests the report “is based on the elimination of disability as the solution to the problems of societal inequality” (Caughill, 2024 p. 45). First, nowhere in the report is it suggested that dyslexia can be eliminated, cured, or erased. Second, the report does not suggest that eliminating dyslexia or even providing evidence-based reading instruction is a “solution to widespread systemic inequity caused by racism, colonialism, and other forms of oppression” as claimed by Caughill (p. 45). Rather the report concludes with:

There are indeed several sources of historical and societal disadvantage for many students. Having strong early word-reading skills is not enough on its own to overcome

structural disadvantage in education and in life. However, when students start school at a disadvantage and then fail to learn this basic skill, it only deepens their disadvantage (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2022c, p. 68).

Therefore, the lack of effective reading instruction in public school systems (i.e. ableism) can be understood as an *intersecting* system of oppression. Caughill's attempt to reframe the report as falling within a medical model of disability obfuscates the ableism within the Ontario's education system and Faculties of Education, of which they are a member.

Conclusions

Dyslexia Canada has indicated their support for the Ontario Right to Read report (Dyslexia Canada, n.d.), indicating the dyslexia community does not find the report dehumanizing, in contrast to the assertion by Caughill (2024). What is dehumanizing is fighting for decades for evidence-informed and inclusive reading instruction, only to be continually rebuffed by education systems and Faculties of Education (OHRC, 2022; The Manitoba Human Rights Commission, n.d.; Saskatchewan Human Rights Commission, 2023). Curiously, Caughill (2024, p. 46) cites Hartblay (2020), calling for “an approach that centres disability expertise”, but it is not clear whether Caughill sought out anyone in the dyslexia community in their interpretation of the report. Caughill ends with their hope “to question the power of science and medicine as the definitive perspective on dyslexia and disability” (2024, p.). I will end with my hope that this commentary can re-center the voices and perspectives of the dyslexia community, as thoroughly documented in the report (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2022) and in line with a social model of disability (Oliver, 2004), to make reading and literacy instruction more inclusive and effective for all.

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