Future teachers experience what it’s like to have dyslexia, learn specialized reading techniques

Defined as a language-based learning disability, dyslexia can take on many forms. Traditionally, it’s thought of as a slipping similar letters like b and d. Georgia College junior early childhood majors recently learned it’s much more than that. In small groups, they filtered through stations presenting different challenges associated with dyslexia. In one scenario, students had to cover their non-dominant hand and see the reflection from a mirror to write certain things. At another station, they were asked to follow verbal directions while background noise and side conversations muffled what was said. Through all six of the 10-minute sessions, the students facilitators—who acted as teachers—hurried the participants and said things like, “If you can’t do this, we won’t move on to third grade.”

“The whole point was that we were supposed to be really mean and create like a worst-case scenario for the students that were taking our auditory spelling test,” said junior Grace Pifer, early childhood education major and student facilitator for the training. “So, I basically just screamed commands that I would have been in as a kid when I was labeled a ‘problem’ for being disruptive.”

After multiple sessions for over an hour, the teacher candidates reported feeling emotionally exhausted, frustrated and even embarrassed they couldn’t do some of the tasks.

“It was an eye-opening experience because I didn’t know how common dyslexia is,” said junior Rilee Eldridge. “I did get really frustrated. I understood why kids want to quit, and why they act out in class. Connecting these dots is exactly why this training is important.

“My number one goal is to ensure that students are not lazy or inconsistent, but instead that they look and dive deeper into the whole child,” said Stephanie O’Donnell, who is a structural literacy, dyslexia interventionist.

Starr received her undergraduate degree in early child education from Georgia College. After pursuing her master’s degree and specialized dyslexia training, she started her own tutoring business.

“Dyslexic does not have anything to do with IQ. In fact, I would argue the student I work with that have dyslexia are really brilliant and do really amazing things,” said Starr. “They just aren’t able to express it in written format or at least not without some support.”

She worked with Dr. Stacy Schwartz, professor of Early Childhood Education, to secure two rounds of grant funding from the International Dyslexia Association—Georgia Branch to support the simulations and equipment in six classrooms to help struggling children.

“The first year of the grant we bought materials to help with the tactile nature of learning—tools children can write with and touch, like writing on the bumpy board or in sand,” said Schwartz. “We also bought the kit that allows us to do the dyslexia simulation.

The grants also funded REAP (Reading is Essential for All People) training for all early childhood majors over the last three years. A non-profit organization dedicated to improving reading proficiency in Georgia public school students, REAP provides public school teachers with specialized training in reading instruction called structured literacy. Early childhood majors will graduate with approximately 50 hours in structured literacy training.

“This makes our students very marketable because they’re going to be scarcity,” said Schwartz. “They just have to be really good at what they do, and they’re now new with COVID, to get all their teachers trained,” said Schwartz.

“When applying for jobs, our students are able to talk about the fact that they are trained in structured literacy and have been trained through REAP,” for junior Annette Herbert, the training especially hits home.

Diagnosed with dyslexia as a child, she knows first-hand the challenges kids face at school.

“I think it’s a gift, and I have really embraced it,” said Herbert. “But people have always said, ‘Having dyslexia must be so easy for you because you get accommodations, and you get that extra help from people.’ I actually work 10 times harder than the average person. That’s been really hard, but I found ways to cope with it.”

She brings her experience designing dyslexia into her future classrooms and hopes to help children who face similar challenges.

“When I was diagnosed with dyslexia, I decided I wanted to help other kids who have issues learning at not basic level like I did,” said Herbert. “I want school to be like a safe space for them.”

Understanding their future students’ needs and the best way to help is one of the primary goals for Starr and Schwartz.

Through their experience, they also hope the teacher candidates pass along their knowledge to others.

“We hope they take this simulation to their host schools and are able to offer a little mini-training on this,” said Starr.