Teaching Kids with Learning Difficulties in the Regular Classroom

Ways to Challenge & Motivate Struggling Students to Achieve Proficiency with Required Standards

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Dedication

To all of the wonderful educators who have so generously contributed to my bag of tricks over the years, a sincere thank you. To my children, Stacy, Kari, Melinda, and Diana, and my six grandchildren, who always model for me the diversity of learning styles and continuously help me understand the importance of accommodating all types of learners in the classroom. To my beloved uncle, Paul Ginsberg, who throughout his exemplary lifetime, has modeled and explained all I ever needed to understand about respecting individual differences.

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Introduction

Has there ever been a more challenging time to be a teacher? From the relentless pressure to make sure that all students score at the proficient level on high-stakes tests, to the rigorous requirements from the legislation known as No Child Left Behind, teachers and principals are being held more accountable than ever before in the history of public education. Some of you remember when the special learning needs of struggling students were met, to a great extent, outside the regular classroom. These days, we have students at every level of performance, from those who do not speak any English to those who may be gifted. And it is perfectly obvious that there are not enough special teachers available to help. How is one teacher supposed to handle it all?

In order to be a successful teacher for students who are struggling to learn, you need to understand that these kids are not necessarily less intelligent or less capable than the successful students. Many are simply less fortunate because successful students have enjoyed a match between the way their brain processes information and the skills that are needed to master typical school tasks. By and large, unsuccessful students have not. Although many of these kids have been labeled “learning disabled,” a more accurate description is that they are learning strategy disabled. Many have never been taught strategies that are compatible with the way they think and learn. Once we teach them the appropriate techniques, their learning problems diminish significantly.

When the right methods are used, it is no longer necessary to water down content or repeat it endlessly. For example, for many years those students who failed to learn to read with a phonics-oriented program were given remedial phonics. The assumption was that everyone had to understand phonics to be able to read. When we taught outlining, we assumed that all kids should learn it the right way. Now that we understand more about how the human brain functions, we know that rather than remediate, we must work to make matches happen between the content to be learned and the learning styles of our students. When the right matches are found, the message we send to struggling students is, “You can be a successful student!”

In addition to the obvious benefits of learning how to expect and get better achievement from students with learning difficulties, there are other advantages to discovering how your students learn and teaching different kids in different ways. Differentiation shows your students that being different is just fine—something to notice and honor rather than something to hide. When kids learn how to stand up for themselves by discovering and using their predominant learning styles in their schoolwork, the incidents of bullying in any form can actually decrease. It’s pretty hard to tease or ridicule those who are proud of their individuality.

Another challenge that teaches often face is what to do when the powers that be insist that you follow an adopted program by using every included component, and not use outside materials or strategies in any way. Pressured to prepare all students to meet state standards, we sometimes conclude that there is no time available to teach the way we really want to teach. Most teachers would prefer to teach for understanding, not just coverage. Many teachers have given up many of their favorite topics and activities in favor of more traditional approaches, because those seem to be what is expected. Some teachers are actually grieving the loss of what they perceive as their autonomy in the classroom.

And yet some teachers are finding ways to teach through experiential and meaningful activities that are linked to the expected standards. Many wonderful lesson plans are available from dozens of Web sites. Just take some time to browse and see what you can find so you don’t have to always start from scratch when planning new lessons for your students.
I remember hearing a story about a sixth-grade teacher whose kids always moaned that they hated to write. She made a long list of the writing standards expected for the year, tacked copies of the list onto the board, and asked a student to throw a piece of clay so that it would stick to any one of the expected learning outcomes.

The clay chose the standard that said: “The student will write a business letter, using the correct form, content, and punctuation.” So the class brainstormed all the reasons people have for writing a business letter. The students could all relate to letters of complaint. The class brainstormed again, this time to make a list of things they wanted to complain about. Many students were angry over the poor quality of the paper tablets sold at the school bookstore. The entire tablet fell apart when they tore off a page or two. The class decided to write a business letter of complaint to the company that made the tablets. The company wrote back and challenged the kids to come up with a better way to make the product. The kids did some research, wrote reports, and presented their ideas to their principal. A formal proposal was sent back to the company.

At the end of the four-week experience, the teacher put the writing standards back on the board and had teams of kids use markers to cross out those that had accidentally been covered during their business-letter experience. More than 20 percent of the standards had been included in this experience, including proper grammar, punctuation, and format, as well as standards associated with public speaking.

The moral of the story is that it is always okay to use real-life, meaningful, relevant experiences to teach required standards. Teachers all over the country continue to teach through activities their students will remember forever, along with the required standards. Classroom simulations such as running a business, raising money for charities and other relief funds, writing newspapers as they would have appeared in a certain historical period, having school elections for a student council and comparing that process to national elections—all these and more teach standards in memorable ways. I truly believe there is no reason to give up on your favorite learning experiences. The only thing you must document is that your students have learned the standards. How that happens is still up to you, most of the time.

Never lose sight of the fact that a crucial 21st-century job survival skill is a positive attitude toward being retrained, which is a lot like going back to school. Every student you are teaching will have to change careers numerous times before he or she retires. People who will be successful at doing this are those who enjoyed their formal schooling days, and therefore look forward to become students again.

In my workshops with teachers, I use the following Differentiation Rationale for Students with Learning Difficulties. I believe that it summarizes the intent of all the strategies in this book.

- All students should experience learning at their own personal challenge level every day.
- High self-esteem, and therefore learning productivity, comes from being successful with tasks the student perceived would be difficult.
- When students feel they have some control over what happens in school, they are more likely to be productive. This feeling of control comes from opportunities to make choices. Teachers can make those available by offering several options about the type of expected task and/or product.
- When learning styles are attended to, and curriculum is challenging and meaningful, students are more likely to choose appropriate behaviors.
- The first place an educator should look for explanations of inappropriate behavior is the curriculum! Is it appropriately challenging? Does it incorporate students’ interests wherever possible? Does the student understand why it must be learned? Does it allow access through students’ learning style strengths?
- All students must feel they are respected for who they are and what they need in order to be successful learners.

This book presents a wide variety of teaching methods so you can find the right match for every student in your classroom. These practical, easy-to-use strategies, techniques, and activities have been collected from a variety of sources. Actually, that is what makes this book unique! You don’t have to do your own research about what works to teach kids how to read, or how to remember their number facts. I’ve done the research for you, and this book contains the most effective methods I have found for helping students with learning problems become much more successful learners. Simply diagnose the learning weakness a particular student exhibits, find the right chapter in this book, and match the strategies to the student. Significant improvement will take place before your eyes. Using these strategies, you can help bring the learner up to the level of the content rather than lowering expectations for some students.

Throughout this book, there is an emphasis on the belief that high self-esteem can only be achieved through hard work and genuine accomplishments. As author and educator Dr. Sylvia Rimm has said, “The surest path to high self-esteem is to be successful at something one perceived would be difficult.” (Yes, I borrowed this idea for my Differentiation Rationale!) Dr. Rimm goes on to say, “Each time we steal a student’s struggle, we steal the opportunity for them to build self-confidence. They must learn to do difficult things to feel good about themselves.”

There is nothing quite so powerful as our ability to communicate high expectations for success to our students. Over the years, many studies have shown that we get what we expect! For example, the Pygmalion study in the 1960s demonstrated that kids could improve dramatically if their teachers were told they would do extremely well in a given year.* A 1969 report by the President’s Committee on Mental Retardation found that some children may function in the retarded range while they are in school for six hours a day, but behave more like normal people once they return home.**

We really don’t know for certain how many students we’ve labeled “slow” or “remedial” over the years have actually been experiencing some type of learning difficulty that can be addressed with the right methods. We don’t know if we’ve properly matched labels to kids or if we have over-labeled. None of that matters, since the strategies in this book will potentially benefit all students who find learning difficult.

I do not attempt to match specific strategies to each specific category of special education student. The strategies are generic and are presented as a menu of options for you to use as you empower all kids to become successful in your classroom. They are just as effective with students of poverty and with English Language Learners as they are with kids who have been diagnosed with learning disabilities. The best news is that when you find strategies that work with your struggling students, you may observe that they are effective with other kids as well.

You have nothing to lose and everything to gain by trying some of the methods described in this book. You know that your struggling students will continue to struggle if they don’t get the help they need. When you find and use strategies that work, teaching and learning become mutually successful experiences.

I promise you that these methods will work for you and your students. They have been used by me and by many other classroom teachers with success. As a staff development specialist, I have presented these concepts to thousands of teachers of all grade levels. The response has been overwhelmingly positive, and many teachers have told me that they wish they had known about these strategies throughout their entire teaching career.

This book will help you become an even better teacher than you already are. All you have to remember is this: If students are not learning the way you are teaching them, find and use a more appropriate method so you can teach them the way they learn.

Here’s what you’ll find in this book:

- Chapter 1 contains tips for helping all students feel welcome in your classroom, since kids who feel like outsiders are potential candidates for misbehavior and underachievement.
- Chapter 2 presents tried-and-true ways to get all students involved in all learning activities.
- Chapter 3 describes various types of learning difficulties and offers suggestions for intervening with some of those problems.
- Chapter 4 helps you understand and appreciate how to enhance the learning success of your struggling students by matching your teaching to their learning styles.
- Chapter 5 presents state-of-the-art ideas about how learning happens and how teachers can create learning success for all students.
- Chapters 6 through 8 suggest a variety of methods you can use to improve reading and writing success for your struggling students. These methods are compatible with any others you are currently using to teach reading and the language arts.
- Chapters 9 and 10 focus on reading and learning in the other content areas, including science, social studies, and mathematics.
- Chapter 11 describes ways to help your students improve their organizational skills and use effective methods to study what they need to learn.
- Chapter 12 describes several methods that can help you move beyond traditional assessment and get a better picture of what your struggling students are really learning.
- Chapter 13 focuses on behavior issues. Because students with learning problems often seem to have behavior problems, you might be surprised to find this chapter so near the end of the book. In fact, when students’ learning styles are attended to and curriculum is appropriately challenging, behavior issues become less worrisome because misbehavior declines!
- Chapter 14 offers suggestions for involving parents as part of the learning team. It describes several ways to reach out to parents—including those who don’t seem interested—and make them welcome at school.

Each chapter also includes a Questions and Answers section in which I respond to the questions most frequently asked when I present this content in a workshop format. If you have questions that are not addressed in this book, be sure to write to me so I can respond, either in future


editions or by personal communication. Write to me c/o Free Spirit Publishing, 217 Fifth Avenue North, Suite 200, Minneapolis, MN 55401-1299. Send me email at help4kids@freespirit.com, or through the Free Spirit Web site, www.freespirit.com.

Finally, each chapter concludes with a “References and Resources” section that points you toward additional sources of information and materials. These are the best books, articles, videos, organizations, associations, programs, and resources I have found, and I encourage you to seek them out.

You may be interested in two more products related to this book. The Teaching Kids with Learning Difficulties in the Regular Classroom CD-ROM includes all of the reproducible forms in this book as well as additional content organization charts from my work in the field. You can print them out when you need them and customize most for your classroom and students. The Teaching Kids with Learning Difficulties in the Regular Classroom Multimedia Package serves a school-based study group of teachers who work together to learn and implement strategies for their students. For more information about the CD-ROM or the multimedia package, please contact Free Spirit Publishing or visit the Web site.

I believe that this book can make teaching much more pleasant and effective for you, and learning much more enjoyable and successful for your students with learning difficulties. I’d love to receive any feedback from you that you care to share with me.

Let’s get started.

Susan Winebrenner

REFERENCES AND RESOURCES


Olweus Bullying Prevention Program (www.clemson.edu/olweus). A comprehensive, school-wide program designed for use in elementary, middle, or junior high schools. Recognized as a model program by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Human Services Administration, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (modelprograms.samhsa.gov). Contact Marlene Snyder, Ph.D., (864) 710-4562.

The President’s Committee for People with Intellectual Disabilities (PCPID) (www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/pcpid). Formerly the President’s Committee on Mental Retardation (PCMR). (202) 619-0634.

