
The Learning-Disabled Child:

A Challenge for Christian Teachers

John trudged noisily into the classroom. His books spilled over the desk and floor like ice cubes out of an ice machine. His boots, obviously chosen by someone many years his senior, gaped open. One glove was on his left hand while the other was mixed in with the books that had fallen to the floor. As he pulled off his hat his hair flared out like sheaves of wind-blown grain.

Miss Matthews looked up from her last-minute preparations to see John tugging at his green-and-gray plaid coat in an effort to remove it. The rest of the fifth graders entered the room, shouting and talking together. John continued pulling on his coat, finally switching his attention to his boots. As usual, he exchanged few words with the other children.

Miss Matthews did not know John as well as many of her other students, though she had had him in class for almost four months. She had heard a lot about John before he entered her classroom, however.

She had been forewarned that John did not like to work, did not listen, did not know his times tables, and did not

complete required projects. She had often heard the fourth-grade teacher scolding him for not following directions, paying attention, or completing his work.

As the fifth-grade year began, Miss Matthews found that John was behind grade level in reading, did not comprehend or solve story problems well, and was not accepted by his peers.

The teacher can significantly enhance the learning-disabled child's learning experiences by the way he or she manages the classroom and sets the tone for learning.

Though it seemed John was either lazy or not very bright, he occasionally surprised Miss Matthews by making remarkably insightful comments during classroom discussions. His science project, though late and illegible, showed evidence of a curious and intelligent mind. Despite these encouraging signs, however, John continued to have difficulty with daily assignments and written exams.

Sometimes it seemed as though John

didn't know where his arms or legs were, for he would bump into other children, tables, chairs, and desks. No one could ever have mistaken him for an athlete. He was always the last chosen for kickball and other sports. Once, playing kickball, he made a good kick. When his teammates cheered him on, he became confused and ran the wrong way around the bases. Needless to say, this brought only ridicule from his classmates.

John's grandparents, mother, and several other relatives were well educated, and had not had any problems in school. Just what was John's problem, anyway?

If his teacher had been more familiar with the symptoms, she would have known that John suffered from learning disabilities. Like most other learning-disabled students, John had an above-average IQ. He did not have any other discernible handicaps such as hearing loss or sight deficiencies that would cause him to perform significantly below grade level. He had a pleasant disposition and often offered to help the teacher and others in the classroom. John was of average height and weight for his age and didn't look any different from the other boys in his classroom.

Despite these appearances of normalcy, closer scrutiny would have revealed a child who dressed in a disorganized fashion, kept a messy desk, could never find his personal property, confused the days of the week, didn't know right from left, and often didn't seem to hear the teacher when she spoke to him. John also couldn't recall

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the correct words when talking, made inappropriate comments, couldn't sit still, and exhibited very little self-control when the class's usual routine changed.

What Do We Know About Learning Disabilities?

Learning disabilities are really no respecter of persons—even a genius like Thomas Edison was learning disabled. Learning disabilities occur at every income level. We do not know what causes them, though the problem does tend to run in families. Experts vary in their assessment of what portion of the population is learning disabled, with most citing between 5 and 15 percent. About 70 to 80 percent of those affected are boys.

Academic Adjustments for the Learning Disabled

How can teachers deal with a child like John? Upon enrolling a learning-disabled student in his or her classroom, the teacher finds himself with what is termed a mainstreaming situa-

tion. Even though the teacher may not have any special education resources, he or she can do many things to make life much more pleasant and productive for everyone—teacher, student, and classmates alike.

First, the learning-disabled child needs to be tested to determine his or her specific problems. Then he or she

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needs to be given material at the proper reading level. This may mean using Reader's Digest Skill Builders at the appropriate level as well as other suitable materials. It is most important that the material strengthen reading comprehension, since that offers the most

long-term benefit for the student. Reading material must be at a comfortable grade level so as not to add to the child's feelings of failure.

Exactly what to do about the student's oral reading can be a sensitive issue since this has been a monumental source of humiliation in the past. The teacher can try several alternatives. (1) Do not call on the child to read aloud, if this saves embarrassment. (2) Arrange the room into reading groups, and place the learning-disabled child in a group that reads at his or her level. (3) Tell the child in advance what passage he or she will be required to read, thus allowing him to practice at home until he feels confident about reading successfully in front of his peers. The writers of this article have used and experienced all of the above methods, depending upon the situation. A teacher should *never* reason that a learning-disabled child should be treated the same as everyone else and therefore embarrass him by making him read orally just because the class has to do so. The learning-disabled student

needs—and should receive—special help.

Problems in Math

In arithmetic more learning problems will become apparent. Many learning-disabled students memorize the times tables—several times, in fact—but simply cannot retain them. Therefore, they should be allowed to use a calculator. This may take a little explaining to parents, since most grownups attended school when *everyone* memorized the times tables.

Some teachers may worry that the child has not learned the principles on which the calculations are based. To assure mastery, the teacher might ask the learning-disabled student to perform all the steps necessary to solve a problem even though the child uses a calculator. This helps prepare the student for real life where he or she will have to figure prices, make change, and add up expenses or mileage. In fact, the learning-disabled person will probably keep a calculator handy all through life.

Another common problem arises when the teacher assigns a large number of problems. The learning-disabled child may be overwhelmed by the size of the assignment. After all, it takes many learning-disabled students longer to just coordinate their eyes and hands and copy the problems onto the paper. As an alternative, shorten the assignment, requiring only enough of each type of problem to demonstrate mastery.

Conquering Science and Social Studies

Since many learning-disabled students read at least two years below grade level, this makes the traditional method of assigning silent reading and questions inappropriate for teaching them science and social studies. Selecting from a variety of interesting methods and materials will prove much more effective. This may make the subjects more interesting for other students too!

The teacher can present interesting material orally and assign projects or questions for students to answer. Other alternatives include having students read the lesson aloud in class, going on field trips, performing experiments, and asking grandparents or volunteers to read some chapters onto cassette for

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the student to listen to with earphones or at home.

The media and materials should be flexible enough to allow for different learning styles as well as the child's varying strengths and weaknesses.

Skirmishes With Writing

Many learning-disabled students have trouble with written communication, either because of handwriting problems or poor organizational skills. The teacher can allow the learning-disabled student to dictate his or her ideas to an adult or to record his thoughts on cassette. This is especially helpful if the child is trying to compose a lengthy science or social studies report. Oral tests are often more accurate—and less stressful—than written ones for such students.

Environmental Adjustments for the Learning Disabled

Academic adjustments can and do make life much more bearable for the learning-disabled student. However, such students have indicated that of equal or even greater importance to their well being and success is the way they are treated in the classroom by both teacher and peers.

Research has shown that both parents and teachers tend to view the learning-disabled children quite negatively, and they are also less popular among their peers. This is especially true of the learning-disabled white female.¹

In the classroom the teacher can significantly enhance the learning-disabled child's learning experiences by the way he or she manages the classroom and sets the tone for learning.

Bryan found that learning-disabled students had less interaction with their teacher than non-learning-disabled students. The type of interaction was also somewhat different. Fifty percent of the interaction time between the learning-disabled child and the teacher centered on helping the child with academic work. Only about 25 percent of the teacher interaction with non-learn-

ing-disabled students was for academic purposes. The teacher was more likely to interact with nondisabled students to send them on an errand, elicit their aid in organizing, ask them to help with other students, or for other nonacademic matters.²

Certainly no one would advocate that teachers cease helping the learning-disabled student academically. Rather, they should devote some time to non-academic interaction as well.

A Safe Environment

We have concluded, based on the research findings, personal experience, and talking with quite a few learning-disabled students, that in order for learning-disabled students to develop a healthy self-concept, the teacher must develop a safe environment within the classroom. To do so in many cases means that the teacher will have to change his or her attitudes toward these students.

All teachers communicate both verbally and nonverbally with their students. But what attitudes do they convey to learning-disabled children, who are often more "trouble" than their classmates? Do they show that they consider such students to be worthwhile individuals, capable of success? Or do they display low expectations and exasperation when these children do not perform as well as other students?

As William Purkey has observed, the teacher's attitudes become an invitation to succeed or fail academically. Consequently, three basic feelings need to be relayed to students. These feelings are (1) you are of value, (2) you are capable, and (3) you are responsible.

While the teacher's attitudes are a power for good, they can also be a power for evil. Teachers can be disinclined to students by (1) ignoring, (2) labeling, and (3) using killer statements.

Ignoring can come in very subtle ways. The teacher may not learn the student's name as quickly as those of other pupils. Or the rebuff may be more obvious, such as ignoring the child's comments or ideas.

Some labeling may be necessary to convey important information to other teachers and medical personnel, but the learning-disabled child should not be singled out either by words or atti-

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tudes within the classroom. Teacher attitudes toward children tend to become self-fulfilling prophecies.

Without even realizing it, teachers sometimes use killer statements that embarrass or belittle a child. Remarks such as "You're so slow!" "You never pay attention," "How many times do I have to tell you to _____?" "Look how neatly Joni did her arithmetic paper. Why can't you make yours look like that?" make the student feel worthless, incapable, and irresponsible.

Children need a positive self-image in order to succeed. Students who have experienced failure in school already suffer from bruised egos and may feel stupid and worthless. They certainly don't need a thoughtless teacher to reinforce those negative feelings!

Teachers should be invitational to their students. This means that they view their pupils as valuable, able, and responsible. These feelings need to be unconditional and genuine and must be skillfully communicated.

Some skills that will help produce this type of atmosphere include:

1. calling each student in the classroom by name;
2. listening with care to what each student is saying (this may require perception rather than a keen sense of hearing);
3. being genuine—children can see through a facade;
4. maintaining a well-managed classroom;
5. not taking rejection personally;
6. being inviting to oneself, which means that the teacher must consider himself or herself to be worthwhile, capable, and responsible.³

Even the most competent and dedicated teacher sometimes finds that the differences between children result in certain ones making life miserable for others. This problem can be allayed if the teacher sets an example of tolerance and affirmation by treating each child with respect. In addition, the teacher can use a reward system for encouraging pupils to make honest and complimentary comments to one another.

Conclusion

Teachers may ask themselves, When I have so many other things I am expected to do and teach, why should I work this hard for a student with learning disabilities? Perhaps Ellen G. White said it best when she wrote, "The worth of man is known only by going to Calvary. In the mystery of the cross of Christ we can place an estimate upon man."⁴

One of the great functions of a teacher is to give his or her students a "vision of greatness," which inevitably means making them feel worthwhile, capable, and responsible,⁵ as well as academically competent. □

FOOTNOTES

¹ T. Bryan and J. Bryan, *Understanding Learning Disabilities* (Sherman Oaks, Calif.: Alfred Publishing Co., 1978), p. 122.

² *Ibid.*, p. 127.

³ William Purkey, *Inviting School Success* (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth Publishing Co., 1984), pp. 56-70.

⁴ Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publishing Assn., 1948), vol. 2, pp. 634, 635.

⁵ Purkey, p. 35.

MUSIC ACTIVITIES FOR EXCEPTIONAL CHILDREN

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skill. A number of different activities can help polish listening skills. Many of these can be individualized to meet the needs of children with specific disabilities. (See Appendix.)

When using music, teachers should be careful to select compositions appropriate for the child's level of sensory development. "Peter and the Wolf" is more appropriate for teaching elementary students about the sounds of orchestral instruments than a Beethoven symphony.

Music and Language Arts

Good listening skills aid the development of speech. "Even the simplest kinds of sound in speech and music may contain common properties. . . . In music, reference is made to intonation, tempo, accent, and rhythm. Speech counterparts are inflection or intonation, rate, stress, and rhythm."¹³ One means of teaching vocal pitch, rhythm, and tempo of speech, syllabic accents, and intensity is to use chords played on

a piano. Complex versions of this activity appeal to older and/or more able students.

John A. Smith, writing in *Music Educators Journal*, describes ways music can strengthen language arts. Included are (1) using the lyrics of songs to teach vocabulary, word-identification skills, comprehension, and analytical thinking; (2) writing experience stories and setting them to music; and (3) preparing fill-in-the-blank activities in which children must rely on context and "cloze" in order to supply the missing word(s) in the line of a song.¹⁴

Special learners need extensive repetition and positive reinforcement. Basic knowledge such as Bible texts, the ABC's, math facts,¹⁵ and state names¹⁶ can be practiced through music. Concepts about the routes to the West can be reinforced by songs like "The Erie Canal" and "Santy Anno." The role music has played in inspiring workers and setting a rhythm for tasks can be taught by studying work songs and spirituals.¹⁷

Many books have been written about teaching special children. Study of these volumes indicates that it is especially important that teachers follow certain "steps" in the teaching/learning process¹⁸ such as those summarized below:

1. Establish routines and use them consistently.
2. Structure content in easily managed "bites."
3. Keep directions simple and clear. Make sure the reading vocabulary is at the child's level.
4. Provide brief written or taped outlines and explanations.
5. Choose materials appropriate for each child's need(s), e.g., large print books.
6. Emphasize basic concepts, teaching the same concept in a number of different ways.
7. Be concrete; include visual, auditory, kinesthetic, and tactual stimuli.
8. Correlate materials with several subjects and with pupil interests. Utilize students' creativity.
9. Use a variety of high-interest activities within one period; include movement.
10. Carefully select music that will neither over- nor understimulate. Choose songs with "strong, definable rhythms and clear, logical melodies."¹⁹