



MIND AND HEART

A Podcast by Trinity Christian School

Ep 2 | Demystifying Learning Disabilities with Kim Miller

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Jo Wilbur:

Welcome to Mind and Heart, a podcast by Trinity Christian School in Fairfax, Virginia. In this space, we explore our calling to raise up the next generation to be salt and light in the world. Hello and welcome to Mind and Heart. I'm your host, Jo Wilbur. And today I'm sitting down with Trinity Christian School Assistant Head of School for Academics, Kimberly Miller. Kim, how are you today?

Kim Miller:

I'm doing great, Jo. Thank you.

Jo Wilbur:

Absolutely. Thank you for sitting down with us today. Now you are the Assistant Head of School here at Trinity. Can you walk us through how you ended up here in this position, and how you came to pursue education in general?

Kim Miller:

So my why; what is my, why? I think it started in high school. No, I would say it went back further than that. I was diagnosed with ADHD in third grade and I distinctly remember the feeling of being in the hospital, getting that testing, getting that diagnosis, recognizing that sometimes it took me longer to learn things and what it felt like to be a student that struggled in school. When I got to high school, Fairfax County offered this amazing child development program that allowed me to leave my high school for two periods a day and go over to an elementary school. I got to be an assistant and help the teacher. And I distinctly remember working with a group of three students who were struggling to read. I remember realizing that the traditional ways of teaching to read (practicing, asking questions about comprehension, etc.) weren't working.

I remember grabbing Play-Doh and shaping the Play-Doh into a letter and having the child feel the shape of the letter and make the letter so that they could correlate the letter with the sound. And I remember a principal walking by and popping in and saying, "That makes a lot of sense." Something clicked for me. That moment of, I don't know, feeling like I was giving a student hope, giving them a new way to learn in a place where they typically struggled. It ignited something in me. When I went to college, I loved science and I loved this idea of teaching. I found a way to kind of marry that together. I have a minor in biology. I got to pursue

that, but I also have my degree in education as well. And my ideal scenario was to be able to go teach any grade of science.

I've been blessed to be able to do that! When I got into teaching and got my first teaching job in Fairfax County, I was teaching seventh grade life science. I remember I had 145 students, and it was a wide range of abilities within that classroom. A couple of years went by and I started asking myself the question, "What is it that I could be doing better? Where is an area as a teacher that I could grow?" I recognized the students that I wasn't meeting the needs of were my very gifted and bright students. I almost punished them for being smart in that they would finish their work and I'd give them more. And that bothered me. It didn't seem right. So I went back to school, went to the University of Virginia, and studied educational psychology with a particular focus of how to meet the needs of gifted learners; they too have very unique and special needs just like a student with a disability would.

I came to understand that spectrum of learning and that all students have needs- unique needs- regardless of the label of a giftedness or disability. From that moment on, I've just been in this wild pursuit of being a student of students and becoming a learner of them and asking questions and watching, and the best part about it is that I then get to come alongside those students and develop programs to help them. It's probably the most rewarding thing I could do. I did it for free for many years, during a period when I had stepped away from the classroom and was raising my own children. I helped schools that couldn't afford it and built their science programs. I'd go in and help teachers know how to teach those programs. I would run school-wide science days and have classes rotate through.

The passion, whether I was officially in a job or in a role, or whether I was doing it on a volunteer basis, it's that thing I have to do. I tell students that a lot when they're trying to figure out what it is they want to do in life. I always ask that question. What's the thing in your head you can't turn off? What's that urge or desire that you have to do no matter what? Is it painting? Is it teaching? And that's kind of how I came into teaching and have had no regrets. I've loved this job, this career, this privilege of doing this eternal work.

Jo Wilbur:

That's amazing. I love that you call it eternal work because it really is eternal work for the kingdom of God. And I also love something you said, "being a student of students." I know you referenced things like learning disabilities and unique learning needs. I would love to ask you more about that. Can you tell us a little bit more about your background and experience specifically regarding students with learning disabilities?

Kim Miller:

Well, obviously it started with my own experience of learning what that was like. But then as I had children- I learned from my youngest in particular; it took him much longer to learn how to read. The traditional ways I taught my older two weren't working with him and I started recognizing there may be something going on. It took us a couple of years to figure out that there was actually a disability there. So first, in myself, then as a parent, working with my son,

and then coming to Trinity into a place where it was very academically rigorous and there weren't programs at the time here. When you're a parent dealing with it (and the shame of it), and asking yourself, "Did I do something wrong?" That's a lot to be able to grapple with, even with my education background. There was a part of me that thought, me especially, "Why didn't I see this sooner? This is what I'm qualified to do. How come, I don't know how to come alongside and help him? If anybody should, I should." I recognized [those thoughts and thought] No. I started delving into this a lot more and you know, we think of disabilities so often as-students aren't motivated, they're not intelligent or it's a parent fault or it's a teacher fault. And it isn't that. That's where my lens of looking at students that struggle just really widened. They are perfectly and wonderfully made. We all have weaknesses. If we all took these tests that these students [with disabilities] have to take, we would find areas of strengths and we would find areas of weakness. Recognizing that we all have areas of growth, and all have areas of strength, and that God ordains and purposes those areas of weakness. That's a different mindset than often the world has; knowing that his strength rests on us in those weaknesses and that these kids feel that when they're working and struggling and wrestling and seeing themselves make progress. It's a pretty cool thing to watch and see.

Jo Wilbur:

You mentioned the parent perspective on that. And I imagine that would, could be difficult news to hear for a parent. Maybe people don't know how to deal with that. And I think it's encouraging to hear that you've gone through it. Let's maybe take a minute to define our terms for people who perhaps aren't familiar: what is a learning disability?

Kim Miller:

We hear terms like "developmental delay" or "a gap in knowledge", and then you hear a term like "learning disability". A learning disability is a neurological disorder. The most common one that you hear are reading disabilities (dyslexia is the most common), but in general, five to 10% of students in the United States have a learning disability. So there are many ways to go about diagnosing that. There are basic tests that a psychologist has to do. One is an aptitude test that determines: what is their God-given ability? What is it that we can expect them to be able to achieve? And then we test: what do they know on any given day? And that's an achievement test. That achievement test is checking reading and math and some subsets of each of those. And then we compare that.

If we have a student with a very high ability, that IQ, and an area of weakness in that achievement, we start asking some more questions. And often we run more tests even there to determine, is this a neurological disorder or is this a gap in knowledge? Or have they just not been exposed to this and it's going to take them a little longer to catch up? There are differences in all three. In some ways, when they're very young, when they're in preschool and kindergarten and even first grade, you treat it all the same. The interventions look the same, but once you get past those interventions (by second grade typically is about the earliest), we then typically do these types of assessments. Then we start looking at whether this could be something they can't help, that we need to somehow level the playing field for them in. Then we really target the intervention that we provide to help.

Jo Wilbur:

Now, Kim, you've talked about both students who are gifted and students with learning disabilities. Is there any intersection there or overlapping, does that ever happen?

Kim Miller:

Yes. There are many students that we call twice exceptional students that may have an IQ over 130, 135, that we would label as gifted and talented; but also have a processing disorder that would be a disability. We call that twice exceptional. There are students that we would call triple exceptional. They may have dyslexia. They may have dysgraphia and a high IQ as well. And you can imagine the challenge of that, that they know what they're capable of, but they can't get the words down on paper. They can't read fast enough, but they know what they're capable of. These are the kids that really require intervention and a different way of coming at teaching them. These are the kids I love. They're often so misunderstood, but have so, so much to offer.

Jo Wilbur:

Absolutely. That's very helpful. I think there is so much different terminology surrounding some of those issues to help us even better understand. What would you say are some things that learning disabilities are not? What are some additional myths surrounding learning disabilities?

Kim Miller:

That's a great question. I think there are a lot. Oftentimes we think of students with a learning disability as not being intelligent. That is not the case. We can look at them, particularly in a classroom setting or from a parent trying to work with them at home, and think they're not motivated. Sometimes we even think, like I mentioned earlier, it may be an inadequate teacher or a parent that didn't do enough. That is not the case. As I mentioned, a learning disability is a neurological disorder. It's often hereditary. It's not something that they can help, and how we go about addressing it is different in many ways. But knowing that with these students, it's quite the opposite.

They often work much, much harder than their peers. And we need to know that. They often have a hand tied behind their back metaphorically. I always liken it to having glasses. They're the ones squinting in the classroom. Sometimes just small accommodations in the classroom, "giving them glasses" so to speak, levels that playing field so that they can keep up with their peers and can do the rigorous work. We don't want to lessen the rigor of the work. We just have to change the way we go about doing it. We often think that this is only children, but there are adults with learning disabilities as well. This isn't something that necessarily goes away. We're teaching them coping mechanisms. We're teaching them things to be able to work with their disability, to recognize the strengths they can compensate with. And oftentimes I've noticed that if we did nothing, if a child has a disability and they're not diagnosed, they find a workaround. They end up finding their own way to accommodate. And that's wonderful, but oftentimes that doesn't happen. That's the thing that motivates me. I don't ever want a student to have to struggle longer than they need to if there are ways we can level that playing field.

Jo Wilbur:

I know we talked about as an example, just a good example of leveling that playing field, is a student maybe who has dyslexia; filling out a scan-tron for a history test maybe is extremely difficult for them. So the test isn't actually testing them on their knowledge of history. It's how well can they look at the answer and copy it over onto the sheet? So I think that's maybe another misunderstanding- that these students are getting free handouts. Or that it's being made easier for them with these accommodations. But really it's just, how do we assess the students' knowledge of the actual subject?

Kim Miller:

Jo, I think that is an excellent point. That is another myth that you bring up: that we are giving them too much scaffolding. "This isn't fair, that this isn't leveling the playing field. It's giving them an edge up that their peers don't have." And your point is so true. If on these assessments, we're wanting to, as you say, measure what they know and can do. They can know this information, but to be able to just move a bubble from one side to another, when they struggle with dyslexia, with directionality, where we see things from left to right, they sometimes see things starting in the middle. It looks mixed up and jumbled and backwards. In that case, we're really not assessing them on what they know and can do. So I think that's an excellent point.

Jo Wilbur:

How do you think educators in private schools like Trinity, how do they support students with learning differences? Are there different sort of rules or standards for private school versus public school in terms of dealing with students who have learning disabilities?

Kim Miller:

In terms of public schools, there's been quite an evolution with support. Starting with Public Law 94-142, and then it's evolved to the Idea Act (Individuals with Disabilities of Education Act), which basically mandates that children should be taught in their least restrictive environment. And so that's common knowledge in a public school system. A private school system doesn't have access to all those resources that a public school would. In many ways, (particularly smaller) private schools do struggle with their response to intervention for these students. Trinity is very blessed in that they sought to invest in this area early on. They recognized that the body of Christ is wide. It is varied. They recognized that these students can learn, they just need a little bit more support. There's much that Trinity in particular has done, but we all say we can excel still more. We have intervention programs for students with disabilities, for those that need organizational help with Executive Function. And the area we are focusing on now is: what are the things we can do in a classroom? What are the ways that we can have support before we move to the identification of a disability, to try to be able to support these students and intervene early on?

Jo Wilbur:

How do you think the Christian community in general (the church, the body of Christ), how can we maybe do better to see these students who learn differently and just people in general who

maybe have a different way of thinking or learning, how can we support and love those individuals better?

Kim Miller:

That's a wonderful question, and particularly from a biblical worldview. I think that seeing ourselves as agents of hope, seeing ourselves as agents of change and having these students not only view themselves, but us view them, not from a deficit viewpoint, but an asset-based viewpoint. So often we like labels. Labels are easy for us. We put people in cohorts all the time, right? Because it's easy to identify in that way. And we know that there are so many multi-dimensional aspects of every human being; not just academic, but emotional plus gifts and talents. I think starting with: Here are my strengths. Here are the things that I can do. Particularly for a student to be able to say this of him or herself. But for a teacher, for parents to not look at the fact that they don't read fast enough or they don't they do well in math, but to look at all the amazing things they're able to do; how they notice the mundane, how they see beauty and things that others don't see, the way they see God's creation, the way that they're able to articulate themselves. Those are all maybe not in the direct curriculum, but what I would call the hidden or the no curriculum that are just as important as academic standards as well.

Jo Wilbur:

That's excellent. And you know, you mentioned in there students being able to articulate their own strengths and weaknesses. Do you have any practical tips for students who maybe recognize they might have a disability or a learning difference? What's the best way or some practical ways that they could stand up and advocate for themselves and make that known to their teachers and maybe even peers?

Kim Miller:

Even piggybacking off your last questions. These students often come to the table- when we get to the point of testing- with a lot of shame. They don't understand why it takes them so much longer than their peers to do something. It feels frustrating. It feels like there's something really wrong with them. And so first and foremost, and this is a biblical perspective, reframing their thinking of themselves. That it's okay to learn differently. It's okay to see things differently. God didn't make a mistake here. I think that reframing from a biblical viewpoint that we truly are perfectly and wonderfully made isn't just going to happen overnight. That requires teachers, intervention specialists, and parents, all saying the same thing to this child. And as these children break that cycle of failure and start feeling small measures of success, it starts changing- their own mindset changes. The confidence builds, and it effects everything for them.

These are the kids that graduate that I see with the most grit, the most resilience, the most persistence. These are things that we can't teach. Those things happen through experience. This is just one platform that God provides for these children to develop those things. And that's part of our goal. It isn't just academic success. It's that they see themselves the way God does, that they recognize that this grit and perseverance God is giving them that strength to do that. That is huge for them. I also think in a practical sense in a classroom, once they know their

strengths, to be able to start with that with the teacher. To be able to say, I am a better visual learner, it would help me a lot if I could see a graphic organizer, or could you provide me those PowerPoints or provide me those notes? For students to be able to advocate for themselves in that way, but also in the areas that they might need something. Sometimes teachers don't know how to meet their needs and who else to become a better student of yourself and to be able to know those strengths and weaknesses, then helps it make it easier to advocate for themselves in a classroom or in an academic institution.

Jo Wilbur:

I love what you said that, you know, God did not make a mistake when he made that person who has that disability, even though maybe the world can tell us that. And that sometimes those people who have struggled with that disability, they have more grit, more determination, they're harder workers. I have someone in my life who I'm very close to who has a diagnosed learning disability. And she is one of the hardest workers I know, and one of the most creative people I know. She's actually a very successful artist now. And part of me thinks it's because, you know, I look at a sheet of paper, and I can read the words on it. And to me, it's a sheet of paper. She looks at it and she can turn it into a piece of art, something amazing. So I think sometimes we don't give these people enough credit to know that in some ways their disability is actually an ability that we don't have.

Kim Miller:

What a beautiful way to say that. It sounds like that person is an overcomer. And that's what I see with these kids too. There is something so special from the other side of it, from a teacher/administrator side, when you've watched these kids struggle and wrestle, take two steps forward and one step back and walk across that stage, the pride in their face. To see them leave, go to college, develop these careers and see the things that they become and the way that God uses the disability- because of the disability, not despite it- to become these agents of change and these agents of hope and to provide perspective for the world that we may not have. That is a big motivator for those of us that are here doing this worthy work.

Jo Wilbur:

Absolutely. Well, I have goosebumps. I know our listeners do too. Thank you so much, Kim, for joining us today. I know we would love to have you back on the podcast soon.

Kim Miller:

Thanks for giving time for this worthy conversation.

Jo Wilbur:

Thanks for joining us for this episode of Mind and Heart, a podcast by Trinity Christian School. For more information, visit us at www.tcsfairfax.org.