

Ideas for Teaching Junior High Students With LEARNING DISABILITIES

By Renee K. Coffee

"Our next unit in English deals with the short story."

Dan raised his hand. "What's that, Mrs. Coffee?"

"It's part of our literature study. We will read stories and discuss them in class."

A number of my students looked panic-stricken. Two boys put their heads on their desks and tuned me out for the rest of the class period.

In the 16 years I've taught, I've had a few students with serious learning disabilities. But this year five of my eight ninth-grade students are learning disabled (LD).

Many articles and books offer suggestions for teaching learning-disabled students at the elementary level. But very little help is available for teachers at the junior high and high school levels.

I am not a specialist in learning disabilities. But in my search for ways to help my problem learners, I have found a number of ideas that may help other teachers with learning-disabled students in their classrooms.

Some of the ideas can be easily adapted. Others will take a lot of time and energy. Some will work well in your classroom, others may not.

Whatever you do, don't approach the list all at once. Try one idea at a time. If it works, fine. If not, try something else.

Here are some suggestions for dealing with learning-disabled junior high students:

Reading Assistance

If students have not learned to read well by the eighth or ninth grade, they should be referred for clinical help. It is not too late for them to learn. However, it will require more concentrated clinical

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work than most classroom situations can accommodate.

If learning-disabled students lack prior reading skills, they will be unable to get content information from books. They will need accommodations such as recorded books, shorter or simpler reading assignments, or other ways to get information. In many places, certified learning-disabled students can receive recorded textbooks and other materials from libraries for the blind.

Class Scheduling

1. If possible, schedule the most difficult subjects early in the day.
2. Seat learning-disabled students next to a child who can help them.
3. Don't seat LD students together.
4. Keep them away from distractions such as window areas and doors.

Delivery

1. Don't try to write on the blackboard and speak at the same time. But do learn the skill of explicit chalk talk while giving structured directions.
2. Get everyone's attention before giving instructions.
3. Vary your voice tone and pitch.
4. Speak slowly and use short sentences

when giving instructions. After asking a question, pause before calling for a response. Each class member must formulate an answer since no one knows who will be called upon.

5. Avoid calling on LD students unless they raise their hands. Refrain from putting any student "on the spot."

6. After an answer is given, give time for students to consider a response before you make a comment.

Assignments

1. Write assignments in the same place on the chalkboard each day.
2. Insist that students copy their daily assignments on a special sheet. Use copy-buddies for students who can't write correctly and/or fast enough.
3. Base the number of problems assigned to each student on his or her ability.
4. Sign contracts with students. Outline the specific requirements for each letter grade. Then let students choose the letter grade they want to earn.

Lectures/Instruction

1. Write each day's class objectives on the chalkboard. Some teachers like to have their students copy the objectives in a notebook.
2. Use overhead transparencies, charts, maps, and pictures as often as possible. Explain or discuss each item, then allow the students enough time to copy it before proceeding to the next part of the lesson.
3. Provide typed notes instead of requiring students to copy everything from the chalkboard. To keep students involved, leave occasional blanks for

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COMING EVENTS

JUNE - SEPTEMBER 1991

**K-12 Social Studies Curriculum Guide
Workshop (Orlando, Florida) June 10-28**

**9-12 Science Curriculum Guide
Development Workshop
(Orlando, Florida) June 10-28**

**Grade Five Bible Activities Workshop
(Portland, Oregon) June 10-28**

**NAD Union Directors of Education
(Portland, Oregon) June 13-14**

**Joint Meeting, NAD Board of Education,
K-12, Board of Higher Education,
Public Affairs & Religious Liberty
(Portland, Oregon) June 17-18**

**NAD Commission on Accreditation
(Silver Spring, Maryland) August 5**

**NAD Union Directors of Education
(Calgary, Alberta) September 11-13**

**Elementary Science/Health
Steering Committee
(Denver, Colorado) September 23-27**

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⁴ D. L. Share, T. E. Moffitt, and P. A. Silva, "Factors Associated With Arithmetic-and-Reading Disability and Specific Arithmetic Disability," *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 21:5 (1988), pp. 313-320; K. D. Muth, "Solving Arithmetic Word Problems: Role of Reading and Computational Skills," *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 76 (1984), pp. 205-210; J. D. Perry, J. Guidubaldi, and T. J. Kehle, "Kindergarten Competencies as Predictors of Third-grade Classroom Behavior and Achievement," *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 71 (1977), pp. 443-450.

⁵ Rotham and Cohen.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ D. T. Wambsgans, "Being Successful With Dyslexia," *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 23:1 (1990), pp. 9, 10.

⁸ J. K. Brobeck, "Teachers Do Make a Difference," *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 23:1 (1990), p. 11.

⁹ Ellen G. White, *Counsels to Parents, Teachers, and Students* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publishing Assn., 1943).

¹⁰ Joyce Steeves, "Make Math Multisensory: A

Plea to Math Teachers," *Perspectives on Dyslexia* (A periodic publication of the Orton Society), 4:2 (1979).

¹¹ National Council of Teachers of Mathematics, *An Agenda for Action: Recommendations*.

¹² L. M. Kennedy and S. Tipps, *Guiding Children's Learning of Mathematics* (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1988).

¹³ M. N. Suydam, "Research Report: Manipulative Materials," *Arithmetic Teacher*, 31:5 (1984), p. 27.

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important key words.

4. Break up science demonstrations,

lectures, and movies into smaller parts. Give students a chance to respond to what they have learned. For instance, after showing the first part of a movie, turn on the lights and discuss one or two important points. During demonstrations, have students practice the first step in a math problem before going on to the next step.

5. Use frequent repetition and review. Summarize concepts.

6. Schedule group activities. Learning-disabled students benefit from interacting with other students. They will feel freer to participate in a small group.

7. If the class takes turns reading aloud, allow students to choose whether to participate when it is their turn to read. If this isn't feasible, tell LD students which paragraphs they will be assigned so that they can practice ahead of time.

8. Use real-life illustrations with which students can identify.

9. Give lots of praise and encouragement. Reward both *effort* and *progress*.

Homework

1. Before assigning homework, be sure the LD student can do it. Tailor the amount to the student's abilities. Use negotiable time segments instead of fixed amounts.

2. Insist that all homework be done on time. When students get behind, they become overwhelmed. And they get caught in a vicious cycle that results in discouragement and failure.

3. Allow students to highlight important points in the textbook.

4. Tape record each chapter, story, or poem that you assign for reading. Let the students choose whether to listen to material or read it.

Grading/Testing

1. Write comments on students' papers—not just grades.

2. Tell students exactly what they need to know before each test.

3. Read test questions aloud. Before each test, I invite students to join me at a table. I read through the test question by question, allowing time for them to write their responses. If students would rather not be singled out this way, I offer to read the test at lunch or after school.

4. Let students tape their answers to test questions. This is especially helpful for essay questions.

5. Give many smaller tests, rather than one large one.

Conclusion

Finally, make concessions for those who have a hard time learning. Don't expect LD students to "toe the line" with the rest of the class. Offer alternative projects and activities. Do what you can to relieve their stress and make learning

easier. Keep experimenting with a variety of new approaches and ideas. And don't give up! □

Many of the ideas presented above were included in a workshop presented by Susan Winters at the Orton Dyslexia Society convention in Dallas, Texas, November 1989.

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TEACHING THE OLDER STUDENT WITH LEARNING PROBLEMS

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Common-sense syllable division can become automatic if taught directly.

In content area classes, every teacher must emphasize the vocabulary of the courses being taught, although LD students will need more direct and individualized instruction. For example, social-studies teachers can identify word roots that are useful in their particular discipline. The root *arch* (meaning "leader" or "ruler") is useful in helping students understand words like *anarchy*, *monarchy*, and *oligarchy*. Math instructors can teach the meaning of word parts such as *meter*, *tang*, and *circum* that help students decipher many words and understand important concepts. Science teachers have even more opportunities to teach word roots.

Alternative assignments can permit LD students to learn and retrieve information in ways that do not depend on their reading and writing ability. Assignments in every class should provide flexibility in the choice of materials and activities to be completed. Class discussions are much more interesting for everyone if materials come from a variety of sources.

Becoming a Diagnostician and Clinician

Like younger students, many adolescents have not made the shift from "learning to read" to "reading to learn." Older LD students often experience difficulty with those elements of American English that do not follow conventional patterns. For example, letter combinations in words borrowed from other languages such as "kn" in *knowledge*, "gn" in *gnaw*, and "gh" in *laugh*, "ch" in *psychology* or *machine*, confuse the LD student. These students need to learn

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which letters are "silent" in these instances and which letter combinations have "place value." These characteristics can be taught directly through the use of a variety of techniques.

Teachers and psychologists often view a student who misreads or misspells a word with one of these combinations as having had "too much phonics." In fact, such students have had too little phonics, and their teachers have too little knowledge of the nature and history of language.

Older students may have difficulties with both long and short words. Short words are more likely to have come from earlier forms in the language, or they may have been borrowed from other languages. They may not follow the expected sound/symbol correlations. *Was*, *of*, and *women* are examples of such words.

Secondary students who fail to read adequately are apt to have a language learning disability rather than a lack of opportunity or inadequate motivation to learn. Teachers of such students need to study in some depth the biological basis of learning disabilities, information processing, memory, speech and language development and pathology, as well as the logic and history of the language.

Learning disabilities and differences are often misunderstood. Knowledge, understanding, and expertise in many disciplines are required. Teachers must become lifelong learners, constantly experimenting with new ideas and approaches.

Teachers who have used the same techniques successfully for a number of years may have difficulty understanding why certain students don't thrive under traditional instruction. Teachers often fail to understand the problems of LD students because most of them were excellent students who experienced little difficulty in school.

To make a difference in the lives of students with learning disabilities, teachers must develop a diagnostic mind-set. They might say to a student whose homework is always late, "Let's look at your math assignment, and see if we can figure out why it's so hard for you," rather than nagging the student about uncompleted work or making threats about the number of points that will be deducted if materials are not

turned in on time.

Teachers have a responsibility to help each student learn, not just those students who are easy to teach. The following text sums up the teacher's sacred obligation: "Verily I say unto you, inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me" (Matthew 25:40). □

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REFERENCE

Council on Scientific Affairs, 1989. "Dyslexia," *Journal of American Medical Association* (April 1989).

OF INTEREST TO TEACHERS

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second largest racial group, with 12.1 percent (up 0.4 percent from 1980), followed by Hispanics (9 percent, compared with 6.4 percent 10 years ago), and Asians and Pacific Islanders at 2.9 percent (up from 1.5 percent), Eskimo and Aleuts (0.8 percent, up from 0.6 percent). Some 3.9 percent of Americans classify themselves as "other."

A Flood of Standardized Tests

Schools in the U.S. are drowning in a sea of standardized tests, at a cost approaching \$900 million per year. At some grade levels, students are required to take as many as 12 tests a year mandated by their state or district, according to the National Commission on Testing and Public Policy. Nationwide, 127 million such tests are administered annually to students in grades K-12, the commission estimates.

From 1955 to 1986, the sales volume of standardized tests and testing services K-12 almost quadrupled, says the national commission, which issued a report early in 1990 condemning current test practices.

Critics charge that test scores carry inordinate weight and can cause students to be improperly tracked, denied access to special programs and scholarships, or labeled as deficient. The tests are said to reflect knowledge of standard English and test-taking skills as well as content. In addition, the tests have come in for considerable criticism for alleged bias in terms of culture, race, and gender. □