EDUCATING CHILDREN WITH DOWN SYNDROME

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Confusion abounds in our society about what a learning disability is and how to educate individuals that have one. In the education community we are charged with educating students in order to prepare them for the rest of their lives. Yet some of these students that are entrusted in our care may have a learning disability. How do we reach them? How do we also educate the greater student population on learning disabilities to encourage the inclusion of individuals with disabilities into the greater society?

According to the National Joint Committee for Learning Disabilities (NJCLD) the term learning disabilities

> is a generic term that refers to a heterogeneous group of disorders manifested by significant difficulties in the acquisition and use of listening, speaking, reading, writing, reasoning or mathematical abilities. These disorders are intrinsic to the individual and presumed to be due to central nervous system dysfunction. Even though a learning disability may occur concomitantly with other handicapping conditions or environmental influences, it is not the direct result of those conditions or influences (Hammill, Leigh, McNutt and Larsen).

Given the NJCLD's definition, Down Syndrome in and of itself is not a learning disability, but certainly may cause one. Down Syndrome was first recognized in 1866 by John Langdon Down although analysis of art from the thousands of year prior to Down's "discovery" indicate that the disorder existed from the known earliest times (Derayeh). Derayeh states that individuals with Down Syndrome experience difficulty in mastering speech and language, experience problems memorizing, exhibit attention span problems as well as hearing impairments. Down Syndrome individuals have traditionally been characterized with others who have been defined as "learning disabled."

Blandy identified four eras in disability treatment and noted the changes in society's attitudes towards individuals with learning disabilities. Blandy's first period is from roughly 1700 until 1920. Individuals with disabilities were often cared for in the home by the extended family or the community during this time. Blandy cites Ralph Waldo Emerson's brother Robert as an example. Robert lived his entire life on family farms in Massachusetts and Maine. By 1920, the era of large institutions had replaced the family-centered care system of the previous 200 years. Blandy states that these institutions specialized in certain types of disorders or conditions; yet, they also became widely

known for their horrific treatment of the disabled, further stating that rehabilitation programs were only available for those individuals who were deemed employable. The large institution system was discredited during the middle period of the 20th century. It was during this time that America experienced the Civil Rights movement that brought equality for racial and gender minorities. Individuals with disabilities used many of the same tactics used by the larger groups to gain recognition. Americans with disabilities finally achieved equal status under the 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). The ADA, passed at a time coinciding with the end of Blandy's fourth period, ensured that the people with disabilities would have access to public accommodations.

While the ADA guaranteed public accommodations, equality in education had begun with 1975's Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). The IDEA sought to level the playing field so that all schools would offer roughly the same curriculum, a curriculum which included a "large special education system to address the needs of these (learning disabled) children" (Lewit and Schuurmann Baker). Historically, much like the institutionalization of disabled individuals during the middle of the 19th and 20th centuries, students with learning disabilities were shut away from the rest of the school population to be taught in their own way.

The current trend in disability education is known as mainstreaming or inclusion. Mainstreaming involves educating students with learning disabilities alongside "normal" students. Many schools, my former high school among them, have completely dismantled their special education program and have fully included special needs individuals in the general population. Madden and Slavin found that students with learning disabilities who are educated in tradition classrooms showed an increase in self-perception and behavior. Children with learning disabilities may exhibit more negative behaviors in the classroom, particularly when viewed through Lipton's five contexts. Children who are not fully understood by the teacher or who are made fun of by other students are much more likely to exhibit negative behaviors than children who are more comfortable in these two areas. A secondary benefit of inclusion or mainstreaming is social acceptance by the larger school population thereby eventually lessening disruptive behaviors by students with learning disabilities.

Kopperhaver and Erikson found that many educators feel that students with learning disabilities have needs that differ from other students and that this population is best served by being taught separately from the non-disabled student population. Contrary to this line of thinking, Kopperhaven and Erikson found that "students with disabilities have the same needs and learn in much the same way as other children." The authors found that students with learning disabilities experience difficulty in learning to read and according to Lewit and Schuurmann, nearly 17% of children have difficulty in learning to read. Many of these students are probably not classified as having a learning disability and are merely given additional individual instruction or additional resources to achieve the standard. This supports Madden and Slavin in their argument that students with learning disabilities should be educated with their non-disabled peers.

Derayeh's research continues the argument for inclusion. This research acknowledges that each student is an individual and what works for one is not likely to work for another. This maxim can be applied to all students, not just those who are learning disabled. Some students learn by watching, others by doing, while there are some who learn best by reading and then applying what they have read. Derayeh states that a student with learning disabilities can be successful in a mainstream classroom if an Individual Education Plan (IEP) is designed for each student. Participants in the IEP include the parents, the teacher and all educational aides, the school administration and most importantly the student. Koppenhaver and Erikson continue in this vein when they discuss that each student, in learning to read, must be monitored to see if they need assistance in relating what they know to what they read, setting a purpose for reading, applying strategies for reading, and monitoring reading comprehension to make sure students understand what they read.

Wong's research indicates that current trends in education may actually be hurting the education efforts of students with learning disabilities. When the IDEA was passed in 1975, all schools offered roughly the same curriculum. Today, with the growth of private schools, charter and magnate schools as well as the federalization of education through the No Child Left Behind Act, the curriculum can differ greatly from school to school. Students, who thirty years ago could attend almost any school and get an education, are now forced to choose only schools that may be able to meet their unique needs. Wong's argument is not as believable in light of evidence promoted by Madden and Slavin as well as Kopperhaver and Erikson who argue for mainstreaming students with learning disabilities.

The theories discussed in this literature review can be applied to educating children with Down Syndrome. Parents must be proactive in choosing what methods are used in educating their child. Being proactive is not enough though. Parents must be actively involved in their child's education, particularly when a child with Down Syndrome has been mainstreamed and requires additional instruction and assistance in learning basic tasks.

Annotated readings:

Blandy, Doug. (1991) "Conceptions of Disability: Toward A Sociopolitical Orientation to Disability for Art Education" *Studies in Art Education.*

Blandy characterizes the conception of disability in to four distinct eras, beginning in 1700 and ending in 1985. The treatment of individuals with disabilities progressed during these four time periods. Initially, individuals were treated in the home. Eventually, they were institionalized away from society. Blandy's fourth era corresponds to the time period when disabled individuals gained increased acceptance in society. The passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act incorporated this acceptance in to everyday life.

Derayeh, Nahal. (2001) "Down Syndrome: Teaching Strategies" *Exceptional Children.*

Derayeh posits that teaching strategies for children with Down Syndrome, much like the strategies for teaching any student, differ from child to child. The author argues that most successful strategies include participation by the student, the parents, the child's classroom teacher (as well as any teacher's aides), school administrators and, finally, any therapists involved in treating the child. These individuals are responsible for forming the Individual Education Plan. The IEP should focus on the individual child's developmental stages and needs.

Hammill, Donald D., Leigh, James E., McNutt, Gaye, & Larsen, Stephen C. (1988) "A New Definition of Learning Disabilities" *Learning Disability Quarterly.*

Hammill's, Leigh's, McNutt's and Larsen's work comes from a time when professionals were attempting to redefine the term "disability." Prior to their work, learning disabilities were vaguely defined. Terms such as *perceptual handicap* or *autism* (of which there are many levels of severity) were used to generally describe a student with a learning disability. The authors were part of the National Joint Committee for Learning Disabilities (NJCLD), an organization consisting the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association, the Association for Children and Adults with Learning Disabilites, the Council for Learning Disabilities, the Division for Children with Communication Disorders, the International Reading Association and the Orton Dyslexia Society. Like Blandy, the authors' work is during the period in which disabled individuals were attempting to gain societal recognition.

Heyer, Katharina C. (2002) "The ADA on the Road: Disability Rights in Germany" *Law & Social Inquiry.*

Heyer compares Germany's growing disability awareness campaign to that of the United States prior to the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act in 1990. Heyer says that Germany's expansion of disability rights is more like the expansion of welfare rights instead of the expansion of equal rights, unlike in the United States where disability recognition was seen in the same light race and gender inclusion.

Koppenhaver, David A. & Erikson, Karen A. (2008) "Technologies to Support Reading Comprehension in Children with Disabilities" Center for Literacy and Disability Studies

Kopperhaven and Erikson seek to find technological aides to assist children with disabilities in learning to read. The authors state that a "vast majority of children with a learning disabilities experience great difficulty in learning to read." While these children have difficulty in mastering the task, Kopperhaven and Erikson argue "that students with disabilities have the same needs and learn in much the same way as other children."

Lewit, Eugene M., & Schuurmann Baker, Linda. (1996) "Children in Special Education" *The Future of Children.*

Lewit and Schuurmann Baker argue that public schools are often unable or unwilling to provide the necessary services for children with disabilities. The authors examined how children are classified in terms of disability. They found that regional differences exist in determining if a child is learning disabled or not. One stark example is that 11% of students in Massachusetts are classified as having a learning disability while only 5% of children in Hawaii are classified in this way. The authors believe that the discrepancy exists because the state is largely responsible for education. States with more money are able to provide better (or more) services to students with learning disabilities than are those states with less money.

Lipton, Aaron. (1971) "Classroom Behavior: Messages from Children" *The Elementary School Journal.*

Lipton identifies five contexts in which a student's classroom behavior should be viewed: the teacher-pupil relationship, the pupil-pupil relationship, classroom methods and materials, the child's personality and the school as an institution. Lipton theorizes that these five areas each exert pressure on a child to behave in a particular manner.

Madden, Nancy A., & Slavin, Rober E. (1983) "Mainstreaming Students with Mild Handicaps: Academic and Social Outcomes.

Madden and Slavin examined the results of "mainstreaming" or placing students with learning disabilities in full-time special education programs, part-time education programs and full-time "regular" classes. The authors found that placement in traditional a classroom with individualized instruction or a classroom supplemented by additional educational resources allowed mildly handicapped students to achieve higher outcomes than those students placed in full-time special education programs.

Wong, Mei-Lan E. (1993) "The Implications of School Choice for Children with Disabilites" *The Yale Law Journal.*

Wong argues that the current trend of "choice" in public schooling can be negative for students with disabilities. According to Wong, when Congress passed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act in 1975, all public schools offered roughly the same curriculum. Today, by allowing parents to choose which school they want to send their child to, children with learning disabilities may be losing out. Not all schools offer the same curriculum. Given the choice among private schools, charter schools or traditional public schools, a parent is going to choose the educational opportunity that best suits his/her child. But for the learning disabled child, since not all schools offer the same thing, their choice (or their parents' choice) is limited to those schools which offer the programs needed to ensure the academic success of their child. Wong somewhat contradicts Madden's and Slavin's argument about mainstreaming children.

Extended bibliography of related publications:

Print

Buckley, Sue, Emslie, M., Haslegrave, G. & LePrevost, P. (1986). *The development of language and reading skills in children with Down syndrome*. Portsmouth, U.K.

Goodwin, Joan F. (1993). *When Slow is Fast Enough: Educating the Delayed Preschool Child.* The Guilford Press. New York.

Lane D. & Stratford B. (1987). *Current Approaches to Down's Syndrome*. Cassell Educational Limited. London.

Oelwein P.L. (1995). *Teaching Reading to Children with Down Syndrome: A Guide for Parents and Teachers.* Woodbine House. USA.

Web

Association for Children with Down Syndrome [Online] www.acds.org

Down Syndrome Resource Center [Online] www.aim-high.org

National Association for Down Syndrome [Online] www.nads.org

National Down Syndrome Society [Online] www.ndss.org

Video

"Discovery: Pathways to Better Speech for Children with Down Syndrome" (2005)

"Inclusion: John Meets his Expectations" (1998)

"Learning to Read: An Approach to Teaching Reading and Language Skills to Children with Down Syndrome" (1995)

"Playing for Language: Infants and Preschoolers with Down Syndrome" (1995)

"Reading Skills in Pre-School Children with Down Syndrome" (1983)

"Schooled for Success: Integrated Education for Children with Down Syndrome" (1993)