

# **“WHATEVER IT TAKES” A CASE STUDY OF OUR CHILD’S ALTERNATIVE PATH TO LITERACY**

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## **Abstract**

As public school educators, my husband and I struggled with making alternative academic choices for our child with learning differences. Choosing the alternative path was not easy or clear cut for us. This is a reflective record of the journey toward getting my son “Whatever it Takes” to help him learn. The article chronicles intuition about the early warning signs of learning differences. The article discusses the merits of the private school experience, the homeschooling experience and ultimately a modified and personalized learning plan that made learning natural, while preserving my son’s confidence, self-esteem and integrity. Detailed in the article are the discussions concerning the many educational, instructional and sociological decisions that are necessary to individualize instruction to meet an individual’s needs.

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## **The Journal of a Mother and Reading Specialist**

I am sharing this journal as a mother and reading specialist to chronicle the many learning challenges and triumphs we encountered with our son. At the time we were experiencing these issues, I had been an educator for over 20 years, a reading specialist in elementary and secondary schools for over ten years and was teaching in a graduate reading program in higher education. I taught students how to teach and remediate reading at a local public university and later served as the Reading Clinic Director.

### **Growing Concerns**

Even though Nate came a week early, he was a whopping 10 pounds at birth. He ate and slept well as a baby, and his most remarkable baby feature was his contagious belly laugh. We read to Nate in utero and every day after he was born as any two educators would do. Now, he is eight years old; he is still precocious and a big boy... and we still read to him every day.

Our little boy, like many other children, had chronic ear infections as a baby and into his toddler years. Nate had tubes put into his ears on several occasions; it was only after he had his adenoids removed that the ear infections subsided. He has some lingering hearing damage but the ENT's record it as in the normal range. Nate was also diagnosed with an allergy to dust mites and takes antihistamines daily. As a toddler, Nate loved being read to and looking at the pictures in books.

In spite of his ear issues, Nate began to speak at the age of one. He spoke in phrases very quickly and has always been very articulate. His vocabulary and diction has always been above age level expectations. He was always out going and sparking up conversations with strangers in the grocery store, etc. When he toddled past folks, he often said "excuse me" very clearly,

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startling people. People would remark about the vocabulary he used and how well-spoken he was. His first career choice was to be a paleontologist and he spoke about this choice often to others at the age of 3. Because of how articulate he was, it didn’t concern me at first that he did not remark on text in the world around him in ways that were reflective of his developed oral vocabulary. Whereas, as I was well aware, his peers could look at environmental text around them and begin to point out connections to their oral vocabulary, he did not start to identify text in his world spontaneously until he was seven years of age.

Nate attended and was successful in several preschools. He was appropriately socially engaged and his oral vocabulary was sophisticated for his age. However, he really struggled with many fine motor activities. He could not tie his own shoes or snap his coat as other children his age were doing. He could barely scribble his first name and hated drawing or coloring of any kind. Some of these difficulties I chalked up to being a boy who was developing his gross motor skills before his fine motor skills. He had excellent eye-hand coordination when throwing catching and hitting balls. We also had his vision screened in preschool and found that he had astigmatism which required him to wear glasses full time.

He could recognize, at the age of 3, an average number of letters and enjoyed age-appropriate literature activities like being read to, or singing phonics songs. Nate was read to frequently in and out of school, and observed his older sister and myself reading for pleasure and for other purposes regularly. While his language and vocabulary developed and his sentence structure expanded, we began to notice that Nate would *talk around* concepts. He seemed to have difficulty retrieving a word that was obviously very well known to him, as he could describe it in detail but he was not able to recall the specific name of the concept. For example, he would say, “You know that place where they give me cheese and we get cookies and pick out food?” He

was referring to the grocery store but couldn't say the right word although he knew the word and had used it conversationally on many occasions. Again, because I knew he knew these words and I could experience how urgently his thoughts came to him, I wasn't too concerned with these moments of difficulty with concept recall.

Our first real indication of a learning challenge was when we were preparing him for a kindergarten entrance exam. Part of the exam was reciting your name, address and phone number. We spent several days trying to get Nate to verbally recall these pieces of data. He was finally successful with the address because we assigned an aspect of the address to each corner of a room and had him move to each corner to recall the part of the address. We had to do similar tactile or kinesthetic routines for him to remember the phone number. My husband (also a teacher) and I exchanged many harried looks during this process and had several discussions about a possible disability.

Around this time, my husband mentioned that he had been in special education services for speech until second grade and that he really didn't start reading until third grade. My husband was not able to remember what label he had received for special education. I already knew that he had been to several colleges unsuccessfully. It took him 10 years to earn a Bachelor's degree. He avoids reading as an adult and is easily fatigued when required to do so. When I approached my mother-in-law about the disability she only remembered that it was called, "left handed and right brained," a label with which I was unfamiliar.

### **Early Intervention**

That summer before kindergarten, we tried to ramp up Nate's sight words. He struggled. Worriedly, we sent him off to his first day of kindergarten at a small private school. We thought

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that this was the best choice for him because of the faith-based foundation, small classes and specialized attention. But, after just a few weeks in kindergarten, we began to see that Nate was not able to retain pre primer level sight words. Even the word “the” would stump him. He was not able to read a sight word on page two of a book that he had already read on page one. Based on his delayed progress, I began doing some remedial work with Nate loosely using the Systematic Instruction in Phonological Awareness, Phonics, and Sight Words (SIPPS) program (Newman & Hefelbine, 2005) and 100 Book Challenge (Hileman, 2004) at home. SIPPS is a systematic phonics intervention program and 100 Book Challenge is a leveled reading program that focuses student’s independent reading into stages of instruction with support. I was familiar with both programs from my work as a reading specialist. I modified the SIPPS program to include tactile or kinesthetic applications for the sound cards. For example, the short ‘u’ sound card uses a visual of a cat under a chair to remind students that short ‘u’ is like the first sound in “under.” I had Nate actually move under his chair when he came to that sound to help him anchor it. For the short ‘e’ sound, I had Nate move to the very “edge” of his chair to better anchor that visual of the cat on the edge of the chair. I also flooded our home with yellow level books from the 100 Book Challenge Program. This is the level of text that represented the text well in pictures and used predictable patterns. He could “read” these predictable, controlled vocabulary books by predicting from the pictures and the patterns of language. We also required Nate to use his finger to track his reading which helped him to better anchor the sight words and sounds with touch as well as the visual stimulus. I also find that his eyes don’t have to work as hard when his fingers do the tracking for him.

Reading was such a chore and ordeal for him that he really began to dislike reading at all. He still loved stories and information gathering as long as he didn’t have to read to get the

information. Unfortunately, we also couldn't find many books that he could "read" that he found interesting or fed his raging curiosities. Knowing that research supported oral reading as supplement for vocabulary acquisition (Suggate, et al, 2013), I began to fill all of his car rides with audio books well above his reading level to continue to feed his curiosity and love for literature. We continued to read aloud to him each night as part of his bedtime routine but these novels, such as *The Hobbit* (Tolkien, 1997) and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (Twain & Geer, 1961), were in addition to what he heard during our daily commutes and errands in the car.

Nate's kindergarten progress reports and report cards reflected average effort and achievement until November. Then, with no further explanation from the school, at the end of the second quarter such words as "Developing Expectations" were used instead of "Consistently Evident" in the areas of reading, writing and language. In addition, we started to hear concerns about his attention to task and an emphasis on the school motto of "We honor God by exercising self-control." He had never had negative behavioral comments in the past and, as educators, we knew this was code for 'I'm bored and/or frustrated in class and entertaining myself in other ways.' In strong contrast, as I was a reading specialist in a public school, I paid specific attention to what other kindergarten students were doing in my school. I also shared work samples of Nate's with the public school kindergarten teachers. It was very curious that we were so concerned about him, yet he was performing similar to, or out-performing many other public school kindergarten students. I just knew that he wasn't performing up to where he should be in relation to his oral language.

Based on our concerns about the reports of Nate's difficulty with attending to tasks at school, as well as what we were seeing at home in terms of struggling in letter sound identification and sight word retention; we approached the school about educational testing.

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Although he attended a small private school, the school had a part time special educator on staff. She administered an early achievement test and a developmental test of visual-motor integration. Nate scored in the average range in all areas except in writing; where he was only slightly below average for his age.

These scores may have seemed reassuring to most parents but, they were frustrating to us. We knew how articulate Nate was and how frustrated he became when trying to communicate his thoughts or record his ideas. The recommendations from the school were for oral rehearsal prior to writing, use of graphic organizers, a word bank, a personal dictionary and sentence starters; all of which were already in place in the classroom. After some research into the area, I finally determined that we had to watch and wait as so many of our concerns could be just developmental delays, especially in boys. There just weren’t any assessments that would express in educational terminology what we could observe and sense was happening with Nate. As an active member of his school’s School Board and a professional development consultant with the school, I was able to provide some *push in* services to Nate and a few other students who needed extra support. I did directed reading lessons, read alouds, author studies and some short term interventions, as well as some short term professional development sessions on differentiated learning.

Rounding out Nate’s kindergarten year, there was standardized testing which revealed average or above average national norm scores in all categories but ‘Word Reading.’ Nate’s year-end report card reflected completely average marks with lots of praise for his leadership potential in the classroom and no indication of concern over behavioral problems. Although, I suspect that in my role as a colleague/parent/educational leader in the building some of these issues were not shared with me. After hand-picking his teacher for first grade, I arranged an end-

of-the-year conference with the administration and this teacher to establish some priorities for the following year's instruction in terms of differentiation and support. My husband and I made a decision for me to leave my more lucrative reading coach position in the public schools and pursue a position in higher education which would allow me more flexibility to assist in the classroom while Nate was in the very critical first grade year. I made some inquiries and returned to higher education as a lecturer (as to avoid any research responsibilities) and taught in a Graduate Reading Program. I also signed up to be the "Room Mom" for the class so that I could have even more informal access to the instructional happenings in first grade.

Over the summer, I planned to have a consistent plan of instruction for Nate. Each day, we went over the sight words and sound cards and did the dictation for the modified SIPPS program and read from the 100 Book Challenge leveled texts and conferenced three days a week. I was met with great frustration and avoidance of these activities from Nate. Sessions that should have taken 20 minutes went on for over an hour and often ended with both of us in tears. I backed off and attempted to run the SIPPS a few times a week. This is the time that it became impossible to deny that he had a reading disability. He was about to enter first grade and could not maintain access to more than ten sight words and even those he accessed inconsistently. He was not consistently able to write and spell his name accurately. He performed many vertical reversals in his writing of b, d, p and horizontal reversals of m and w.

As first grade began, I had more flexibility in my schedule and began as the volunteer reading coach for Nate's school. I directed and maintained the 100 Book Challenge program and SIPPS program to the school. I was able to train the teachers and do the diagnostic testing on each student to determine a 100 Book Challenge Level. Nate was able to hold his own with some other lower achieving students in his class with the extra support we provided at home and in

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class until about December. This is when other students began to be able to ‘chunk’ their sounds consistently. Nate hit a wall at chunking and was frustrated and embarrassed. Now that he was a bit older, we felt like we could try educational testing again and although I had access and experience with some tests that I would like to assess Nate with, for validity sake, we requested that the special educator at the school do them.

### **A Diagnosis**

This time she ran a full-range IQ test, test of language development, reading mastery, word efficiency, oral reading, phonological processing, written spelling and a math sub-test.

The special educator shared that Nate saw himself as good at “soccer, math, video games, Bible, and playing catch.” He felt he needed help with “remembering stuff...I leave out some letters and when my mom gives me a ‘pacific’ (specific) direction and I forget it.” He also shared that “I am not so good at keeping my letters straight and sometimes I need help reading words.” When asked about paying attention, he said, “sometimes my mind wanders off.”

As the evaluation conference began, I thought “I have been sitting at the other side of this table so many times, how surreal it was to be the parent receiving this information”. The data indicated that Nate had an above average/superior intellect with definite strengths in verbal reasoning, but struggles in language-based reading and writing tasks, with scores in the low to low average range. As the special educator began reviewing the purposes for the tests, the validity of the testing situation and how pleasant Nate was to work with (blah, blah, blah)... I rudely ignored her and tore through the contents of the test evaluations. (My husband was polite enough to make eye contact with her and listen intently.) I was not surprised by any of the results save two points. The first was how extremely bright the scores indicated Nate was. With my own

child and with all of educational research, knowledge and experiences, I still considered him of average intellect because of the difficulty reading. I was ashamed of myself for limiting his potential in my mind. And then; there it was in print, and my eyes filled with silent tears as I read it, Dyslexia. There was conversation about specialized dyslexia programs, and creating a modified plan of instruction, but I don't remember much of the rest of the meeting. I had what I needed; 'the elephant in the room' had been named. In my training, research and professional understanding, dyslexia meant a mysterious combination of overlapping reading disabilities. Wasn't that what we had experienced with Nate up until now? In all the hours spent in thought and conversation about his struggles, I never retrieved that word, which now seemed almost magical. Over the days and weeks to come, my husband and I had many conversations about what our options were. Most importantly, what were the best most efficient and respectful ways to adjust our educational plan to Nate's needs? Some of the conversations were lengthy, most were emotional but none of them led us to one path or answer.

We did meet as a team again and created an instructional modification plan which included supports that we were already providing for Nate. We anticipated that he would continue to struggle academically the rest of first grade. What I did not anticipate were the ways that his social interactions changed. He had some problems with peers that he had not experienced before, he was no longer praised for leadership potential; rather, he was using his verbal superiority to dominate classroom conversations and was beginning to find creative ways to entertain himself when frustrated by independent tasks. We had Nate enrolled in this faith-based school as a partnership in developing a firm spiritual foundation, but now participation in that partnership was influencing Nate negatively. We met with his teacher, who agreed, that Nate was so bright and intuitive about everything but what he read, that he often tried to

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overcompensate in other areas because of his insecurity about his reading and writing. The frustration and confusion about his reading and writing skills became a barrier for him socially.

As first grade came to a close, we found ourselves considering alternative settings for Nate for the next school year. This was a weighty consideration for us because we had another child enrolled in the school and it was our church’s school. I had been on the school board for a number of years as well as being highly involved in the professional development, curriculum adaptation and assessment systems at the school. We had been financially linked in the school for over 10 years and I had spent over 20 hours a week in service hours there for the past year. We were deeply invested. So, we had the difficult conversation with the administration about needing to find a better fit for Nate and began our search.

### **Educational Alternatives**

For many reasons, public school was not an option for our family. We visited a private special education school in our county. This is a school which advertises that it specializes in students with dyslexia, and their instruction runs more like dual small group tutoring sessions in Language and Math throughout the day. In the morning students’ work in small tutoring groups in math, and then in the afternoon in small reading tutoring groups. The teachers were not necessarily state certified, but were trained to the school’s satisfaction in the *school’s* way of teaching dyslexic children. I interviewed the staff and administration and observed several lessons over several days. The instruction seemed sound, but the program lacked a convincing research-base. What concerned me most is that there was no sense of urgency in instruction but rather a ‘warehousing mentality’ with a \$28,000 a year tuition price tag. Student’s individual needs were met in small groups but, there was little expectation for growth beyond their current

situation. With very few other options, and the knowledge that I was perfectly equipped to meet Nate's educational needs, we began to consider homeschooling.

The decision seemed obvious to other people around us. When I mentioned it to family and friends, they said things like "of course" and "sure, why wouldn't you?" I could think of a million reasons why I wouldn't. But, my biggest issue was just because I didn't see us as a homeschooling family. This was a huge identity issue for me. Besides, I work a full time job. Yes, my position does allow for some flexibility during the day, but I have a full time workload. I wasn't sure how I could do both well. I spent the rest of the school year and into the summer months researching home school options and curriculum and building up my online teaching experience. I was able to narrow down some curriculum that was a good fit for Nate and establish sound online teaching options for most of my courses. I used the modified SIPPS program and 100 Book Challenge with limited success over the summer with Nate. We began the fall of his second grade year as a partial home school family since my daughter chose to continue at the private school.

## **Homeschooling**

In our state, you need to either choose to follow the state's requirements for homeschooling or join a private, but State certified, Homeschooling Umbrella. I chose a local, faith-based Umbrella organization. Their requirements for curriculum and data collection were minimal. They just required limited artifacts and a learning log recording the daily objectives which were to be presented at the end of the year. I was professionally shocked by these few requirements. As a professional, at the end of August, I ran a battery of informal reading assessments on Nate and took a writing sample in order to monitor his progress throughout the

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year. His informal results indicated that he was reading and comprehending at a pre-primer level. His writing sample was a self-selected topic and done independently. He wrote “I ha bsrch for God.” Which he told me said “I have searched for God.” He also drew a picture which he said, “This is me being baptized and dedicating my life to Him.” He was on grade level for math but had some problems with reversals when writing numbers.

Instead of ordering a ‘Dyslexic’ curriculum as I had originally planned, I decided to modify a public school curriculum, with which I was very familiar and had good access to supporting materials, to meet Nate’s needs. During this time, it was very difficult for me to struggle with what I wanted for Nate as a parent and what I knew he needed as a reading specialist. I began with a second grade version of that curriculum but quickly (with some heart break), back stepped into the middle of first grade edition as it was immediately evident that, even with my support, the second grade text was too far out of reach for Nate. I teetered between feeling very confident that I could ‘get him on track’ and feeling like a complete failure on the days that ‘dyslexia won’. We had lots of those days where he would try to read something, over and over and just not be able to ‘pull it out’. He often ended up teary eyed and in my lap for a bit before we would try again. On some days, we let ‘it’ win and moved on to other subjects or took a walk.

In the beginning, all of the comprehension checks and word work was done orally and I recorded the work as dictations. He had one small writing requirement each day that was self-selected and independent. I began recording the percentage of words that he spelled correctly daily and saw good steady growth over time. By February, he was writing book summaries or non-fiction reviews from a generated word bank. For example, on 2/22/13 he wrote, “This book is about Hondo’s gang of pirate. They ride speeder bikes. The pirate attack the Sith Count

Dooku's (*reversed K*) ship." This was a particularly exciting day because this was the first time he began writing a sentence with a capital letter. He had recently been able to see this flaw and correct it later on, but had not ever started writing with a capital. He also incorporated the possessive 's' on his own for the first time. It had been modeled earlier that day in a reading lesson and he was able to apply this new learning without prompting from me.

His growth in these two areas prompted me to have a conversation with him about his growth and how he was feeling about reading and writing. In one statement he sealed his assent into the next chapter of our mutual education along this journey. He said, "Mom, you know all those great strategies you have taught me for reading? It's like they all fly around in my head while I am reading and I can't hold onto just one." I had a flood of realization come over me as I began to question him more specifically about his thought processes and in particular his ability to focus on things that he wanted to focus on. The answers he gave led me to his pediatrician's office the next day. After an hour long consultation with the pediatrician, in which she examined Nate and questioned us both (with great deference and respect to my professional opinion), we left that day with a prescription for amphetamines, a stimulant drug to help support Nate's attention to learning.

## **Growth**

The first morning he was on the medication, we were scheduled to attend chapel at my daughter's (his former) school. I didn't mention anything to him about the medicine or question him, but I monitored him closely. I was concerned as a parent that his bubbly and enthusiastic personality would be dampened. On the ride home, he was particularly quiet in the car. I asked him what he was thinking about and he said, "I can feel the medicine helping me focus on

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details. When we were in chapel today, I noticed that a lot of my friends were moving around but I was able to look back at Mr. Tim (that day’s speaker) and listen to what he said even though my friends were moving around a lot.” I also noted in my journaling that day that he was still commenting and interacting with the text orally as he had always done, but his fluency increased about 50%. He was much more consistent at blending chunks of letters and tackling multi-syllabic words. He did not comment once about the puppy, the phone, or the air vent making too much noise; which were daily complaints before. Most notably, as he was working on his writing that day, he asked me how he could show exaggeration or excitement in his writing. I shared about writing in all caps as an option and he incorporated it in his writing that day. The evening ended and as I tucked him in he said, “Mom, I love that medicine; it helps me so much!” The next day at breakfast he asked for it, even though we were heading to the gym to play, he wanted it to help him play a game better.

As the weeks wore on, I began to see other significant developments in his reading that I believe are attributed to his attention resolution allowing him to absorb the intensified instructional supports allowed by homeschooling. He spontaneously began to critique a few of the authors of the texts he was reading. He made these comments interspersed with the reading and was able to return to the text seamlessly. A few months later, he has increased his time on task independently by 50% and continues to make strong strides in reading and writing. His informal reading assessments show a gain of 18 months over 8 months’ time. He is writing full paragraphs with a 45% improvement in spelling and grammar. In language arts he is still below grade level for third grade expectations but catching up steadily. He is performing a grade level above in math. We have decided to continue homeschooling again next year. That decision was

sparked in part by this one experience that I have captured below... he is smiling while he reads a book – first time ever!



## Reflections

The professional in me has come to a few conclusions through this journey. First, he is not “cured”, but we have hurdled one of his biggest barriers in word identification – chunking. Longitudinal studies have shown that students who struggle with reading differences often continue to struggle within all of their schooling years (Dickinson & McCabe). Second, because I was able to intervene early, he has a much stronger chance of fewer negative effects of his learning differences on his life (Hook, Macaruso, & Jones, 2001; Lyon & Moats, 1997).

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Third, as a reading specialist, I was so thrilled to be able to preserve his love of ‘the story,’ he so easily could have begun to see himself as a non-reader. He has a favorite author and he loves to learn new things from text. He was able to comprehend complex text long before he was able to identify words and that made all the difference. Finally, it was so powerful to see some of the symptoms of his disability ‘peeled’ away when we added the medication for the attention deficit disorder (Pisecco, et al, 2001). It was clarifying to see what the reading disability was versus the attention issues. This clarity allowed for a better target for instructional strategies. The medication was an important part of the journey but the decision to homeschool and remove Nathan from the classroom situation was the most powerful one in his growth. I had the opportunity to focus and maximize his instruction one-on-one in the early morning hours when he was at his best. He received several reading interventions a day without having to miss any other subjects as he would have to do in a school “pull out’ setting. This alternative setting allowed us to concentrate all of his mental energies on reading and writing and use media and other more conducive avenues for other content area learning. The ability to write a daily instructional prescription for Nathan was much more powerful than the other prescription he took daily. Finally, navigating this process as a parent who is an educator sometimes aligned in ways that were fruitful for Nate and at other times it was detrimental to his growth.

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