

FOREWORD: AMERICA NEEDS ALL KINDS OF MINDS

In May 2002, I found myself staring at the cover of *Fortune* magazine. The lead article was “Overcoming Dyslexia” and inside was my story. The author noticed a strange and common theme as she talked to the world’s most successful CEOs and other high achievers. Many of us seemed pretty hopeless as kids, labeled dyslexic or “learning disabled.” Yet, all of us have been enormously successful in our careers. Our different ways of learning, thinking, and seeing the world have energized America’s entertainment industry, launched successful companies and brands, won Nobel Prizes and Olympic medals, and designed diverse creations from famous works of art to Nerf balls. As Dr. Sally Shaywitz of Yale University said in that article, “Dyslexics are overrepresented in the top ranks of people who are unusually insightful, who bring a new perspective, who think out of the box” (Morris, 2002, p. 56).

The recognition of my learning differences came early. I failed second grade and spent part of my third grade year in a class of children regarded as “mentally retarded,” which goes to show how little was known of individual learning differences at that time. My school years were distinguished by invitations to leave practically every high school in Los Angeles. My parents painfully watched their child struggle to learn and tried everything they could think of to help me read, hoping

my self-confidence would not completely disappear. My teachers were also frustrated. They worked hard, but too few people understood dyslexia or ADD in those days. A well-meaning educator told my mother to enroll me in trade school so I could become a carpet layer.

Learning differences are far more prevalent than most people think. About one in seven kids struggle in school because of known “disabilities,” and that translates into *millions* of kids. Without help, the outlook is often grim. Many of these kids will be branded as intellectually inferior, and never get close to realizing their full capabilities—a major loss to themselves, their families, and our country.

I was fortunate to have parents who knew I was capable of so much more and convinced me that once I was out of school, I would succeed. I got through college because my dyslexia and ADHD fostered risk taking, problem solving, and resilience. I somehow figured out my own strategies to deal with my learning difference. I also learned that I saw things others didn’t. Working on a collaborative project with fellow students at USC’s Marshall School of Business gave me the idea that led to Kinko’s. As the group’s “gopher,” I had to make copies in the library’s reserved book room. The long lines and inconvenience triggered my entrepreneurial instincts.

For over a decade, the Orfalea Foundations have encouraged parents and schools to see all children as distinct learners with unique profiles of strengths and weaknesses. We’ve also worked tirelessly to change the public perception of specific learning conditions like dyslexia and ADD. We know that a struggle with learning does not mean you’re disabled; it means you learn differently. The goal of my autobiography, *Copy This* (Workman Publishing, 2005), was to provide hope and optimism to kids and their families who are feeling as frustrated in their classrooms as I did in mine.

My wife, Natalie, and I hold this fundamental belief: When faced with a child who learns in very different ways, you first work to discover and emphasize strengths. As I’ve learned firsthand, it is your strengths that are the foundation of a successful adult life. I’ve learned to love how my mind works and firmly believe it is the reason for the success I’ve enjoyed.

This book describes an approach that will help school leaders transform our schools into learning centers for all kinds of students. The key to this approach is helping educators really understand how to prevent students from needless struggle, while building on their strengths and assets. Science and brain research are helping us all understand how people vary in their learning. All Kinds of Minds has put this knowledge into programs and resources for teachers, parents, and students. The result is a better understanding of how each of us learns and an approach to teaching that provides hope and optimism for *all* students, building confidence that they *can* learn and faith that their schools can help them.

Our world faces increasingly complex challenges every day. Yes, we need our students to graduate with the twenty-first-century skills and knowledge that will keep our economies sound, our democracies stable, and our communities thriving. But more than ever, America needs the kinds of minds that generate new perspectives, seek solutions, and discover emerging opportunities. Those are the minds of many of the students in your schools today who, at first glance, look a lot like the struggling student I was in school. I invite you to take a second look at the individuals who walk through your school doors. Join us in helping as many kids as possible become more aware of their unique talents and more confident in their learning abilities—and help us rescue the wonderful potential that may otherwise be lost.

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Paul Orfalea

References

- Morris, B. "Overcoming Dyslexia." *Fortune*, 2002, 145(10), 54-70.
- Orfalea, P., and Marsh, A. *Copy This: Lessons from a Hyperactive Dyslexic Who Turned a Bright Idea into One of America's Best Companies*. New York: Workman, 2005.