

[00:00:07.870] - Lauren

Hello, everyone, and welcome to the LDA podcast. I'm here with Patty Gillespie. She's a reading specialist, and today she's going to talk to us about some reading strategies and her life experiences. So, Patty, thank you so much for being here.

[00:00:19.050] - Patty Gillespie

My pleasure. Sure. Thank you.

[00:00:21.350] - Lauren

So to start off, would you mind giving us just a quick background about yourself? Just let our listeners know who you are and give a bit of an insight into your experience.

[00:00:29.990] - Patty Gillespie

Sure. I was raised in Western Massachusetts, and I was raised in a home where my parents thought education was the most important thing and that all three of their children would have a college education. And we heard it throughout all of our growing up years. But I have five learning disabilities, so I had great difficulty learning to read. When I actually graduated from high school. I was still illiterate, so I have quite an interesting background. I went from that illiteracy learning to read and then obtaining my bachelor's and master's degree in education and ended up as a reading specialist for 36 years. Besides my 36 years as a reading specialist, I was fortunate enough to spend nearly 30 years presenting at educational conferences throughout the country where my primary talks were vocabulary development and reading comprehension and techniques and things of that nature. I really enjoyed that. I hid the fact that I didn't learn to read until I was 19 years old. You don't want people to know that you still think you're dumb. And I still feel at my old age that my vocabulary is lacking because I missed twelve years of formal education.

[00:01:55.630] - Patty Gillespie

If you think about it in terms of vocabulary development, I never passed a spelling test in my life, but now I spell very well. But it's taken a long time. But what happened was I'd been teaching for ten years. When this happened, I was doing an outdoor camp with 250 middle school kids. And so you're doing activities. And I got assigned to run the games for the afternoon with these kids. And I went into panic mode. I can't remember the rules. I can't remember the order that things have to go in order to play that game. And out of desperation, I went to a colleague and his name was John. And I said, John, I need a favor. They will do any duty you don't want to do. I'll do lunch duty. I'll do any duty you don't want to do if you'll cover these games for me. And he looked at me like, what's the deal? I said, Would you do it for me? So he agreed that he would do that for me. And I could see it in the look on his face, he's wondering, Why? What's her problem? So he came to see me later on, and he said, what's the deal, Patty?

[00:03:09.360] - Patty Gillespie

So I told him about my learning disabilities, and I said, don't want anybody to know. And he thought it was the greatest thing ever that I had overcome all these learning disabilities to succeed and be where I was. And he went and told the English Department, and this was at a private College in Albuquerque, New Mexico. But anyway, it became this big thing and they wanted me to talk to the entire student body, six to twelve, about my struggle learning to read, because even though it's a private school, you still have students that had difficulties and it just took off from there. And when I did it professionally, I just had teachers at me saying for hours after my presentation giving me scenarios, asking me more questions. It snowballed and became a great thing rather than something I tried to hide for so many years.

[00:04:13.900] - Lauren

Well, just to sort of expand on that background a little bit, when did you realize that you learned differently?

[00:04:22.810] - Patty Gillespie

I didn't realize that I learned differently until I was graduated from high school and trying to teach myself how to read when I was 19 years old. Yeah, very unique. I just thought the whole time that I was just dumb, that people, everybody got it, but I never did. And I couldn't understand why. The thing is that because two of my learning disabilities are auditory processing and auditory discrimination, I was the generation of teaching phonics. In fact, when I first started first grade, it was the teacher's first year teaching phonics. So everything was with phonics, so I couldn't discriminate any sounds whatsoever. And that's why I never learned to read. My parents even hired private tutors for seven years. And what did they do? They taught me phonics and I couldn't learn. I couldn't hear the differences. Well.

[00:05:27.360] - Lauren

So what was it sort of like going throughout high school, not being able to read?

[00:05:32.270] - Patty Gillespie

Well, my memories aren't, in terms of academics are not fun, but I was very social, so that's what kept me going in school. But I felt so lost all the time. That was the thing. I didn't know what was going on around me, and I knew that my classmates thought I was dumb. That was really difficult, too. But I was smart enough to figure out various tricks, like when the teacher would ask a question and the majority of the class raise their hand. And I knew it would be safe for me to raise my hand. So I'd raise my hand and if my rare chance I got called on, I'd say, oh, I forgot what I was going to say. I get away with that. I was really stressed the whole time because I didn't understand. And I truly cried a lot at home out of

frustration. One of the other things, it was really difficult just in general in school with your trade and grade papers back in the day you came with your homework done, you traded it with someone beside you, you graded it, and then you switched them back. And mine were always all wrong.

[00:06:42.190] - Patty Gillespie

So it was always an embarrassing situation for me. And the other thing that probably goes along with this. When I was in high school, after my first year of my freshman year of struggling, I went to my guidance counselor and I told him that I couldn't handle this anymore. I needed some help. And we set up a new schedule for me starting my sophomore year to do half business classes instead of all college bound curriculum, which gave me a little bit of a break. But it was interesting that the two college classes I had to keep, college English and history were just horrible. And I can remember every year in my English class teachers saying, how did you get to be a freshman? You can't read and you can't write. I heard the same scenario every year. And the interesting thing at the end, when I was in my senior year, my guidance counselor's advice to me, just get married. You're not college material.

[00:07:49.590] - Lauren

Oh, wow.

[00:07:50.520] - Patty Gillespie

I got told in the end, that gives a little background.

[00:07:56.390] - Lauren

Wow. So you mentioned after high school you were able to teach yourself to read.

[00:08:01.970] - Patty Gillespie

Yes.

[00:08:02.760] - Lauren

Could you kind of go into how you did that?

[00:08:05.720] - Patty Gillespie

Yes. I reached a point, if I can give you a little background. I mentioned that my parents were adamant that their children have a college education. So when it got to be my senior year, my parents were saying, Where are you going to college? Well, I applied, not expecting to get in anywhere. I applied to a community college that accepted anyone. And then I applied to the local state teachers college. And to

make a long story short, the state teachers college accepted me. But what they said, I will quote, we're accepting you so you can be one of the 30% that's flunked out the first semester, end quote. I'm not kidding they said that to me. The problem being why they weren't going to accept me. SATs were a requirement. And the state of Massachusetts at that time, minimum requirement for each portion of it was 450 points. And on the reading part, I got credit for my name. That's how bad it was. Anyway. So I got accepted and I made it through the first semester crying every day. It was horrendous, but believe it or not, I missed flunking out. I missed being put on probation by two tenths of a point.

[00:09:28.430] - Patty Gillespie

I knew I was still in college. So what was I going to do? So it was Christmas break and I just said, this is it. I either learn to read or I'm done and I want to be successful. And that was it. So I decided I was going to teach myself to read. And what I did was I basically figured it was the time of figuring things out. And it's the first time I realized that I couldn't attack any word because I couldn't figure out any of the sounds. So what I did was I used a visual association so every vowel sound, digraph, diphthong, song, consonant sounds. Even where there are two sounds, I had to make a picture for that, a word and a picture so I could bring that down to the word. So for example, I come across an A, and short A has, as an apple, I have a picture of an apple. If it was long, it had a picture of an ape. So I'd bring the sound, I'd see the apple go bring it to the word, and that's how I could get the sound. It didn't take me very long to figure out I needed the other five vowel sounds for a picture beside me.

[00:10:49.590] - Patty Gillespie

But this is what I did back and forth until I mastered them. And I practiced 6 to 8 hours a day, seven days a week for a year to become fully literate. And once I was literate, it was the Dean's list and on to get my Masters with a 4.0 in reading. So I've gone full circle. Everything that I read for college, in school, every single paragraph I read, there was a note next to it. With that main idea of that paragraph, I could not trust my long term, short term memory problem, which are two more of my learning disabilities. I couldn't trust my memory to remember even though I comprehended the paragraph or the chapter. Even I needed those notes to refresh me over and over again. And when I was in school and college trying to pass tests and whatever, I studied every single day from the day I got my notes right up until that test happened. So if it's 20 days worth of notes, I've already practiced them for 20 days, day after day, and keep adding on and more practice things that I think are really important that seem simple. But for comprehension, things like signal words, I mentioned using context clues and the graphic organizers for conceptualization in terms of understanding the text when you can put it into a picture, it makes such a difference for students to be able to understand that.

[00:12:34.720] - Patty Gillespie

So that was a big thing that I also use in terms of reading comprehension and teaching myself to comprehend. I realized that, yes, I could read words, but what did they mean and what was the message?

And how am I going to get there? And I work at a sentence level only until I could figure out who or what in the sentence and then what it had to do about what the sentence had to do with that subject. I wouldn't go any further. So I read the sentence over and over and over again. And I use that same method teaching my students, with special ed students, that same thing, we don't just read words if there's no meaning, we're not comprehending. Basically what I did to teach myself to read. And when I realized that I wasn't dumb I just needed crutches to help me get to where I needed to be.

[00:13:29.810] - Lauren

Right. Wow. So during all this, what made you decide that you wanted to go into the field of education?

[00:13:37.950] - Patty Gillespie

I always wanted to be a teacher when I was growing up. I always wanted to play school. And of course, I had to be the teacher. That dream kind of fizzled with all my struggles in school. But once I learned to read, it was like I don't want other students to feel like I did growing up. And I had more desire than ever to want to be a teacher so that I can help students with learning disabilities so they could succeed without all that frustration and maybe learn sooner than I did.

[00:14:16.570] - Lauren

Well, and you sort of touched on this a little bit earlier, but you kind of use the same strategies for yourself that you use for teaching others, right?

[00:14:24.680] - Patty Gillespie

Yes, I did many strategies. Yes. Believe it or not, a majority of my students had auditory problems that were never recognized. So I use a combination of different methods for teaching them. I also use graphic organizers with them. I use some of the same things that I did in terms of not letting them go past the sentence level unless they understood it. And then once we got to a point where we complete a paragraph, if you don't know what the main idea that paragraph is, read it over. There's a lot of repetition until they could learn to understand each sentence, to put it together, to understand the paragraph. So I did a lot of those things as well. I taught context clues and signal words and graphic organizers. I use all those myself. I taught myself those context clues that made it a lot easier than having to look every single word up that I didn't know. So those same things that I used to teach myself, I used when I was teaching other students to read, I also went on with I kind of became a study skill guru. And one of the key things I think I taught multiple skills over many years.

[00:16:02.700] - Patty Gillespie

But to teach multimethodologies for learning was the key piece on that and how to study using all of our modalities, not just one.

[00:16:13.930] - Lauren

And it definitely sounds like your experience with teaching yourself to read and going through what you did that you really have an advantage in teaching others.

[00:16:22.110] - Patty Gillespie

Well, it gave me empathy, and that was the key to the whole thing being empathetic and being able to let the student know that they're not alone and that it was possible to learn to read even with problems that I had done the same.

[00:16:41.230] - Lauren

Definitely. So what are some of the most common recommendations that you sort of find yourself giving to parents and educators who are trying to help a student with their reading comprehension?

[00:16:52.150] - Patty Gillespie

Number one is to convince the learner they're capable and to let them know it's not that they're smart, that they learn differently from others. The students need to realize that. So they don't just give up, 'I can't do it' kind of thing. I just think that's so important. And I think of it in these terms. If I had a leg that was lame, I would use a crutch or cane to help me get around. It is the same thing with a learning disability. I need a crutch. I need a tool that's going to help me to be able to learn better. And that's kind of how I look at it as a learning disabled person myself.

[00:17:43.030] - Lauren

Right, sure. So if you could give advice and I'm sure you often do this, if you give advice to young students with learning disabilities, what would that advice be?

[00:17:53.360] - Patty Gillespie

The first one is never give up trying. If you give up, you're done. Basically, you can't give up. I want them to understand that they learn differently and they're just as smart as their peers and that they're capable of learning. And the key thing is believing in themselves and keeping them motivated to keep trying even as they're struggling. And that's a constant you can do this. You can do this. Absolutely.

[00:18:25.210] - Lauren

Can I ask what was one of the things that motivated you when you were teaching yourself to read?

[00:18:31.270] - Patty Gillespie

I will be honest. And that was the push from my parents. I didn't want to let my parents down. They wanted me to have a college education. That was their dream. I was going to let my parents down. And that was my push to say, I'm going to do this, I'm going to get that college degree. And that was the reality of the whole thing. I wanted to get that college degree and I had to learn to read in order to get it. That was it for me.

[00:19:01.070] - Lauren

Right. Well, and speaking of what you're sort of recently doing, you recently have a book out?

[00:19:07.200] - Patty Gillespie

Yes.

[00:19:08.030] - Lauren

Would you be able to tell us a little bit about it?

[00:19:10.500] - Patty Gillespie

Yes. Basically, my book starts out sharing about my struggles of learning to read throughout my life, my feelings life as a disabled learner, and what it's like, the strategies I use for myself and for others, and a little bit about my successes and what I've accomplished since learning to read. It defines various learning difficulties and helpful suggestions for different ones. Reading strategies that I particularly like. My next book is all strategies and all these things to be done. But right now I took key ones that were essential for me to learn to read. There's also an organization and study skills guide in it. It's for parents and educators. I included a section, ADD, because I'm ADHD and I raised the son ADHD. And what happened was in my profession, I was always given students with ADD and ADHD because the administrators knew 'Patty knew how to handle them.' So I have a lot of experience and that was recognized in the end. I know this fascinating part. I have some I'll call them case studies. They're unique stories of my teaching people how to read one being a total non reader that didn't know the letters of his name and had to sign his paycheck with an X to a PhD candidate who left college because she was so frustrated not being able to comprehend the text.

[00:20:59.530] - Patty Gillespie

So it's the whole gambit so there are some neat stories about that as well. That's in a nutshell what my book covers.

[00:21:10.030] - Lauren

What's the title of the book?

[00:21:11.790] - Patty Gillespie

It's "A Self Taught Reader with Five Learning Disabilities, a Guide for Educators and Parents" and it can be found on Amazon.

[00:21:21.080] - Lauren

That's great. And so just wrapping up here, is there anything that you wanted to talk about or any advice or closing words that I didn't really ask or talk about that you wanted to bring up?

[00:21:32.670] - Patty Gillespie

My big thing, I guess, is my wish that educators respected and understood what learning disabled students go through and it's not just in the classroom, but it's in our world. It's all around us and there's all kinds of things that become difficult because we have the learning disabilities and I think that's just really important for all educators and parents to understand absolutely.

[00:22:03.250] - Lauren

Thank you so much, Patty, for talking with me today.

[00:22:05.790] - Patty Gillespie

It is my pleasure. Thank you.

[00:22:13.310] - Lauren

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