

Bridging the Gap between the Classroom and Students with Learning Disabilities

How to Help Students with Learning Disabilities Make Good Decisions about their Education

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Mike is a tenth grader at a public high school in Pittsburgh, PA with a large build and an attitude to match. He was diagnosed with a learning disability in second grade, and has never been able to read well or write to the degree of ability he wanted to. Along with his struggle with writing, he finds it hard to understand math word problems as well. He has few close friends because he often picks fights with his peers. Growing up he had learned to become aggressive as a tool to protect himself from his classmates that chose to make fun of him for his learning disability. As he became older, he became more resistant about doing his work or going to school. For him, ditching class was better than possibly being embarrassed again by a teacher or another student.

When he chose to go to class his teacher tried to push him to read for practice purposes, but often when he came to a word that he couldn't pronounce he would stop reading and slam his book shut. His math teacher would often ask him to go to the board to work out a word problem in front of the class and he could always hear his peers chuckling in the background while he tried understanding the problem. His teachers just did not understand all of the emotional and learning struggles that Mike faced on a daily basis. They felt that if he had a learning disability he should try to work harder, and they did not know how to deal with his resistant attitude. Mike's confidence had diminished a long time ago and his insecurities had made him depressed. He did not feel he had any support from home, and he was too embarrassed to see counselors at school.

The school was aware of his learning disability but he refused to go to an "LD" class because he knew he would get teased even more. His teachers had tried helping him in the past but he gave such attitude that they had given up. And so did the director that was in charge of the program at school that helps students with learning disabilities. Every couple weeks the director would try to talk to Mike but he refused to come to

her office. To Mike, the director wasn't anything but another resource for kids to make fun of him for. He just wanted to learn and he wished that a normal activity like going to school wasn't so hard for him. He also wished that everyone would just leave him alone.

Students with learning disabilities face a variety of complicating circumstances, however they all do share many of the same problems because of their inability to understand and communicate some form of information well. The gap between the student's actual intelligence level and their academic achievements create frustration in the classroom which often leads to emotional suffering. Emotional suffering is also a result of peers that make fun of students with learning disabilities. In order to avoid emotional suffering, such as anger, frustration, depression and anxiety, progress must be made inside the classroom to help these students perform to the best of their ability without letting their emotional anxieties get in the way.

Just as with any other student, emotional well being affects students with learning disabilities in and out of the classroom. The problem with students with learning disabilities is that they often get so discouraged by their own negative feelings about themselves that they give up and don't perform well in school. Visible signs of negative feelings that can be seen in an LD student are sleeping in class, not paying attention, quitting when reading aloud, not finishing an assignment, pretending they don't want to listen, talking back, skipping class, or doing an excess amount of teacher errands to avoid being in class.

So the question is how do we prevent this type of resistant behavior in the classroom? These students have to accept their disability and remain motivated to do well in class. The answer to this is a combination of teaching using literacy practices designed for students with learning disabilities and providing counseling services to keep emotional well-being high, which should help keep their academic motivation strong.

Four Person Dialogue

How can Mike gain the desire to make good decisions about his academic career?

In order for Mike to make good decisions about his schooling, taking advantage of the resources available to him is necessary. His resources can be defined as teachers, counselors, and his learning disability program director. Through a combination of his own desire to be educated and the help that his resources can provide for him, Mike should be able to gain the confidence and determination to make good decisions about his education. This includes future plans, not skipping class, paying attention, and becoming motivated to overcome class and emotional obstacles. This four person dialogue will be between a high school student with a learning disability, a teacher, a learning disability program director, and a high school counselor.

Student: I understand where Mike is coming from. Teenagers tease each other all the time, but when you have a learning disability and going to school is hard enough as it is, to get teased about being 'stupid' or 'retarded' just tears you up inside. All the labeling drives a kid crazy, some people take it well and are able to shrug it off, but if you don't have the confidence to begin its like you're being forced into a downward spiral. You start to not feel good about anything anymore.

Counselor: That's where counseling should step in, but when a kid is resistant to even seek help, it's hard to reach out to the student at all. Sometimes the first step to dealing with kids with learning disabilities is to make sure that they can learn well in class and be able to leave school every day feeling that they have accomplished something.

Narrator: There are many procedures that teachers can take to make things easier for a student with a learning disability in a classroom. In some of my classes there's a tutor for LD students but the tutor helps everyone in the class. By the tutor helping every student, other students don't realize that the tutor is an actual LD tutor. Thus, students with learning disabilities can gain the special help that they need without getting ridiculed about it. Another way to look at this problem is to make note of the conflict of discourses that learning disabilities face. A discourse is, "...a sort of 'identity kit' which comes complete with the appropriate costume, and instructions on how to act, talk, and often write, so as to take on a role that others will recognize."¹

A student with a learning disability has two main educational discourses in school. The first discourse is depended on what is expected out of every student in a normal classroom setting. Students are expected to have decent writing and mathematical skills, participate in class, pay attention and remain alert, work

h¹ Gee, Literary Discourse, and Linguistics: Introduction and What is Literacy, p. 526

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those students as 'stupid' or 'lazy'. Many LD classes are paced so slowly that students find it hard to adjust to regular classes that move at a faster pace, so they end up lagging behind in normal classes. Many LD students become upset because the teasing that occurs and their own frustration with themselves lead to a type of negative acceptance of their disability and they give up on themselves. The conflict of these two discourses can be seen when a student skips class, sleeps in class, argues with a teacher or refuses help. There are many signs that are visible, but also many that are not. "I often offer to do errands for my teachers so I don't have to be in class. People think I'm the teacher's pet, but I just don't want people to know that I struggle in school," says Jack, a high school student with a learning disability. The conflict of these two discourses prevents an LD student from learning effectively in a classroom.

Director: I see this pattern in students, how they perform badly in many areas such as school performance, personal character, and lack of attendance to avoid embarrassment. The problem is that teachers need to learn how to teach to an LD student. Teachers often think that LD students just will struggle more because of their disability, but just because they have a learning disability doesn't mean that they are stupid. They just learn in a different way.

Teacher: I have never been taught how to teach an LD student. I always believe that pushing a student to work harder and to practice skills is helpful, no matter what their learning strategy is. Then again, I am not educated in the LD field, and don't know how different learning disabilities learn. Many times I am at fault because I sometimes accuse certain students of being lazy, lacking responsibility, or insulting me by putting their head down. But now I understand that there are many emotional factors that contribute to this type of behavior.

Counselor: Maybe forcing students to see a counselor at school would help. Better yet, mentors or tutors can also do their jobs and provide some sort of counseling for them. Students are many times reluctant to listen to adults but if they speak to someone that is closer to their age, and can relate to them, maybe they will open up. Through time they will develop a relationship, and then a tutor or mentor will be able to suggest seeing a counselor. I'm sure that the student will be more willing to see a counselor if someone who can relate to them suggests it. They can have more influence than an adult who barely knows them at all.

Student: I don't understand why my peers have such a hard time understanding about people that are different around them. I am sure it is a process of maturation and eventually they will understand that learning disability doesn't mean stupid, but until then, I wish I could avoid all of the ridicule. I think that if teachers could somehow incorporate a discussion about this in class would help me and other LD students out a lot. That way other kids will basically be forced to learn about me, and maybe they'll ask me about it later and I can be able to make them understand my own personal struggles. Just like Mike, I like to learn, but my disability combined with ridicule leads me to frustration and I want to give up. I want to be able to make good decisions about my future and education without being discouraged. I feel that if I have the proper support and someone is there to keep me motivated, I could be able to think about my future more clearly. Then I will be able to make good decisions for my own academic well-being. I will decide to stay in class, work hard, and to pay attention. In the end I'll be able to have more respect for my school, teachers, and most importantly, myself.

Sources

1. Delpit, Lisa. "The Politics of Teaching Literate Discourse." *Literacy a Critical Source Book*. Bedford/St. Martins, New York: 2001.
2. Gee, James Paul. "Literacy, Discourse, and Linguistics: Introduction and What is Literacy?" *Literacy a Critical Source Book*. Bedford/St. Martins, New York: 2001.
3. "Classroom Interventions for Children with ADHD and LD".
<http://www.childdevelopmentinfo.com/learning/teacher.shtml>

Note on Method:

The vignette and statements from the four fictional characters and narrator (myself), were based on comments and statements that were said by Oliver High School SOS students during my mentorship in the Spring Semester at CMU, 2003.

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