

**M. COLLEEN CRUZ**




Common Mistakes We  
Make  
When Teaching or  
Parenting  
a Child with Dyslexia

[what they tell us about ourselves]



A large, bold, black, stylized letter 'W' graphic that serves as the first letter of the main text block.

Whether you are an educator or someone who is raising a child with dyslexia, the chances are good that somewhere along the way, you've made a mistake or two. If you're anything like me, you've probably grappled with a fair amount of guilt because of those mistakes. Staying up all night regretting mistakes isn't going to do anyone any good, though. And perhaps more importantly, there are some unexpected upsides to those mistakes if we dare to face them head-on.

A decorative graphic on the left side of the page, consisting of a grey arrow pointing to the right, partially overlapping the text.

Everyone knows mistakes happen on any learning journey. It is through mistakes that we achieve proficiency, if not excellence. However, the benefit to mistake-making I am most interested in is not learning how to do a thing better, but the new angle on ourselves and our beliefs that only shakes out when mistakes are made.

Most of the time, we walk through life unaware of what we really think or believe. We sort of take those day-to-day beliefs for granted until or if we make a mistake that pulls back the curtain. For example, the coffee we left on the counter while rushing out the door in the morning lets us know we prioritize getting our kids to school on time over self-care. Mistakes are a window into ourselves that we wouldn't have otherwise.



## Waiting too long to formally evaluate

It happens to many of us. A child struggles to identify letters and letter sounds. Rhyming is challenging. They take so much longer than their peers to complete almost any task involving reading or writing – from writing thank you cards to reading a short story. We know the child is working too hard and getting frustrated, yet we don't jump to find out what's happening. "Let's wait a bit. Maybe it's developmental. Maybe they just need more time. Maybe they need glasses..." Except we all know that urgency does matter. Research tells us that the sooner a child gets the support they need, the better they do – both academically and socially-emotionally.

## What it teaches us about ourselves

For some of us, feet dragging tells us we are putting something off – there is something we would rather not have firm information about for as long as possible. Why would that be? If we made the mistake of putting off an evaluation that a child showed signs of needing, we might want to explore whether we harbor internalized stigmas around learning variabilities. Stigmas we were trying to protect ourselves and the child from. Perhaps we are worried the student will feel shame or be ostracized by friends. Perhaps we worry about how people will judge us. Did we not read enough to the child? Not teach in the right way? Perhaps we are worried about how a 'label' might change their educational path or future success.



## What we can do

While there might not be something we can do about a particular child who we feel we have already waited too long to begin the evaluation process for, there is quite a bit we can do moving forward. For one thing, we can make it a policy to educate ourselves about or refresh our knowledge about possible indicators of dyslexia so that we can act more quickly in the future. Additionally, we can become vocal about our mistakes, being honest about our own hesitations and what that can mean for a young person in our care. Share what you learned with friends, colleagues, and families. And share your mistake story (while protecting the child's privacy). Research tells us that there are few things more convincing than hearing from someone who changed their minds.



# 2 *focusing on the content of instruction, but not the who or the how*

Unless you're Rip van Winkle, chances are you've noticed that there have been some passionate debates about which instructional methods and content are best for students with dyslexia. And while methods and content really matter, it is also true that the most perfect program or philosophy can fail if the way it is implemented is not thought through and is treated as a panacea – with fidelity to the program or philosophy superseding fidelity to the student (Gabriel, 2022).



## *What it teaches us about ourselves:*

We like research! And there is research on what works or doesn't work for students with dyslexia. Additionally, there is so much pressure from outside and internal sources to get things right that handing over the responsibility to a program or expert advice can feel like a relief. And for many of us, especially those of us who are earlier on the journey, our knowledge base is not as deep on this topic as it is on others, so by relying on a boxed kit or other recommended method, we are more likely to be successful and learn something along the way. That tells us we are learners. But it also might indicate that we could do with a bit more confidence boosting.



# What we can do



The good news is that there are excellent programs that can support academic work for students with dyslexia. However, as Matthew Cruger from Child Mind Institute has said (2018), the best 'program' is a knowledgeable and skilled teacher. While programs can be helpful resources for a strong teacher, they will never replace a teacher entirely. A program does not know the child – what needs to be repeated, whether they do better with games, chants, or lots of things to touch. Advocating for and requesting teacher training is critical. But so is giving them the time to plan, the material and personnel resources needed, and a realistic number of pupils to allow for tailored instruction.



# 3 Underestimating the volume of reading needed for success

When something is hard, humans tend to avoid it. However, there's a Catch-22 that applies to this. For that thing to get easier, we need to do it a lot. Without a mighty big carrot to attract us, we will only engage in that thing when we must. So, for many of us, there can be an acceptance that people with dyslexia just might not become readers. Or if they don't, it's understandable. It's a compassionate position and a comfortable one. To truly move into the phase where reading is not effortful and into fluency and enjoyment, the volume of regular reading must be high. When students want to read something, they are more likely to read more. The more they read, the better they get. So much so that a high level of reading volume can even compensate for achievement differences between those who are economically disadvantaged and those who are not. And less reading can wipe away some of the advantages the economically privileged have when it comes to academic achievement.

## What it teaches us about ourselves:

We are compassionate and want the children in our care to feel good about themselves and enjoy their time. It also tells us that we might not put as much emphasis on softer measures like book enjoyment or the number of books read under the covers at night. For some of us, the finish line was simply ensuring this child was able to read. If they don't like reading, it might remind us that knowing how to do something important doesn't have the same value if you avoid doing it.



# What we can do

It's great to know that the actions for this mistake are amongst the most fun to make up for. Research tells us that students can begin making gains from the volume of reading with as little as 15 minutes a day. But the real exponential growth begins at over 30 minutes a day. Knowing that we want to make reading as irresistible as possible. We want to find out what texts the young reader craves, and if they don't yet like reading, what they enjoy in their day-to-day, that we can find books connected to is a great place to start. Literally, everything humans have a fondness for has fiction or nonfiction texts written about it.

We also need to get over any elitist beliefs about what we perceive as being worthy of reading. Does the kid want to read it? It's worthy! Graphic novels, series books, horror, picture books, fact-filled nonfiction books, biographies of pop culture icons, gamer magazines and joke books are all candidates. Fill the shelves and let them loose. Coach into their reading – reminding them to apply the decoding and comprehension strategies they know, but also be sure to give them autonomy too. Few things are as enticing as leaving books you know a kid will love lying around for them to find or letting a kid stay up late to finish a chapter.

No matter if you've made one or no mistakes on this list (I've made them all), the chances are good that you will likely make a new one sometime in the future. If or when that happens, remember that mistakes are more than just part of the learning process. They are a window into our hearts and a road map to what comes next. ■



# References



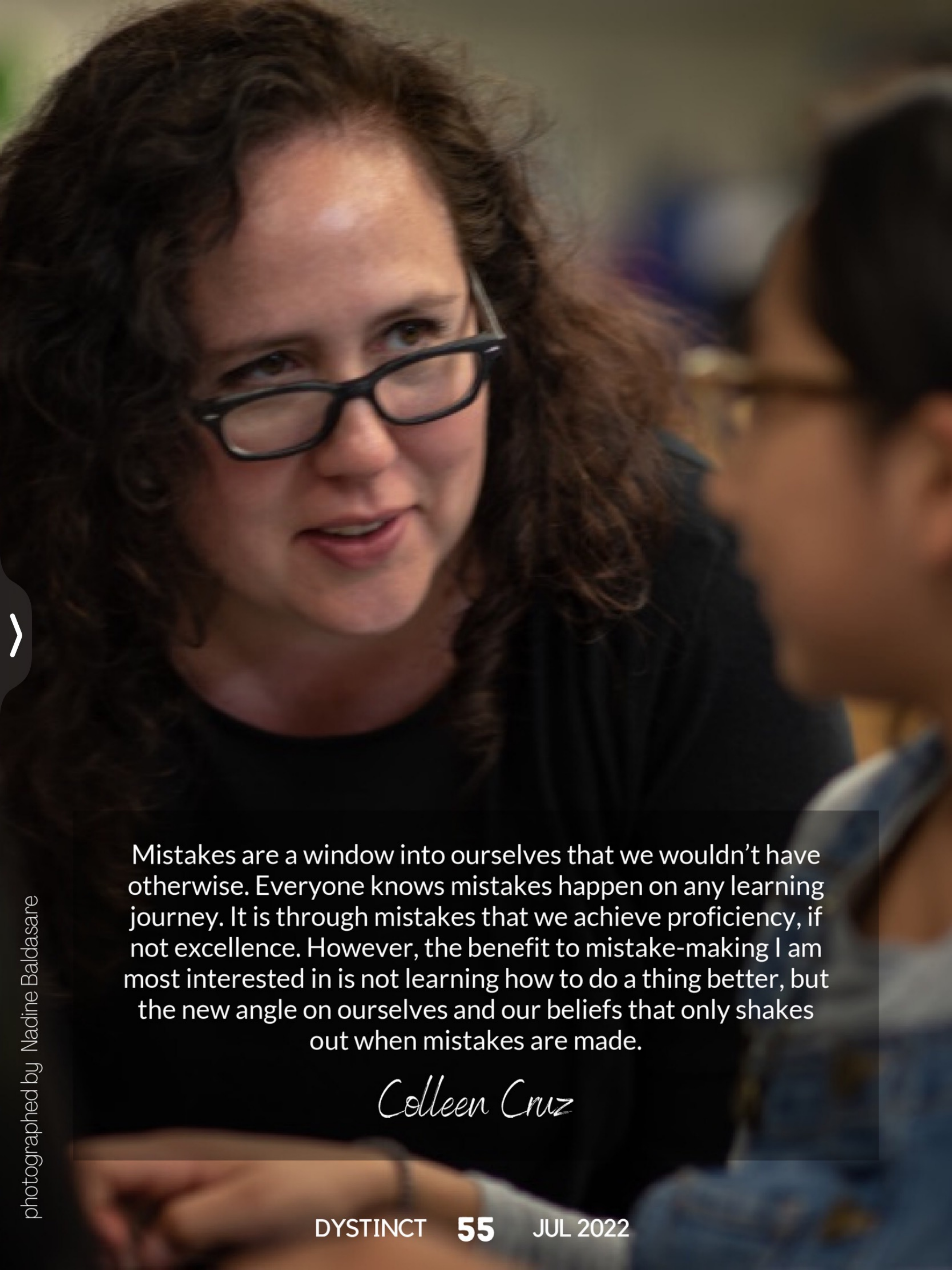
*Dr Matthew Cruger, Clinical Neuropsychologist at the Child Mind Institute, speaking at the Exploring Dyslexia Institute, Teachers College, Columbia University, October 28, 2019*



*Dr Rachael Gabriel, Professor of Literacy Education - UConn Reading & Language Arts Center YouTube video called "EdReports is not my gatekeeper".*



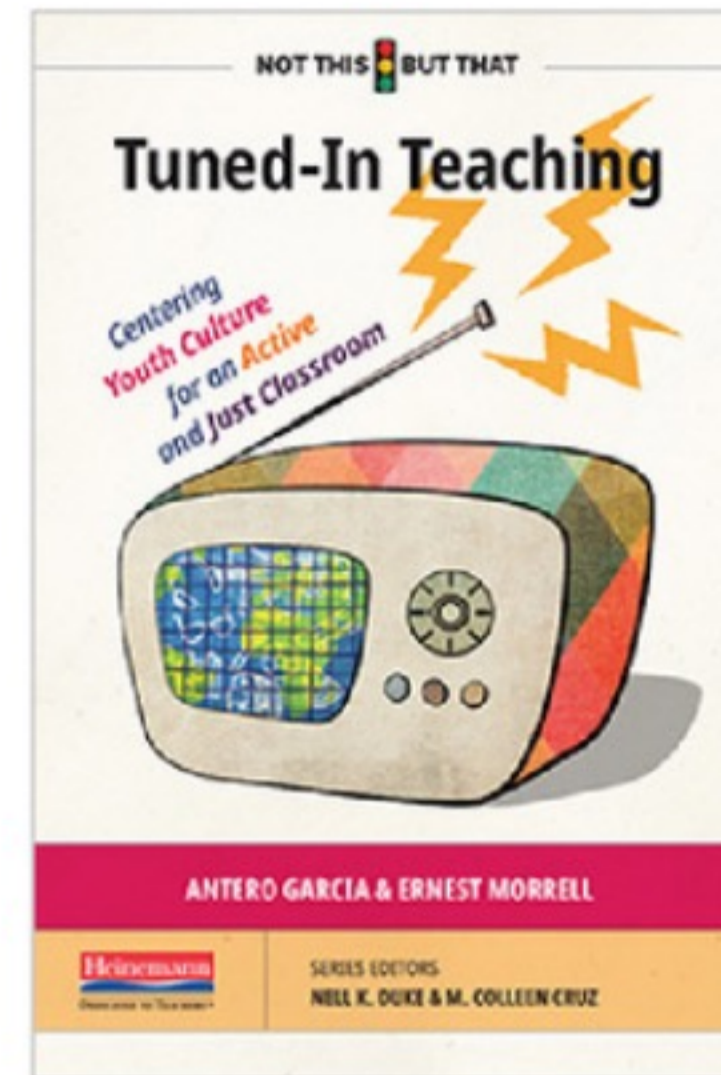
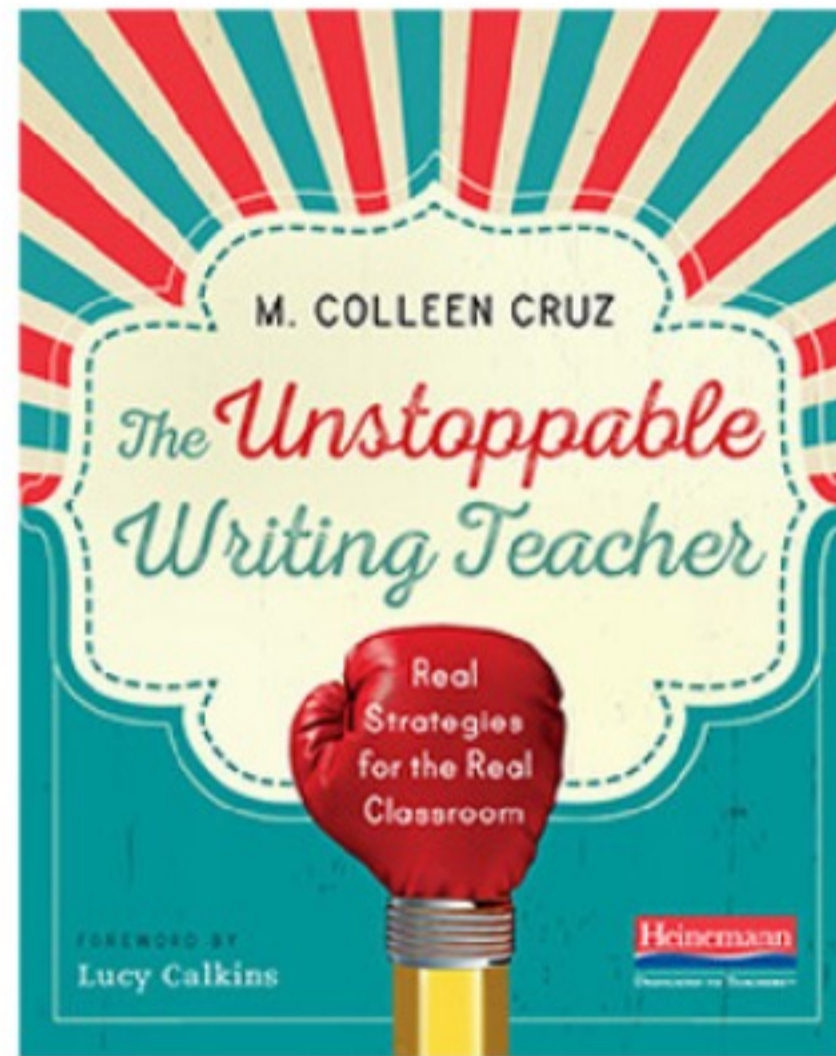
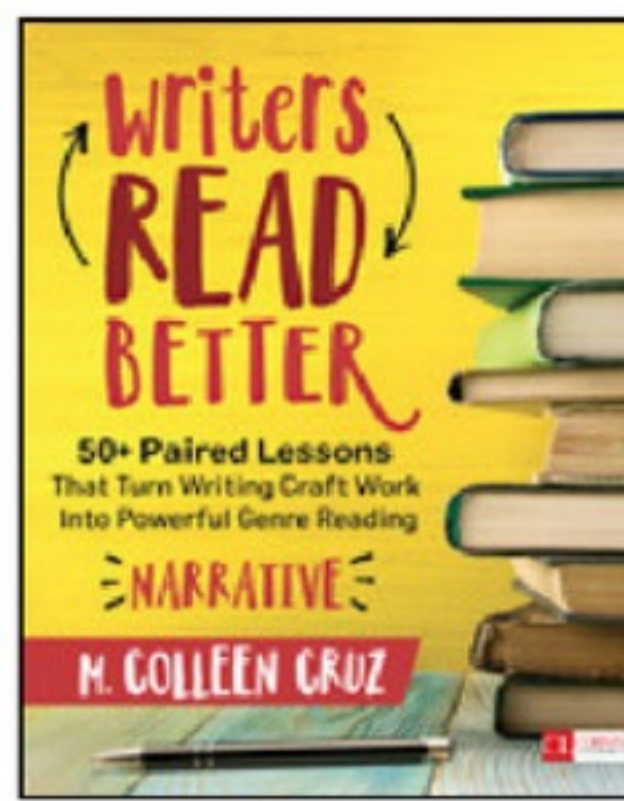
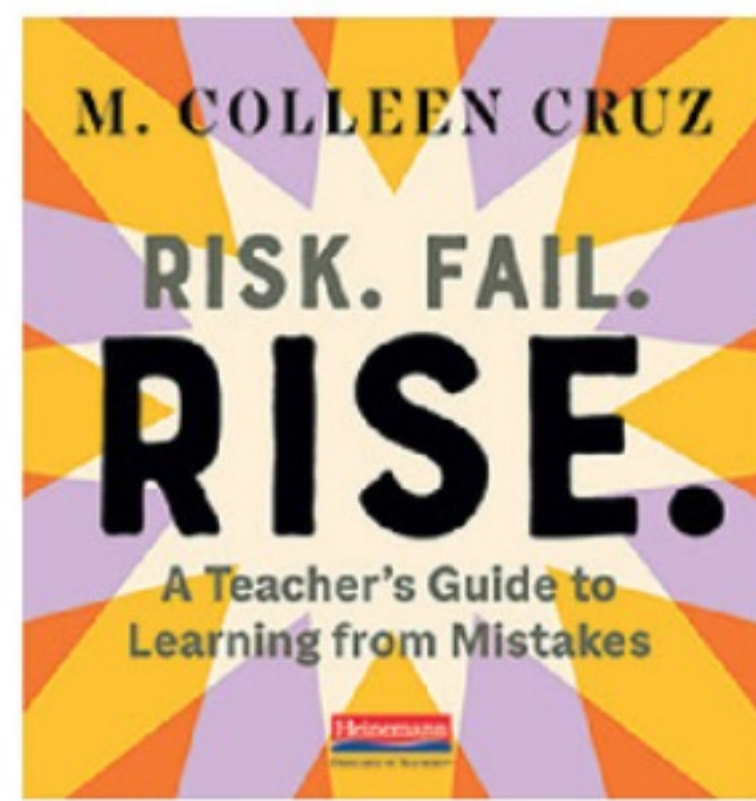




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Colleen co-edits the Not This But That series with Nell Duke - a popular series of books that pairs research and practice.



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M. Colleen Cruz is a fierce advocate for the students and teachers with whom she shares her passion for accessibility, twenty-first-century learning and social justice. An educator with over two decades of experience in both general education and inclusive settings, Colleen is also the author of several books for teachers and co-edits the Not This But That series with Nell Duke - a popular series of books that pairs research and practice.

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