

# The Ugly Side of Dyslexia - Ameer Baraka's Story

In a keynote at Learning Ally's 2022 Spotlight on Dyslexia, Ameer Baraka, Emmy-nominated actor, author, and dyslexia advocate, gave attendees a dose of reality about living with this learning disability, and how it disproportionately affects children in schools and adults in prisons. Ameer has just released his latest book, "[UNDIAGNOSED: The Ugly Side of Dyslexia](#)."

## Misunderstanding and Shame

As a young black child living in poverty who could not read and write, Ameer Baraka feared not only ridicule from his teachers and classmates, but the wrath of his mother. His grandmother knew education was the best way for him to get ahead, yet by the third grade, he wasn't learning like other kids. He wasn't catching on to sight words, reading or spelling. He didn't have access to words, stories, adventures, and examples of black men who led their families through honest work. Ameer could not see beyond his own circumstances, so he did what thousands of young black boys do when failure abounds – he skipped school, ran the streets, got into fights, and pursued a life of crime selling drugs. No one ever explained to Ameer why he couldn't read. He was spanked and made to feel incompetent and unworthy. People laughed at him. His crimes led to juvenile jail time and multiple felonies. His addiction lasted throughout his adolescence, but the darkest moments for Ameer was the shame of not knowing how to read.

## What We Don't Know

Dyslexia is the number one cause of illiteracy. Thirty million adults in the U.S, six million in the U.K., and three million in Canada are estimated to have dyslexia. It occurs in people of all backgrounds. Countless studies of brain imaging tell us that dyslexia is a neurological language development disorder, often hereditary, that impedes our ability to manipulate sounds and letters. The word dyslexia is derived from the Greek word 'dys' (meaning difficult) plus 'lexis' (words or language). Many people do not know they are dyslexic. They will encounter teachers, neighbors, professionals, and classmates who do not understand the disorder, and falsely believe that all people with dyslexia are geniuses, entrepreneurs, scientists, sports jocks, and celebrities. It is really quite the opposite. Many people who cannot read or write are often labeled lazy. The reality is millions of people have learning disabilities. They struggle to complete basic forms like job applications and grocery lists. Dyslexia affects a person's education, social and emotional well-being, mental health, and economic status. It affects relationships and discourages children and adults from accomplishing their full potential.

## Effective Teaching Strategies

Under federal law, public school districts are required to identify children with dyslexia and provide appropriate services to them, however state laws and practices vary. You can find the term 'learning disability,' and 'dyslexia' in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) Statute & Regulations and in Title I. Data show that specific learning disabilities, called SLD, are the most common special education category; specifically, about 40% of all special

education students are identified as having a SLD (U.S. Department of Education, 2017). Of those identified, 80% have dyslexia or a specific learning disability in reading (Shaywitz, 1998).

Advancements in technology and brain-based imaging reveal that our brains are not hardwired to read, but instead activates multiple portions to lay the neural pathways used in reading. Thus, we must be systematically taught to read. Dr. Terrie Noland, CALP advises that early diagnosis and intervention is critical to catch children before they fail. “Reading instruction is much more to distinguish and manipulate phonemes, the smallest units of speech sound that can carry meaning,” she said. “Comprehensive reading instruction must also include sounding out words, spelling, learning sight words, building vocabulary, and reading comprehension.”

Appropriate teaching methods and motivation can impact the learning potential of children with dyslexia in positive ways, including helping them to connect their ideas, thinking critically and out of the box, 3D mapping, and seeing the big picture. Dyslexics use their right brain more than average, which is associated with emotion, spatial relationships, intuition and synthesizing ideas. A proven learning approach for children with dyslexia is to see and hear text read aloud, like [human-read audiobooks](#) that are multisensory. With the right teaching strategies, dyslexics can be successful learners.

### **Taking On Dyslexia in Schools and Prisons**

Even at a young age running the dark alleyways of New Orleans, Ameer recalls wanting to build swing sets for poor neighborhoods. He wanted to help people. After years of feeling failure, Ameer learned what dyslexia was in prison, and why he could not read and write. He was not alone. Many of his inmates were poor readers and writers.

Most U.S. prisons do not screen for dyslexia, and no national studies have been conducted regarding the prevalence of dyslexia among prisoners. One study of Texas prisoners in 2000 found that 48 percent were dyslexic and two-thirds struggled with reading comprehension. A 2014 study by the Department of Education found that about a third of prisoners surveyed at 98 prisons struggled to pick out basic information while reading simple texts.

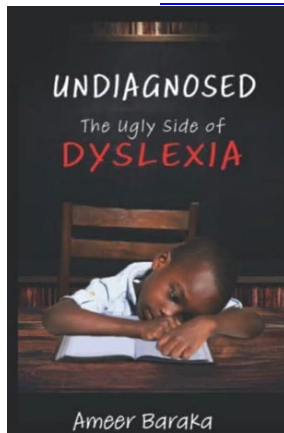
U.S. [Senator Bill Cassidy](#) pushed for screening prisoners for dyslexia, which was included in the First Step Act that passed in December 2018. [See: PLN, April 2019, p.1; Jan. 2019, p.34]. The Act includes provisions that require the Attorney General to implement dyslexia screening programs for federal prisoners, and to “incorporate programs designed to treat dyslexia into the evidence-based recidivism reduction programs required to be implemented” by the statute. Senator Cassidy, a former doctor, encountered many illiterate prisoners while running clinics in three Louisiana facilities. “If someone learns to read, they’re less likely to end up in prison and more likely to be a productive member of society,” said Senator Cassidy. Ameer Baraka gave testimony on his firsthand experiences with Dyslexia at the U.S. Senate Health, Education, Labor & Pensions (HELP) committee hearing on Dyslexia chaired by Senator Cassidy.

### **Committed to Do the Right Thing**

“Many people are oblivious to dyslexia,” says Ameer. “When we fully address it in our schools, we will improve education for marginalized children. We need to understand the enemy so we can stop it from stealing our most fundamental asset, our youth. No one should ever be shamed

for not reading well. When we commit to doing this, we can alter the pattern of failure for millions of children and prison inmates. The ability to read well will lift people out of poverty to enjoy equitable economic prosperity, academic success, and improved mental health. It will reduce dropout rates, bullying, juvenile delinquency, and crime. It will increase self-esteem and well-being among disadvantaged populations. As a society, we can transform literacy by helping all children learn to read and write, and be proud of their unique selves.”

Learn about [Ameer Baraka](#) and his non-profit, Dyslexia Awareness Foundation.



To purchase “UNDIAGNOSED: The Ugly Side of Dyslexia,” [visit Amazon](#) or [purchase direct](#).

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