

TEACHING

The Older Student

WITH

Learning Disabilities

By Joan Mencke Stoner

Wayne listened dejectedly as his teachers discussed his performance in their classes. As his science teacher laid out his numerous shortcomings, he stood up angrily and stormed from the room.

Twenty minutes later he returned, sliding down as far on the seat of the chair as he could. The negative reports continued, as did Wayne's frustration.

While the others talked, I asked him about his science assignment for the day. He replied that there were some "dumb questions" to answer.

I asked if he had his book with him. He said, "No! It's in my locker."

"Why don't you go get it?"

Welcoming a chance to miss the remaining complaints of his teachers, Wayne retrieved his science notebook. He quickly found the page and the four questions he had completed. When we looked at the next question I discovered that there were two words he simply could not read.

After I pronounced and explained the unknown words, he said, "I remember reading something about that" and thumbed through the chapter to the answer. He wrote the answer in his notebook and completed the assignment with minimal assistance.

When the meeting ended, Wayne's special-education teacher followed me into the teachers' lounge. "How did you know to do that?" she asked.

"Do what?" I responded.

"Help Wayne with his science."

"I guess it's just what I'd do with my own child if he had trouble completing an assignment."

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Cover-ups

Teenagers' incomplete homework, behavior problems, and bad attitudes are often cover-ups for academic difficulties. Teachers must learn to look beyond the symptoms to find the causes.

Four major considerations must be taken into account when working with older students: (1) the affective side of learning disabilities, (2) bypass strategies, (3) teaching previously unlearned or underlearned academic processes and information, and (4) the teacher's training.

Feelings of Frustration

Students remember how particular teachers treat them long after they've forgotten what they learned. They recall vividly the grade, classroom, incident, and teacher who convinced them it was useless to continue trying. One 40-year-old man told of the happiest day of his life being the day he dug a hole at a local cemetery for his third-grade teacher! Another said he became a nervous wreck in school after being repeatedly and unexpectedly hit by teachers as they walked between the rows of desks.

Secondary teachers often resort to sarcasm in their dealings with students. This practice is detrimental to both students and teachers. If a teacher feels frustrated, it is important to focus on the particular student he or she was working with when the frustration began. This is the student whose stress has been "picked up." Breathing exercises, meditation, and concentrating on positive achievements can help to ease the teacher's stress. However, one careless word can discourage a sensitive student.

Students become frustrated and discouraged by failure. When their difficulties are not identified and labeled, they label themselves as *dumb*. Now the learning problem is exacerbated by low self-esteem. (See Michael Ryan's article on page 30 for insights into the emotional problems related to learning disabilities.)

Bypass Strategies

It is important to find ways to bypass the skills that prevent students from succeeding in their classwork. If students cannot read a textbook, the teacher should arrange for the material to be available on tape. Recordings for the Blind offers some services, or the material can be recorded by volunteers or students with good oral-reading skills.

Other strategies that can help the learning disabled student include special arrangements for standardized tests. Administrators, faculty, parents, and students should be aware that students can obtain special accommodations to take both the ACT and SAT by filing the appropriate forms and copies of verification papers.

Providing extended time is another

relate a different sequence of events each time he tells the tale. Teachers, parents, and psychologists conclude that he is either psychotic or a pathological liar.

Variation and Inconsistency

The inconsistencies of dyslexia produce great havoc in a child's life. There is a tremendous variability in the student's individual abilities. Although everyone has strengths and weaknesses, the dyslexic's are greatly exaggerated. Furthermore, the dyslexic's strengths and weaknesses may be closely related.

I once worked with a young adult who received a perfect score on the Graduate Record Exam in mathematics. He could do anything with numbers—except remember them. The graduate student he tutored in advanced statistics or calculus had great difficulty believing that he could not remember their telephone numbers.

These great variations produce a "roller coaster" effect for dyslexics. At times they can accomplish tasks far beyond the abilities of their peers. At the next moment, they may be confronted with a task that they cannot accomplish. Many dyslexics call this "walking into black holes." To deal with these kinds of problems, dyslexics need a thorough understanding of their learning disability. This will help them predict both success and failure.

Dyslexics also perform erratically within tasks. That is, their errors are inconsistent. For example, I once asked a dyslexic adult to write a hundred-word essay on television violence. As one might expect, he misspelled the word *television* five times. However, he misspelled it a different way each time. This type of variation makes remediation more difficult.

Finally, dyslexics' performance varies from day to day. On some days, reading may come fairly easily. However, another day, they may be barely able to write their own name. This inconsistency is extremely confusing not only to the dyslexic, but also to others in his environment.

Few other handicapping conditions are intermittent in nature. A child in a wheel chair remains there; in fact, if on some days the child can walk, most professionals would consider it a hysterical condition. However, for the dyslexic, performance fluctuates. This makes it extremely difficult for the individual to learn to compensate, because he or she cannot predict the intensity of the symptoms on a given day.

Social and Emotional Problems

Anxiety is the most frequent emotional symptom reported by dyslexic adults. Dyslexics become fearful because

of their constant frustration and confusion in school. These feelings are exacerbated by the inconsistencies of dyslexia. Because they cannot anticipate failure, entering new situations becomes extremely anxiety-provoking.

Anxiety causes human beings to avoid whatever frightens them. The dyslexic is no exception. However, many teachers and parents misinterpret this avoidance behavior as laziness. In fact, the dyslexic's hesitancy to participate in school activities such as homework is related more to anxiety and confusion than to apathy.

Many of the problems caused by dyslexia occur out of frustration with school or social situations. Social scientists have frequently observed that frustration produces anger. This can be clearly seen in many dyslexics.

The obvious target of the dyslexic's anger would be schools and teachers. However, it is also common for the dyslexic to vent his anger on his parents. Mothers are particularly likely to feel the dyslexic's wrath. Often, the child sits on

Dyslexics' social immaturity may make them awkward in social situations.

his anger during school to the point of being extremely passive. However, once he is in the safe environment of home, these very powerful feelings erupt and are often directed toward the mother. Ironically, it is the child's trust of the mother that allows him to vent his anger. However, this becomes very frustrating and confusing to the parent who is desperately trying to help her child.

This anger is particularly evident in adolescents. By its very nature, dyslexia causes children to become more dependent on the adults in their environment. They need extra tutoring and help with their homework.

As youngsters reach adolescence, society expects them to become independent. The tension between the expectation of independence and the child's learned dependence causes great internal conflicts. The adolescent dyslexic uses his anger to break away from those people on which he feels so dependent.

Because of those factors, it may be difficult for parents to help their teenage dyslexic. Instead, peer tutoring or a concerned young adult may be better able to intervene and help the child.

The dyslexic's self-esteem appears to be extremely vulnerable to frustration and anxiety. According to Erik Erickson,

during the first years of school every child must resolve the conflicts between a positive self-image and feelings of inferiority. If children succeed in school, they will develop positive feelings about themselves and believe that they can succeed in life.

If children meet failure and frustration, they learn that they are inferior to others, and that their efforts make very little difference. Instead of feeling powerful and productive, they learn that their environment acts upon them. They feel powerless and incompetent.

Researchers have learned that when typical learners succeed, they credit their own efforts for their success. When they fail, they tell themselves to try harder. However, when the dyslexic succeeds, he is likely to attribute his success to luck. When he fails, he simply sees himself as stupid.

Research also suggests that these feelings of inferiority develop by the age of 10. After this age, it becomes extremely difficult to help the child develop a positive self-image. This is a powerful argument for early intervention.

Depression

Depression is also a frequent complication in dyslexia. Although most dyslexics are not depressed, children with this kind of learning disability are at higher risk for intense feelings of sorrow and pain. Perhaps because of their low self-esteem, dyslexics are afraid to turn their anger toward their environment and instead turn it toward themselves.

However, depressed children and adolescents often have different symptoms than do depressed adults. The depressed child is unlikely to be lethargic or to talk about feeling sad. Instead, he or she may become more active or misbehave to cover up the painful feelings. In the case of masked depression, the child may not seem obviously unhappy. However, both children and adults who are depressed tend to have three similar characteristics:

First, they tend to have negative thoughts about themselves, i.e., a negative self-image.

Second, they tend to view the world negatively. They are less likely to enjoy the positive experiences in their life. This makes it difficult for them to have fun.

Finally, most depressed youngsters have great trouble imagining anything positive about the future. The depressed dyslexic not only experiences great pain in his present experiences, but also foresees a life of continuing failure.

Effects on the Family

Like any handicapping condition, dyslexia has a tremendous impact on

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*, *monarch*, 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. □