“I was so pleased to read your letter to the editor in the September 30th edition to The Advance Titan. I found your letter to be well written, and inspiring. How often in our lives we fail to be grateful for the people who have helped us on our journey. I found your letter to be one filled with gratitude for the students and professors of Project Success. I’m very proud of you, Shawn, and so grateful that you are part of the Newman community.” Fr. Jeff Vanden Heuvel

Reflecting back, receiving a letter like this was not only heartwarming, but also reminded me of my personal struggles of how I was able to academically navigate and survive the academic institutions as a student with dyslexia. Survival is exactly the word to describe my educational journey as I graduated from a rigorous high school with extraordinary academic standards of which none applied to me (Yosso, 2005). I am not looking for sympathy, but want to inspire other students to never quit, no matter how hard their academics may seem (Bozack, 2011). Prior to breaking that cycle by unlocking the code of learning how to read at the age of 18, I had viewed my academic aptitude to accomplish at high levels from a deficit viewpoint because previous failures led me to underestimate my academic abilities (Damico, Campano, & Harste, 2009; Delpit, 1995; Ford, 2014; Young, 2007).

Thus, experiencing academic failure day after day, month after month and year after year influenced my self-esteem, identity, and expectations (Whiting, 2014). Furthermore, it was not until 1996 that the cycle was broken, thus altering my thinking and influencing my motivation to learn (Margolis & McCabe, 2006). As a result, I was no longer subjugated by the stereotypes assigned to students in special education with

This narrative addresses how having dyslexia has affected the author’s personal academic journey and encourages students to pursue their highest scholarly aspirations.
learning disabilities (e.g., dyslexia) and had not let my dyslexia define my position in life or my identity. My triumph over the academic adversity I faced as a result of my dyslexia allowed me to develop a much more positive perception of my academic abilities.

I have a desire to inspire students who struggle with dyslexia by sharing my experiences with them. Therefore, the purpose of this article is to discuss: (1) my academic journey, (2) instructional techniques that helped me overcome my dyslexia, (3) my pursuit of master’s and doctorate degrees, and (4) recommendations for classroom instruction.

**My Academic Journey**

_A short description of my 3rd through 12th grade experiences._ My earliest experiences being taught to read in a school setting took place over 25 years ago. The passage of so much time makes it difficult to pinpoint precise experiences. Therefore, presented in this section are glimpses of my reading development. First, during much of 1980s and 1990s, the curriculum focused heavily on authentic literature where students were expected to decipher meaning from texts (Goodman, & Goodman, 2009; Pearson, 2009), and focused on whole (e.g., word) to part, instead of part (e.g., symbol) to whole comprehension. Reflecting back through the lens of my current educational training, I needed remedial and explicit instruction that focused on phonological and orthographical components (Gustafson, Ferreira, & Ronnberg, 2007).

Regrettably, this instructional approach did not match my learning needs. As a result, throughout elementary, middle and high school, I had no conceptual awareness of the sound structure of the American-English language (Ehri, 2005; Ehri, 2014). My difficulties in learning to read made instruction focusing on authentic literature unproductive for me, which resulted in my avoiding reading altogether. One strategy I used to avoid reading throughout much of elementary and middle school was using my pointer finger to pick my nose like a drill digging for oil, often extracting blood, which flowed down my face. My nose did not itch, but picking my nose proved to be a successful strategy for getting removed from class as a means to avoid reading out loud. As time went on further avoidance strategies included cursing, fighting, being disrespectful, or distracting other students from learning.

All of these behaviors resulted in the teacher sending me to the principal's office or having me sit in the hallway to think about my actions. I had become a regular in the administration office. However, I continued to struggle academically and experienced a sense of learned helplessness because of the
inability to read (Burden, 2005). I was not making adequate progress with the academic intervention in place. I lost all hope, doubted my ability, and had low self-esteem. Throughout my academic journey (Robinson, 2013), I had reading problems due to cognitive processing deficits (Wolf, 2007), which in my opinion were not addressed earlier and only increased my frustration. Not receiving effective reading lessons throughout elementary and middle school resulted in my falling further behind academically, which carried over to high school. Thus, not knowing how to read increased my aggressive behavior, and I only continued to avoid reading.

However, teachers throughout high school took special interest in me and were aware of my reading difficulty. Moreover, most of the learning objectives of my Individual Education Plan focused on behavior rather than dyslexia. In fact, my high school counselor recommended that I enroll in a trade school because of my academic performance, yet my mother was determined for me to attend college, and at this point in high school, minimal learning was occurring. She relentlessly sought out college programs for students with learning disabilities and heard about the Project Success at the University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh. She scheduled an appointment to meet with Dr. Nash, the founder and former director of the program, and off we went. As we were traveling, I was screaming, “I WILL NEVER MAKE IT IN COLLEGE”, “I AM A FAILURE,” or “LET’S GO HOME.”

Finally, when we arrived, Dr. Nash explained that he would conduct a sequence of standardized tests, beginning by reading high frequency words from an elementary grade-level list. There I sat, as a high school student who could see the words but could not read or spell most of them. I stared at the paper without much expression, grew increasingly embarrassed, and became frustrated. Dr. Nash stopped testing and confirmed that my frustration was normal, which felt refreshing. He then said, “Shawn, I would like you to spell the word C-A-M-E” and I replied with “K-A-M” and Dr. Nash said, “You have dyslexia.” Dr. Nash finished and called my mother back into his office and said, “Shawn has dyslexia, and I’m accepting him into the Project Success.” This gave my mother the hope she had been seeking. I was accepted into the program after an hour-long meeting. He went on to explain, “This doesn’t guarantee he will be accepted into the university, but if I accept him into the program, he will be accepted.” The entire drive home I was screaming, “I AM GOING TO COLLEGE” or “I GOT ACCEPTED.” My narrative had changed!
Instructional Techniques That Helped Me Overcome My Dyslexia

The beginning, in June of 1996, I participated in the Project Success program (PSP), which included roughly 55 other students with dyslexia. As an incoming student, I had a grade equivalency of 5.4 in the area of letter word identification, and was unfamiliar with many academic concepts. I was learning from scratch, afraid and unsure of myself (Burden, 2005). In fact, this was the first time I heard about dyslexia (Moats & Dakin, 2007). Basically, at the age of 18, I had trouble with low-level processing (i.e., phonics and orthographic) and did not know how to read or spell basic words from a third grade program, which impacted my academic and social development (Olson, Keenan, Byrne, & Samuelsson, 2014). Fortunately, I was exposed to knowledgeable others in the PSP who had filled me with content knowledge that helped me develop the self-confidence necessary to navigate college both academically and psychologically and thereafter (Freire, 1970). For instance, through the PSP, Dr. Nash provided two types of enrichment programs, which I view as strategies and practices that educators can use to help students with dyslexia become academically independent. These are strategies I employed throughout my postsecondary experiences and afterwards.

Type I: General Exploratory Activities. Dr. Nash, Dr. Kitz, Mike F., and knowledgeable others exposed me to new ideas and fields not ordinarily covered in programs designed for students with dyslexia. This external stimulation moved me toward internal commitment and purpose (Renzulli, 1986; Renzulli, 2012). The new ideas and funds of knowledge I was exposed to included the nature, prevalence, manifestations and treatments for dyslexia supported by scientific research (Wolf, 2007). First, it was not until the end of my high school career that I knew I had dyslexia, as Dr. Nash used the universal description of dyslexia and informed me after standardized testing that I possessed the characteristics of dyslexia, which include any of the following: (1) learning to speak, (2) organizing written and spoken language, (3) learning letters and their sounds, (4) memorizing number facts, (5) spelling, (6) reading, (7) learning a foreign language, and (8) correctly doing math operations (Lyon, Shaywitz & Shaywitz, 2003).

Second, in terms of treatments, one specific remedial approach that helped my spelling ability was Pure and Complete Phonics (PCP) (Nash, 2015; Robinson, 2013; Robinson, 2014; Robinson, in press). PCP is used to correct the language deficits associated with dyslexia and is a curriculum
that employs the concept of direct and explicit instruction. This method helped me learn how to decode and identify words accurately and fluently (Perfetti & Stafura, 2014). The objective of PCP is to allow students to master the entire phonemic sound structure of the American-English language. Robinson asserted how PCP is a system intended to help students spell and read words by their left-to-right sequential sound structure using the dictionary’s diacritical marks and a simultaneous tri multi-sensory instructional procedure (STMSIP) approach (Pugh et al., 2000). For example, the word “believe” will be used to show the methodical techniques of PCP. The word “believe” in the *Webster’s Colligate Dictionary* is written out twice in both regular dark and less than dark print:

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Dark print     less than dark print
be·lieve     \bəˈliːv\ 
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Each letter/letter-team has a diacritical mark placed above it to illustrate the way the graphemes are identified by sound. For the letter ‘b’ there is no phonetic mark needed, however the phonetic value for the letter ‘e’ is defined as having the sound represented by the schwa /ə/, which is the sound the letter ‘u’ represents in the word up. The syllable type for those two letters is identified as an open syllable (OS) because it contains an isolated vowel not followed by one or more consonants within the syllable. For the letter ‘l’ there is no phonetic mark needed, whereas the letters ‘ie’ make the long /ē/ sound as in the word she. The letter ‘v’ also has no phonetic mark and the letter ‘e’ is silent. The letters ‘lieve’ are considered a final-e syllable because by way of configuration, the syllable ends with a silent ‘e’ and has a preceding vowel that is assigned a long-vowel sound. The example of the word demonstrates how the phonetic assignments of a given letter or letter-combinations are identified and how the four-syllable word is to be pronounced from left to right. This process helps students independently master the entire sound structure of the American English language.

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 /ə/ /ē/
 b e - l ie v e
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PCP is a multi-tiered and multi-sensory evidence-based technique ensuring that students will independently master the entire sound structure of the American-English Language. Thus, by acquiring and accumulating this knowledge about dyslexia and about a remediation strategy, I better understood myself, which helped me shape my identity as a student. Furthermore, after being exposed to PCP, I continued to track my academic progress. In 1998, two years into the program, I was retested and had made great strides compared to my 1996 score, as my grade equivalency score
increased to 6.7 for letter word identification. This progress motivated me to absorb as much academic content as I could (Ryzin, 2011). In addition, in 2000, I was retested and my grade equivalency score was 8.1 for letter word identification. At this point in my life I was a twenty year old with a score that reflected that of an eight grader. Yet that did not stop me as I was on a mission to educate myself, regardless of where or how I started.

**Type II: Group Training Activities.** The second enrichment program consisted of instructional techniques designed to develop higher-level thinking processes, research and reference skills, and processes related to personal and social development (Renzulli, 1986; Renzulli, 2012). Staff helped me learn how to strategically apply multiple approaches to comprehend text, understand the organization of text, and participate in group discussions that not only encouraged quality talk about the text, but also fostered critical-reflective thinking (Fox & Alexander, 2009). For example, instructors implemented the following types of quality talk that stimulated my level of thinking: (1) authentic questions, (2) uptake, (3) generalization/analysis, (4) speculation, (5) elaborated explanation, (6) exploratory talk, (7) affective response, (8) inter-textual response, (9) shared knowledge response, and (10) reference to text, which are detailed below (Wilkinson, Soter, & Murphy, 2010).

Authentic question(s) offered opportunities for me to give a variety of answers that demonstrated my understanding of the material orally (Pearson, 2009). Uptake allowed the teachers to pull more information out by asking for a simple response to my answer(s), such as “Please explain more.” Next, with the generalization/analysis, I showed how I constructed my answer(s) by building on ideas, making connections, and explaining how things work (i.e., analysis), either orally or through writing. Elaborated explanation gave me opportunities to develop/expand my thought process of how I arrived at my conclusion by providing more evidence, which helped me deepen my understanding of the content. Exploratory talk extended this process, as I shared ideas and evaluated evidence of how I arrived at my response(s) and kept an open-mind while considering different perspectives (Cartwright, 2009).

Through affective response, I connected the text with personal experiences (Robinson, 2013), and, through inter-textual response, I drew in other sources of information to connect my answer(s). The more advanced I became in understanding and utilizing instructional techniques to enhance my comprehension, the more I was
able to make connections across multiple texts, conversations, or topics of knowledge I had shared and to refer to citations to support my stance(s). Those variables helped my instructors understand the level of my comprehension of the text and how I constructed meaning. Exposure to these enrichment programs gave me the self-knowledge and confidence I needed to survive academically and enjoy the process of learning. These strategies, along with other instructional techniques, allowed me to navigate higher education, graduate, and boost my self-reliance in applying for graduate school.

Thus, the strategies I learned in the undergraduate enrichment program proved to be useful in graduate school as well. In 2006, I was retested and my grade equivalency score was 9.7 for letter word identification, and in 2007, I crossed the stage with my Master’s in Education with a concentration in School Counseling. Those five years as a graduate student were filled with adversity. Many times I wanted to quit but could not. My academic journey has never been about me. My goal is to inspire other students with dyslexia not to listen to educators who discourage them from achieving their goals. Ultimately, it is about them succeeding and graduating.

I was not done with my education. I applied to a Doctorate in Language and Literacy (Ph.D.) program where I could learn more about dyslexia (myself) and understand theoretical and instructional models of literacy (Gaskins, 2011; Gustafson, Ferreira, & Ronnberg, 2007; Seidenberg, 2013). The desire to continue my education was to promote widespread transformation in school districts and advocate on behalf of students in special education. Now, I am a dissertation away from receiving a Doctorate.

My Pursuit of Master’s and Doctorate Degrees

In 2002, after six years of trials and tribulations that included learning university content plus many academic concepts not taught to me at an earlier age, I finally graduated from college. I was enthusiastic and extremely fortunate to receive such a great opportunity and education. My success completing undergraduate school led me to consider pursuing a Master’s degree. Upon further consideration I applied to an M.Ed. program in School Counseling and was accepted. I began my Master’s degree journey in 2002.
Several of my K-12 teachers would be shocked by my academic endeavors, because they told me I would never get a college degree or become an educator. At the end of my doctoral coursework, I decided to get another educational evaluation to document my progress. In 2014, my grade equivalency score was 10.7 for letter word identification, which is an improvement from where I started in 1996. Furthermore, with such low scores, mastering content should have been almost impossible, but I had pursued the doctoral-level coursework with eagerness and vivacity. The strategies I encountered led me to be academically proactive and empowered me to assume accountability for my own learning, all of which increased my confidence in my ability to learn rigorous coursework and deepened my knowledge about language and literacy instruction.

Despite my reading scores, which indicated that I wouldn’t be able to comprehend these readings at the required level – I did! I had employed the Type II activities to my studies. Although the standardized tests I took over my journey showed my progress, they did not demonstrate my determination to succeed as a student with dyslexia. The tests did not measure my desire to learn and expand my knowledge. Rather, the tests often pigeonholed me as they focused on my deficits instead of my abilities. Based on my lived experiences, I am determined to prevent other students from experiencing similar situations.

**Recommendations for Classroom Instruction**

To support the academic excellence of students with dyslexia, educators should consider developing enrichment programs. Thus, my recommendations for educators are based on my own lived experiences of navigating the educational systems and evaluating theoretical and instructional models of language and literacy. The first recommendation is understanding that in some cases students who avoid reading or
misbehave may exhibit some of the characteristics of dyslexia, which impact their self-esteem and schooling. Therefore, teachers may want to consider identifying the root causes of withdrawal from reading activities and acknowledge that authentic literature may not be beneficial in the beginning stages of learning to read for this population.

The first recommendation is to provide students with (1) high-quality instruction that enables students with dyslexia to become academically independent starting in elementary school, and (2) a venue to voice their concerns and limitations through individual or group counseling. In reference recommendation number one, instruction should focus on fostering understanding of the phonemic sound structure of the American-English language through the use of PCP (Wolf, 2007; Robinson, 2013; Robinson, 2014; Robinson, in press). I believe it may be beneficial if students are not only exposed to systematic and explicit instruction at an early age (e.g., elementary school), but also exposed to the nature, prevalence, manifestations, and treatments for dyslexia, which may promote critical consciousness (e.g., high school). The second and final recommendation is to provide instructional techniques designed to develop higher-level thinking (Cartwright, 2009; Wilkinson, Soter, & Murphy, 2010). To reach this level of depth, teachers may want to have students explore the six areas within the cognitive domain (e.g., knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation) and how they apply to their own learning (Pearson, 2009). Overall, teachers play a critical role in assisting students with dyslexia to take greater ownership of their education.

These recommendations are to help build confidence and increase classroom engagement. Furthermore, it is important for teachers to be aware of avoidance techniques that students use during reading activities before they reach a point of frustration and eventually quit. Teachers should not be so quick to place a behavioral label without considering the cause behind their academic withdrawal or frustrations. If teachers are inexperienced or have a strong background in the area of dyslexia, they should consider recommending the student(s) and parent(s) to a psychologist or specialist who can properly diagnose and offer effective remediation approaches for teaching that will build academic independence, self-confidence, and classroom engagement. Recommending parents to visit a specialist could avoid chances of students flying under the radar and graduating from high school undiagnosed and underprepared.
Conclusion
Throughout the article, I provided (1) a short description of my 3rd through 12th grade experiences, (2) instructional techniques that helped me overcome my dyslexia, (3) my pursuit of master’s and doctorate degrees, and (4) recommendations for classroom instruction. I started college with an elementary-level education and throughout my entire academic journey, when things seemed insurmountable, I never quit, but rather flourished. I made sacrifices that positioned me for success after years of tenacity and hardship.

I will conclude with the rest of the letter that Fr. Jeff had alluded to at the beginning of my narrative because it speaks volumes of my journey and the appreciation I have for those that gave me an opportunity as a freshman:

I would like to acknowledge the positive individuals who work with the Project Success program. I would like to thank them for the opportunity they gave me to attend college. They inspired me to chase my dreams, but also not be scared of failure, and if I don’t succeed at first, to get back up and keep going. The individuals also taught me to be proud of my learning disability [dyslexia] and the positive and negative effects of having dyslexia. They also guided me through the challenges that I was faced with during my first year of college.

They were such positive mentors to me that I have made positive strides in my education. They helped me grow mentally and physically toward the man I am today, and the one I will be in the future. To this day, there isn’t anything that is hard; it is just a larger obstacle and challenge that lies ahead of me. I’m writing this letter to thank you for everything you have given me... To all the freshmen in the Project, keep your heads high, and don’t be ashamed of having dyslexia. It will get better after you get over that negative obstacle. Just believe big.

In the end, I feel obligated to pave the way for others. The moral of the story is never give up or lose hope of your dreams, no matter how hard the obstacles or situations are. If you want it, see it and go get it!
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