

## Matthew Cote – Bonus Episode Transcript

Matthew Côté 02:02

My name is Matthew Côté and I am a person with a learning disability. My disability impacts the areas of my brain around phonics and phonological processing, which impact how your brain decodes and encodes different letter sounds, so breaking down the sounds of a word to blend them together to make meaning is something I struggle with. Because I struggled blending letter sounds and decoding and encoding words, I really struggled in my early years with reading and writing. And so, as the kids around me were starting to learn basic words, basic letter sounds and combinations, I very much struggled with that and, really, for me, it took all the way to, like, grade six, seven, and eight before I was reading independently and, because of that, I was a very anxious kid because, while other students may be able to find their way home after school, I couldn't read the street signs. I had things memorized. I could really navigate the world through memorization or through what I was comfortable and familiar with, rather than being able to read to access new information and access new things.

So, at recess, when my friends played Pokémon cards, or Yu-Gi-Oh!, I couldn't play with them because I couldn't read the rules. I couldn't actually engage with what my peers were doing. When they were reading Percy Jackson when I was in grade five and six, I wasn't reading then so I couldn't talk about that with them, or engage with them. And so, it really was a big struggle because I grew up feeling very isolated and alone because I felt like I was the only one who couldn't read. I was the only one that was struggling with this.

[music fades out] Help arrived when I was in grade five. I was diagnosed with my learning disability then and I got my first piece of CEA technology – the government technology to school boards for students with disabilities that need other tools to help them with their learning. And so, mine came with a program called Kurzweil, and it was a text-to-speech program, so it would read things to me. And I remember, when I got it, my class was doing a project on ecosystems and I was struggling really hard with it 'cause it was a lot of reading and research and Googling at the time, because it was just early access of the Internet in those days. But my mom, who was a big help in my life, got me a tutor, and she made it known to the tutor that she wanted me to do all of this with my technology for the first time.

And it was hard. It was probably 20 or so hours on a fifth grade project—more than you would think—but that was due to the speed that I needed to read everything in, and learning how to use my technology for the first time. And I would say, at 10 years old, 11 years old, that was the first project I had that really actually showed what I knew because then I could actually fully read and understand what I needed to put in the different categories. I could work with my tutor and she would scribe or type and help really capture all of my thinking, because my disability affects my reading and my writing. It's that encoding piece, too, of putting those letters together to form words, to write things out, and so school was really frustrating until I got my technology because I'd try so hard to communicate the answer, but I knew what the writing meant but, unless you spoke Matthew, you didn't know what it meant for yourself. And so, it was very hard for me.

[music continues] The first project opened my own eyes to believing in myself, too, because it was like, "Wow, even though it took a long time, I have something that I can actually look back on and be proud of, of my work." This continued through grade six, where my mom, who saw such a big difference out of that project, was like, "Okay, you have to go to the SSC—the Student Support Centre—and scan your work, get your things-- like, take time out of your own learning to make the learning work for you." [music crossfades to gentle electronic music] She didn't want that anymore, so she fought with my

school and she got me set up with a big desk, a printer, a scanner – all of that in my classroom so I could access the learning right in my classroom, and my teacher was quite accepting of it. He made sure the students knew this was for me. He made sure I had time and space when I needed to get my work scanned, and it really helped me start to believe in myself and start to accept my own differences. Even if I didn't still, at grade six, know why or how I was struggling with these things, it was evident that they helped me and it was nice to have somebody that didn't want to make me feel different for it. [music fades out]

[bubbly electronic music] A big part about it was up, until that point in my learning experience, I didn't ever feel like I fit in with the other kids with learning. I knew I was struggling. I knew I was behind. I knew I didn't have as easy of a time and, at that time, in grade six, I was doing community theatre and our school, actually, we did theatre within our school. We did, like, a big Christmas concert and our class got Kwanzaa, and my teacher celebrated Kwanzaa and so we rewrote the words to Soulja Boy to be Kwanzaa Boy and we did it for our school, and then we actually got asked to go and do it at the Mayor's at the City of Markham, and when they were rehearsing, I was in the back, catching up on work because I was a part of, like, the school-wide play, not our little section, and I'd repeat people's lines. Like, if they needed a line, I was the line guy, even though I wasn't asked, because I had it all memorized because I have a really good auditory memory.

But I couldn't read the lines, and so I couldn't do the script part, right? [upbeat electronic music] And so, my teacher, afterwards, is like, "You got this. Why didn't you want to be a part of this?" And I'm like, "I was too nervous with the script," and he really helped me believe in myself that I could have gone and done that. I could have been a part of that. And he made me feel seen to the class because, when people would forget a line, he's like, "Matthew's got your lines. You gotta get your lines, too." And it was almost always the other way. "Matthew, why don't... You've got it. They've got it. They understand, and now it was the other way, so he helped me kind of believe in myself by pointing out the things that I could do well. It was the first time somebody made me see something I could do well. And my mom continued to push this outside of school, too, making sure I was continuing in theatre, continuing to do things outside of school because school was hard.

[music continues] And so, the teachers in my life started to support me and started to understand, as they saw along my journey, the things that I could do. One teacher that made a difference in a big way for me would be in grade eight. My teacher, we were doing projects and I don't know if he did it because of me, or if it was just a project that I really resonated with, but we had to do PowerPoints with no words. We had to research a global issue and present it to the class, but with animated PowerPoints on it. [music fades out]

So, it was like cool learning that we had to do, but it played right into my strength of presenting and talking and not relying so much on that reading component and that research and that typing. [gentle electronic music] Anything I needed to write or say, I could make little bullet notes for myself and just anchor my presentation around that, and he would work with me after school or before school and he would do that with all the students, and so it didn't feel different. I didn't feel other. It wasn't about going out of the room to get help. Help was right there for me.

And, even at that age, when I'm struggling to read and write and navigate the world, having those people there to help support me and help believe in me made a huge difference. I am 27 years old right now. I'm currently working on my Masters at Ontario Tech University and any academic reading that I do-- I've graduated from Kurzweil because it's an older technology. I use Google Read&Write now, but I

still use it to read all of the academic reading. I would say I can read an instruction manual pretty well on my own, but a chapter book, any longer text, I still struggle to read and decode on my own. [music fades out]

The way that it was explained to me by the psychologist, when I got my second psycho-ed assessment at 17, was by the time I finished reading a sentence, my brain has spent so much energy decoding each of the words to say them, to pronounce them, or make what that word is, that, at the end of the sentence, I don't need it. [gentle electronic music] So, in big, rich text, it's really hard, still, for me to read and extract the meaning that I need. I excel at listening. I really rely on Google Read&Write to read to me as I follow along, and that is a piece that I've learned as I've grown up, too. I can't just listen. I have to be following along and watching as it goes because it kind of highlights as you read and I still use it every day because it still impacts me in my life.

Recently, I went to the grocery store. My brother is getting married in June and we had to pick up so many bottles of Prosecco, that he needed a specific one. We were, like, buying out different LCBOs and I would go and I had to go to a couple of different ones and, when I get there, I scan the shelves but I missed-- I missed the bottle two or three times. I'm like, "No, Mom, there's nothing there. I don't see anything. I've asked. They don't see it." But it took three or four people to actually help me find the bottle that was right there on the shelf that I probably should have seen in the first place, but because of my deficit in reading, as I'm seeing, I'm like, "Oh, that doesn't say the name of the bottle that we need. It says something else," and, lo and behold, it did. So, there are still little ways that it impacts me every day and new environments still make me anxious when they rely heavily on reading to navigate because I know that's something I'm going to struggle with.

[music continues] Today, I work as a supply teacher with the York Region District School Board for K-8 students. [music crossfades to sparse electronic music] Going through school, I felt very alone and I didn't want other students to feel the way I felt when it came to their experience in school. I was the kid that sat alone on the playground. I was the one who watched the other kids play games, and the one who knew they were different but didn't know how to tell somebody why they knew they were different. And it was for more than one reason but, when it came to engaging with my friends, the biggest part was I couldn't read and engage with the same things they did, and that motivated me a lot, along with my mom, who was a teacher.

[music continues] When I started to do better in school, when I had my assistive tech, my mom actually got me to come and speak at her schools, at her staff meetings as kind of like a, "Hey, students with learning disabilities can achieve," and that started my work in advocacy and that started to make me see, as teachers realized my story and my success and made them believe in their own students, I was like, "I want to do more of that. I want to help people believe in themselves and believe that they can achieve, even if their path to achievement looks different," because my path looked different, but I'm still making my way through. And I feel very grateful to be able to have gotten to where I am because of the people that I've had to support me.

[music continues] My mom has always been my biggest advocate. A lot of the opportunities I've gotten have sometimes been because of my mom, or because she's helped push me to be where I am, still, today. I remember I would come home from school in elementary school and we'd have a writing assignment and I would just be bawling with my mom, and she really had to help teach me how to chunk assignments, how to break things down into parts and steps, and teach me that, even if I'm overwhelmed, I gotta start, [music fades out] and that's something that I take with me into being an

adult and into being a teacher now that, we gotta start. It doesn't mean we have to finish today. And it's about overcoming that anxiety and that worry, that fear, and knowing that it's going to be okay. And, if I didn't have that then, I wouldn't be where I am now.

[glitchy electronic music] When I take jobs in classrooms and I go and I'm supporting kids, they often let me know what students may be on technology and things like that, and so I often disclose, typically, to the whole class, as soon as attendance comes out because I have to read a bunch of names that I don't know how to pronounce to a bunch of kids, and, typically, I remember, being a student, when people said your name wrong, you'd giggle and you'd have a laugh and that's okay, but when I disclosed to the class that, "Hey, I have a disability in reading. It impacts how my brain breaks letter sounds, so if I say your name wrong, I'm sorry. Tell me how to say it," and that typically gets us off to a good foot.

And then, students have come up to me themselves and they either disclosed, "Oh, I have a hard time with reading too. I'm not so good at it," and it starts a conversation and it gets my foot in the door. Recently, I had an LTO title—a long-term occasional position—at a school in Markham, and one of the students there had dyslexia, and when they found out that I had a disability myself, they were blown away. They couldn't believe it. They're like, "What? And you're a teacher, and you've made it here?" And parents were of the same thing, and I remember the parents coming up to me and saying, you know, at parent-teacher interviews, "You're the first teacher who makes them feel seen. You make them feel like they have a chance, and there's so much they can do. They'll run marathons for you, Mr. Côté." And I'm like, "I'm not asking them to," but, like, that's heartwarming to feel that you've made just a difference in somebody's life by being around, being who I am, and disclosing to them and sharing with them some of my own struggles, that I know I can relate to that.

[music crossfades to bubbly electronic music]. I felt that way too, and I hope that I get to continue to do that as I go through teaching, that I get to meet students, let them see that adults have struggles, too, and adults have faced difficulties in the things they're struggling with too, but it's okay. You've got to find strategies and the tools you need to help you, but you're going to be able to achieve whatever it is you want to achieve. [music fades out]

[bubbly electronic music] I want them to know that reading is one way we engage with the world around us, but it is not the only way. There is so much to be gained from connection and talking that we can't discredit those in somebody's learning, as well. There are so many ways we show learning and there are so many ways we engage in learning, and just because one part is hard for you, that shouldn't be a reason to disengage from it or feel like you don't belong in it. Everybody belongs in learning. Learning is something that's for everyone. And so, find the ways that you need to. They're the tools you need to help you with learning, and don't be afraid to use them. [music fades out]