

Our Children's Literacy is a Priority: No Excuses
Cecelia Davidson, Ph.D. CCC-SLP

Sojourner Truth (1797? -1883) was a renowned African American preacher, abolitionist and women's rights activist. Sojourner Truth never learned to read and write. After surviving over thirty years of slavery, physical deprivation, sexual abuse and emotional challenges she became one of the most influential women of her time. Sojourner Truth was born Isabella Baumfree in New York. She chose the name Sojourner Truth when she recognized her calling from God to travel and preach about freedom and justice (1843). Although of African ancestry, her first language was Dutch. She was one of several thousands of people of color who were enslaved by Dutch Americans in New York. She was forced to adopt aspects of Dutch culture into her African experiences as a result of linguistic and cultural domination.

Anti-literacy laws in the United States (1800's) prevented former African people from being formally taught to read and write. Slaves were considered legal non-persons. As part of the inhumane treatment deemed appropriate for non-persons was denial of education. In its raw form, denial of education meant denial of the right to learn to read and write. Sojourner Truth's issues with literacy were even more complicated. By today's standards, as a youngster, she would probably be identified as having a specific reading disability. When she had opportunities to learn to read and write later in life sounds and symbols just didn't make sense to her. She didn't have patience to learn and the people who tried to teach her could not instruct her with the usual teaching procedures.

Sojourner Truth was a fierce non-reader! Sojourner was a success in her lifetime by the highest standards of excellence. She was a charismatic speaker who was able to hold her own with confidence among the most formally educated people of her time. She was fearless. Sojourner spoke before angry mobs. She raised the issues of reparations for former enslaved people. She was a champion fighting for desegregation beginning with horse drawn carriages and streetcars in Washington, D.C. This dynamic woman recognized the power of language. She used spoken language, her strength, to change the hearts and minds of people in every venue she encountered. Sojourner couldn't read and write but she knew the power of the written word. She dictated her story of enslavement to a sympathetic White abolitionist, Olive Gilbert. The book was published with the help of William Lloyd Garrison (1850). Funds from ongoing sales of the book helped her to purchase homes to support her children and grandchildren and survive as an independent woman.

Sojourner Truth is seldom celebrated as a parent and as an unrelenting advocate for her children's rights. Sojourner was the first person of color to testify before a Grand Jury in New York and win a case for parental rights (1828) when her only son Peter was kidnapped from New York and enslaved in Alabama. If Sojourner, or young Isabella, were a student in our schools today, teachers would recognize her wit, intelligence and outstanding communication skills. Teachers would encourage her

to use her strengths while working on her weaker skills such as decoding written words. Since she was a bilingual speaker (Dutch/English), she may have been placed in English as a Second Language classes or perhaps in some parts of New York State, in a bilingual school. Isabella (Sojourner) would be intimidated by written words. She would need patience and special methods to help her learn to read. We would need to make sure her hearing and her vision were adequate for learning. We would evaluate how she learns. We would develop a program of reading for her that would break down the overlapping processes of reading into small, manageable steps. At the same time, we might give her a laptop computer and software with text recognition capabilities. We would want her to hear text out loud while she worked through learning written symbols. Learning to read would be a challenge. It would require years of intense training, and dedication but the rewards Isabella (Sojourner) would feel from being able to read and write would be priceless. A whole team of professionals working in partnership with Isabella's parents would make literacy a reality. But Sojourner would bring the most important factor to the process, her desire and perseverance.

Hundreds of years after the repeal of Anti-literacy laws isn't it a shame that so many children of color lack basic reading and writing skills? What's our excuse? I can think of a few but it boils down to this. We pass the responsibility for our children's literacy to the school system instead of cooperatively managing the problem together. We consider limited resources as the reason we have failed our children. We don't feel the urgency and necessity for having a community of readers. The soulful passion for immediate change wanes. We allow ourselves to feel defeated and our children copy the behavior. Literacy is a human right and at the core of our health as people. Sojourner Truth might say, "Get literacy stirring. No excuses!"