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Awareness and Sensitivity

The Starting Point

The important work of education involves connecting students and teachers in a meaningful way. This connection enables learning to take place. In addition, a deep connection leads to such outcomes as mutual respect and appreciation. Understanding is at the core of this connection. Teachers have many responsibilities, but perhaps their most important responsibility is to understand their students.

Exactly what is involved in understanding a student? A teacher can increase his or her understanding of a student in many ways. Meeting with the student's previous teachers can offer valuable information. The child's cumulative file may contain important communications from parent conferences, as well as a quick overview of success and challenges represented by report cards. If the student is a good listener; speaks effectively, candidly, and comfortably; and has formed a positive association with a former teacher, meeting with him or her can prove useful. Arranging for the learning specialist to observe the student in several classes can help those involved "see" various situations that challenge the student. Finally, while time consuming and expensive in the private sector, an evaluation can offer the most complete and detailed information about a child's learning strengths and challenges. Evaluations come in a number of forms with a variety of titles, including psychoeducational evaluations, psychological evaluations, speech and language evaluations, and so on. Learning disabilities are often diagnosed through a psychoeducational evaluation.

The diagnosis of learning disabilities or attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) helps a teacher know why a child performs differently

from his peers. The diagnosis explains lagging performance in an area of learning, whether academic or social. Understanding why a student has difficulties is the beginning of awareness. For example, a student might have trouble with history for a number of reasons; however, knowing that a student has difficulty with auditory memory can be the beginning of coming to grips with the challenge. Certain types of difficulties, such as anxiety, can masquerade as others, such as ADHD. In this instance, the child may be so preoccupied with internal issues and fears that his attention at school is obscured. Clearly, finding a highly qualified diagnostician is critical to getting the correct “read” on a student who faces obstacles at school.

Still, an intellectual understanding of differences is not enough. Teachers will have the most positive effect when they are sensitive to those differences and their impact on general learning. Relating to students on an emotional level is essential for full understanding. Teachers who can empathize with the challenge of disabilities are in the best position to seek solutions and to share their knowledge and understanding with others. Successful teachers understand their students. If the teacher has no personal experience with a specific learning problem, he or she will have difficulty appreciating its impact on a child’s learning and self-esteem in school.

A number of simulation exercises can help demonstrate the obstacles faced at school by students with learning disabilities and ADHD. The feelings associated with these hurdles can be powerful. If a teacher is working with a student who has a type of learning disability that is challenging to understand, it will be important to arrange a meeting with the learning specialist at the school. In addition, seeking opportunities for professional development can allow professionals to truly appreciate the difficulties students face. Rick Lavoie (1989) became well known in the world of education when he developed a video and workshop called F.A.T. City. The workshop simulates the “frustration,” “anxiety,” and “tension” school experiences pose to students with learning disabilities.

Over the next few pages, I hope you will see many reasons for understanding students at a deeper level. Consider what it would be like to go to a job every day that you knew in advance you could not do. Some students with learning disabilities have this type of experience every day at school. A call to awareness involves an intellectual understanding of students’ needs, as well as the emotional sensitivity to realize their ongoing challenge at school.

WHAT’S YOUR POMMEL HORSE?

Being able to tap into the child’s point of view is worth the time and effort involved. A great teacher will try to “crawl behind the child’s forehead” to

assume the perspective of a student. To this end, I would like to share my own perspective of a challenge that I encountered during my school days. In addition, this true story speaks to the following issues:

- The difference between “can’t” and “won’t,” or the existence of a disability as opposed to resistant or avoidant behavior
- The need to adapt tasks to create paths for success and increased self-esteem
- The value of breaking tasks into manageable units that can lead to partial victories and perhaps eventually to total accomplishment

Among my most vivid memories from the all-girls private school I attended, I remember being in gym class, dressed in a light blue tunic with bloomers. A springboard and pommel horse, seemingly 20 feet high, were glaring at me, and the teacher told us, one by one, to run; spring off the board; lean forward into a leap; and simultaneously grab the handlebars of the pommel horse, raise and bend our legs into a crouch position, swish smoothly through the handlebars, and land cleanly on the other side of the horse.

Was she joking?

In 5 years, I never did it. I learned a few things, though:

1. I was never going to succeed at this task.
2. Lucy + pommel horse = fear, bruises, and humiliation.
3. I’d rather get a few laughs than continue the exercise in fear and humiliation. I adjusted the task. I ran, turned aside from the springboard, and ducked under the pommel horse! I picked scolding over humiliation.

What’s My Point Here?

What if the teacher had taken the time to adjust the task for me? For example, what if she had instructed me to focus on running, landing squarely and strongly on the center of the springboard, and maintaining my balance while landing on the floor?

What if she had offered choices for me and the number of other students who were not athletically inclined? There is certainly more than one path to skill development and more than one timeline for skill mastery.

What if, as mentioned in the introduction, the teacher had spoken with me directly? She likely would have understood my struggle more completely. We might have been able to exchange views and come up with a plan for success.

What's your "pommel horse"? If you can identify it, you will be able to relate to students who experience difficulties. You will better understand their feelings and connect with them in a way that will lead to an enhanced learning experience for you and them.

THE TOP 10 REASONS TO UNDERSTAND STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

Many tasks compete for a teacher's time and attention. Some teachers might feel burdened by the demands placed on them by students with learning disabilities, yet there are compelling reasons to understand such students. Good teachers frequently offer a rationale for a unit of learning; here, the rationale for understanding students with learning disabilities is multifaceted:

1. Most children/adolescents/adults with learning disabilities possess gifts in other areas; understanding goes a long way toward preserving their enthusiasm and energy for continued excellence in their areas of giftedness. Many of these students are athletes, actors, musicians, and/or artists.
2. If your own child had a disability, you would want teachers to understand him, quirks and all.
3. You have learning specialists and psychologists to help you.
4. It is important in terms of human contributions, and it is interesting.
5. Parents will understandably bristle at remarks that insist on correcting a genuine disability.
6. There are legal reasons to do so, including such regulations as the Americans with Disabilities Act, Section 504, and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act.
7. This is not just for a school. It's for the real world, too. Policies and laws protect the rights of disabled individuals in the workplace.
8. The child did not choose to have the disability.
9. This is an issue of educational diversity. Let's try to understand one another and celebrate our differences.
10. Teachers who understand can develop a child's sense of self-worth.

THE BASE OF THE LEARNING PYRAMID

Visualize the base of a pyramid. In education, this represents attention. A student's attention might wander for a number of reasons:

1. He might be thinking about something else. Called internal distracters, these thoughts may include worries, trying to remember where something is, and so forth.
2. He might be tired. Perhaps he has a long bus ride or sleep problems or his family works long hours. Perhaps he has to attend a sibling's extracurricular practices or games.
3. He might be preoccupied with sounds in the environment. Called external distracters, these sounds may include noises from lawn mowers, students playing outside, and so forth.
4. He might have an organic problem with sustained focus, such as ADHD.
5. He might be depressed and therefore unable to concentrate for regular periods.
6. He might have difficulty distinguishing between foreground and background, resulting in trouble filtering out irrelevant stimuli.

Other conditions can mimic problems with attention. The history and degree of attention-span variability are important considerations for a diagnosis of ADHD. A psychologist experienced in testing and diagnosis is the best resource for probing attention difficulties and making recommendations regarding treatment. This is critical because, unless the base of the pyramid is intact, the student won't "get it" in the first place; then, he will have a hard time responding to it, recalling it, deriving meaning from it, applying it, and so forth. If variable attention exists and is managed, the student will be able to move up the pyramid.

AIR CONDITIONERS AND ANXIETY

For some students, the value of accommodations is tremendous. A teacher's awareness of this value is important in implementing accommodations. I have noticed that when anxious students realize they can have accommodations to help manage their anxiety (e.g., extended time and/or

private setting on tests), some of them don't seem to need the accommodations as much. It's as if they benefit from knowing an alternative is available. Simply stated, it's a relief to know there's relief.

I love air conditioners. Aside from the reality that they can make the indoors comfortable on a steamy August day, just knowing that I can manage the heat with the simple twist of a dial seems to keep me cooler.

UNDERKNOWLEDGE

Underknowledge refers to a basic fund of information accumulated over time. It is the result of life experience and formal education. Some students have underknowledge that seems like Swiss cheese—it contains random holes. Others have underknowledge as massive as Fort Knox. I would exercise caution about expectations for underknowledge for the following groups:

- Those new to a school
- Those from a different culture
- Those who have changed schools several times
- Those with specific disabilities (especially those with language-based disabilities, which can spin off socially)

Despite being a vast unknown, underknowledge is often expected to be the same for all students. This is not so. When teachers, coaches, or parents say, “You should know this by now,” likely they're referring to recently taught concepts or the murky land of underknowledge.

Developmental issues also come into play when considering underknowledge. Brain research shows that the capacity to think abstractly is not fully developed until about 20 years of age.

DIFFERENT STROKES

Kevin, an 8-year-old, could not remember how to make a capital *I* in cursive, probably because this letter starts with a clockwise motion, which is very different from most other cursive letters (except capital *J*). After tracing in sand, using flocked wallpaper, making Play-Doh letters, and driving little trucks along the road of cursive capital *I*, it was time to adjust my thinking. Kevin could not learn this letter in the “standard” way. I instructed him to make a tiny *c* and connect it to a wide, lowercase cursive *l*. He got this right away. The process was altered, but the product was

fine. Teachers must be ready to alter approaches. Expecting students to learn the same way and achieve mastery at the same time is simply unreasonable. I encourage teachers to step outside the curriculum guide and use their own creativity to offer new approaches and solve problems on an individual basis.

Angela, a 9-year-old, had pronounced dyslexia. One of the most effective approaches to reading instruction is the Orton-Gillingham approach, which is how I began. One day, I flashed the salmon-colored card with the vowel combination AW on it. Instead of responding “A-W says ‘aw’ as in *saw*,” Angela said, “A-W says [long pause] ‘uh’ [*schwa* sound] as in *was*.” I was stunned. She had mastered the technique of associating letter combinations with key words and extracting sounds, but she had processed the letters in reverse. In her mind, she had reversed *saw* as *was*. I used the kinesthetic intensive Fernald technique instead of the favored Orton-Gillingham. Learning is not one-size-fits-all. Be ready to shift gears or even replace the gearbox!

WHEN ROOT WORDS DON'T HELP

English is a difficult language to master. For many students with learning disabilities, even though English is their native language, it can seem more like a foreign language.

It is easy to assume that information is clear; however, it may be necessary to “crawl behind a student’s eyebrows” to obtain his perspective. When a student seems confused, ask him to underline the word/words that he finds confusing. Pinpointing language elements can lead to a better understanding of where the breakdown occurs. Words with multiple meanings often pose a challenge to students with learning disabilities. For example, the words *even* and *evenly* may have a similar linguistic structure, but they bring different meanings to various contexts. Compare “Is 34 an even number?” with “Does 7 go into 34 evenly?”

EXPONENTIALLY CONFUSING

If a student has pronounced difficulty interpreting printed symbols, even seemingly simple tasks can prove daunting. Difficulties with spatial perception can cause significant confusion, particularly in math.

Consider the following: x for multiplication is easily confused with x as a designation for a variable. Many math teachers substitute a dot for the x to limit confusion. This helps, and fortunately, the dot is placed above the

line on notebook paper so it will not be confused with a decimal or even punctuation, such as part of a colon or semicolon.

Exponents are written above and to the right of a base number; however, negative signs are jotted to the left of the exponent. Sometimes, negative signs are placed between numbers to indicate subtraction. Other times, the minus sign by a number might be floating a bit closer to the line than one used to indicate a negative number. At first glance, a teacher might think the student is confusing math concepts, but it is possible that he is experiencing difficulties related to spatial awareness. Knowing, recognizing, and applying “left and right” and “up and down” is not an automatic or reliable process for some students with learning disabilities.

To complicate matters further, different books and teachers jot expressions in their own way. For example, the first letter of the alphabet can appear as A and/or a. If a 1 and 3 are placed close together, the result may look like a B instead of 13. The letter *t* can look a lot like a + unless it’s carefully formed. Handwriting and the choice of font can affect a student’s understanding and performance at school. Generally, the ability to attend to fine visual details is referred to as visual discrimination. Many students with learning disabilities have specific trouble with visual discrimination.

Teachers can perform a task analysis to see the various steps involved. Many tasks that appear simple (e.g., copying) actually involve complex perceptual interpretation and replication of visual sequences and spatial relations.

A strategy for managing this type of task is to “think out loud.” Adding language and auditory feedback can help students comprehend the nature of printed symbols. Try “reading” this equation out loud:

$6x - 9^{-6} + -3x - 0.5 = t$	Solve for t when x = +9.
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Imagine you are dyslexic or tired, spilled water on the page, got the last copy before the ink ran out, or can’t find your glasses. If you can imagine these scenarios, you are closer to developing the sensitivity needed to understand students with learning disabilities.

BRIDGE FREEZES



I read this road sign a thousand times. Bridge Freezes Before Road Surface. I couldn't understand what it meant. I don't usually have a comprehension problem, but this sign was totally out of context. It made no sense. What did *before* mean? I analyzed the phrase. In my mind, since I noticed the words *surface* and *road*, I related the word *before* to the lateral surface of the pavement. This would mean that the area just in front of the junction of the road and bridge would freeze before the actual bridge span. This made absolutely no sense to me. It was years before I realized that the word *before* was relating to a temporal concept rather than a spatial concept.

Once again, "crawl behind a student's eyebrows" to obtain her perspective. If a student doesn't comprehend a phrase, ask her to underline the confusing word/words. I would have pinpointed *before* as the word that stymied me. Once again, words with multiple meanings often pose a challenge. Be cautious about their use, particularly in high-risk situations (tests, road signs, etc.).

GAIL WELLIN'S HANDWRITING

Spending a few moments to tap into the child's point of view is valuable. To this end, I share a story from my own school experience that speaks to the issue of diversity. Educational diversity is worthy of formal consideration. Some students may have perfect handwriting, and others may exhibit other strengths. The mix of students enriches the entire environment.

I remember it from the first grade. It was perfect. It was everything my handwriting was not. I envied it. I tried to emulate it. I really tried. I

developed a huge callus on my middle finger from holding the pencil with a death grip. My handwriting did not come close to looking like Gail Wellin's. Years later, I realized that Gail Wellin's pencil had soft lead!

What do you recall from your childhood at school? Reflecting on personal experiences can link a teacher's past to a student's present. The ability to perceive an experience from another's perspective is to be valued as the art and heart of teaching.

SUMMARY

Once an evaluation is completed, the reasons for a student's difficulties with academic, behavioral, or emotional issues are revealed. The teachers can then have an intellectual understanding of what will be needed to help the student. Subsequently, they can establish a plan and take actions to provide the best possible educational program for that student. Over the years, they can share the explanation and will be enlightened about the student's needs. This is, however, only part of what it will take to connect to the student in a meaningful way.

Developing sensitivity for the challenges faced by learning-disabled students is essential. The effect disabilities have on a child's learning and self-esteem is real and ongoing. Depending on the age of the student, multiple hurdles, obstacles, and difficulties will have been a considerable part of the child's school experience to this point. Connecting to the problems faced by the student will require cultivating empathy.

Once teachers, parents, and others have identified their own "pommel horse," they will have a greater ability to tap into how facing a difficulty feels. This empathy will allow them to develop a much closer connection with the student.