

My name is Tierney Van der Vlugt. I am 14 years old and a grade 9 student. I am going to share with you one of the worst days of my educational career.

It was in grade 3 and my sense of self was about to be torn apart. After a spelling test, I was asked by the S.E.A. how I spelled the word ‘spell’ on my paper. I had no idea, and my page was blank. She pushed me to spell the word out loud and I completely butchered it, spelling it wrong. She then asked me if I was “dumb” because I “could not even spell a simple word at 8 years old. After being embarrassed by the S.E.A. I returned to class and handed my classroom teacher the blank spelling test and she responded by telling me that I “need to work harder” and “stop being so lazy.” I was angry at myself for not being a better student. I was overwhelmed by a gut-wrenching feeling, like I was going to cry and scream at the same time. Later that day, I was pulled into a room by a resource teacher. She asked me to spell every word that I could spell without making a mistake. I wrote about 10 words. She asked if I “was joking” and to use my head.

I went back to class and sat at my desk. My chest was heavy, like I couldn’t catch my breath. I needed to leave. I hurried to the washroom and sat on the cold floor. I felt scared and alone. I began sobbing and shaking as I gasped for air and struggled to recuperate. I did not understand what was happening. I believed that everything that happened that day was my fault. I was a bad student, and I was ashamed.

If I had had access to early screening, structured literacy, and a funded category, this day and many more like it that I have experienced since would not have happened. I did not receive the supports I deserved. I did not deserve to be illiterate.