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An Interview with Faith Borkowsky: "If Only I Would Have Known..."

Jan 7, 2020 by
Michael F. Shaughnessy EducationViews Senior
Columnist

Michael F. Shaughnessy –

1. Faith, as I understand it, you have a series of small books on a number of topics...How did this series first get started?

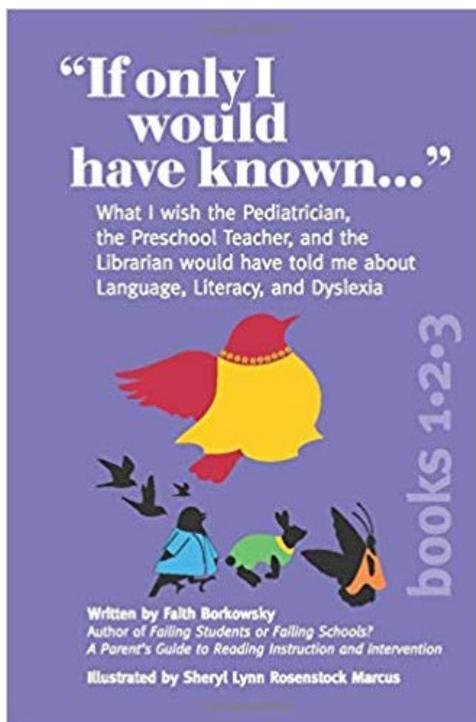
Actually, the topic of each book in the series is the same: language, early literacy, and dyslexia in the critical years of development, birth to five, and in later grades. What's different about each is the perspective and the important information that community-based professionals – a pediatrician, a preschool teacher, and a librarian – can provide to parents of young children and struggling readers. Parents of babies and toddlers frequently look to such professionals for guidance on literacy development, and the book series is intended to be a roadmap for both the professionals and the parents.

The information imparted is meant to be cumulative. Parents need to be aware of the connection between speech and language development and learning to read. Pediatricians can and should start the conversation with parents before the start of school. Preschool teachers should know how to develop the necessary pre-literacy skills for reading success.

Librarians, who traditionally have not advised parents about dyslexia, are natural resources for parents and should be knowledgeable about explicit instruction in systematic phonics, intervention, and appropriate children's books. Parents need to educate themselves before their children enter school.

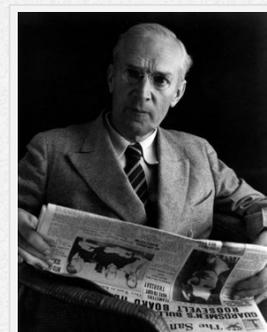
2. "If Only I Would Have Known..." is somewhat desperate- is this the message you are trying to send?

The title, "*If Only I Would Have Known...*," is an expression of regret, not desperation. So many of my students' parents would say those very words to me after they finally began to understand what had been holding their



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children back from learning to read. It was the same story every time, and it would play out the same way: a child was struggling to learn to read in school, the parent was given the child's reading "level" but nothing about the cause of the child's struggles, intervention was not working, I would assess and find phonemic awareness and decoding problems, we would work together on the underlying issues, the child would begin to read, and the parent would say, "If only I would have known..." This recurring scenario inspired me to create the "*If Only I Would Have Known...*" series.

I'm a firm believer that prevention is always better than remediation, and I had also long ago come to the conclusion that only through a grass roots, community-based effort would we be able to overcome the inertia in the schools.

It struck me that various community-based professionals were perfectly situated to provide parents with important, life-changing information about literacy that normally only becomes apparent after a child has experienced failure. My idea evolved into three illustrated, easy-to-understand plays, which I hoped would be accessible and helpful to parents of newborns, toddlers, and school-age children, as well as the professionals highlighted in the story. I am pleased that the feedback I've received to date has been overwhelmingly positive.

3. A child entering first grade—how well can we predict how well he or she will read later in life?

Children show signs of potential reading difficulties way before they even begin reading. That's why the series is perfect for parents of newborns, toddlers, and preschoolers. The books provide guidance on what can be done to ensure children develop a strong foundation before entering school.

By first grade, inaccurate word-reading, if left unresolved, will affect reading and comprehension in the upper grades. As the literacy expert Dr. Anita Archer said, "There is no comprehension strategy powerful enough to compensate for the fact that you can't read the words." For many children who struggle to read in the first grade, reading will remain a problem throughout their lives.

4. Let me try an "If Only I Would Have Known..." on you—"If only I would have known ten years ago- how much these students would be linked to their cell phones and not reading....what can you say?

We should be limiting the amount of time children spend on electronic devices and encourage play using basic, hands-on toys, talking, singing, and moving. Parents are beginning to see how addictive phones and tablets are, and they are noticing their children cannot sustain attention and need to be entertained 24/7. The children have trouble concentrating on one task at a time and seeing it through to the end.

Undoubtedly, there is some correlation between this generation of children (and new teachers) who were raised on cell phones, social media, and instant gratification, etc. and reduced reading; however, the literacy crisis existing in this country and the entire English-speaking world started long before the proliferation of cell phones. It has much more to do with the manner in which reading is being taught in the schools at the Tier 1 level and beyond.

5. Here is another one- "If only I knew what to ask and what to say at that IEP meeting".....

Goals on an IEP should drill down to the most foundational skills. Usually, that means understanding a phonological scope and sequence and a phonics continuum in order to pinpoint which skills need to be taught, practiced, and mastered. Many IEPs do not include spelling, and it should be part of the plan.

Written expression should begin with a focus on the sentence, not a paragraph or essay writing. It's really important to know the process in order to get a meaningful document.

6. Whole language and phonics and literacy—what would you really like parents to have known about this entire morass?

The war between phonics and whole language advocates is not about the children. If it were, people would accept and respect the science of reading, and use common sense. The "Reading Wars" is about money, power, and control. There are many parties who have a lot to lose if science wins. Notice how I don't say phonics. The "phonic-centric" people know that reading is more than just phonics. Whole Language (Balanced Literacy) proponents try to build a false narrative that proponents of a phonics-based approach view reading as a narrow, low-level, "drill and kill" skill. Nobody thinks that way.

The argument takes the attention away from the real issue; we need to teach the alphabetic code to children explicitly and systematically early. If we don't get this right, we will continue to see high illiteracy rates across the country. There is no excuse for continuing to introduce what works only after what doesn't work has failed. It's backwards.

And there must be more and better training for all teachers, so that they can understand the reading process and not be married to a particular program, which may not be suitable for a particular child.

7. How recoverable is "reading recovery" –is it worth the money and time investment?

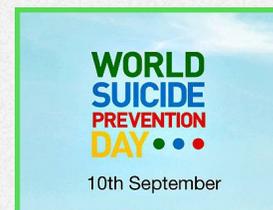
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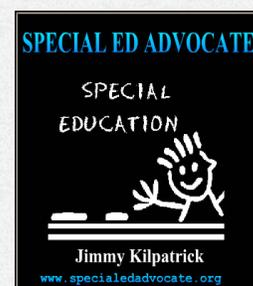
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Reading Recovery, like all educational approaches that are popular in the US, require limited skill on the part of the teacher. The faulty strategies encouraged in first grade such as "look at the picture," "get your mouth ready," "look at the first letter," and "skip it and come back" might work while children are in books that align well with that kind of thinking, but it doesn't last. By the time children reach second, third, and fourth grade and the pictures are removed and the words become longer, the children can no longer successfully guess their way through more difficult texts.

8. With all these movies that kids are "FROZEN too" (get the joke?) how can we get parents to encourage good reading?

The problem of too much television has been around since I was a child. Similar to phones and iPads, television viewing should be limited for all children and delayed for as long as possible. We know that language develops from active participation with caring adults. Movies are receptive and do not give children a chance to engage in conversation. Strong receptive and expressive language determine one's reading comprehension ability once they can actually read the words accurately and fluently.

9. Vocabulary development- what do parents need to know in this regard?

Vocabulary is cumulative and begins at birth. It's developed through social and educational experiences, conversation, reading, hobbies, and opportunities for travel. Children who start school with large vocabularies have an advantage over children with weak word-knowledge. It is easier to learn and retain new vocabulary words when you have a large bank of words to start. As a society, we need to do more for all children if we ever hope to level the playing field before they enter school.

However, once they enter school, teaching them how to read and decode words in a systematic, structured manner is the single most important means of providing all children with the skills necessary to be life-long readers and, hopefully, enable them to grow their vocabularies. In the interim, teachers can use read-alouds and discuss words and language associated with other subjects they are teaching as a means of building vocabulary in all of the students.

10. What have I neglected to ask?

I have been asked what makes my books different from other books that have been written about education and literacy. I think, and I am told, that I offer a unique perspective and that my message resonates with parents and lay people interested in the subjects. I do not speak in edubabble, and I try to write in an accessible, impactful way. The "If Only I Would Have Known..." series was written to provide important information in a digestible format that is non-threatening to the average person.

I pride myself on being down-to-earth and approachable, and these books, just like my book, *Failing Students or Failing Schools? A Parent's Guide to Intervention*, are written for everyone. It is my hope that the books end up in doctors' offices, preschools, and libraries. I purposely did not publish them in e-book format in the hope that they will be read and passed on to others. There is also a 3-in-1 edition for those who might want to have the information in one place. Those interested can visit my author page at amazon.com/author/faithborkowsky/

Faith Borkowsky is the founder of High Five Literacy and Academic Coaching with over thirty years of experience as a classroom teacher, reading and learning specialist, regional literacy coach, administrator, and tutor. Ms. Borkowsky is a Certified Dyslexia Practitioner and provides professional development for teachers and school districts, as well as parent workshops, presentations, and private consultations. Ms. Borkowsky is the author of the award-winning book, *Failing Students or Failing Schools? A Parent's Guide to Reading Instruction and Intervention* and the "If Only I Would Have Known..." series. She is also a board member of Teach My Kid to Read, a 501(c) non-profit organization with a mission to support and empower students, teachers, and parents through education so all kids, including those with dyslexia, learn to read.



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