

How It Feels to Have a Learning Disability (LD) ...

One of the most poignant descriptions of what it's like to have severe LD is found in the book *Faking It* by Christopher Lee and Rosemary Jackson. Following is a summary of some of the observations Christopher makes about his experiences. *

Christopher was in the second grade before he realized that something was wrong with him. He was pulled out of public school and placed in a school for so-called "special" kids. It didn't take him long to realize that the word "special" didn't mean "extraordinary" and, in fact, did not have a positive meaning at all. He soon concluded that "learning disabled" was a cover phrase for "slow and stupid."

He experienced teasing and cruel treatment from his peers and even from well-meaning teachers who constantly admonished him to "try harder," revealing their inability to understand that his learning problems were too complex to be solved by more effort. His coping strategy was to hide his inabilities from his teacher, his parents, and his peers - to "fake being normal."

Christopher's learning problems affected his ability to see and hear letters correctly and to express his thoughts orally and in writing. Spelling was particularly painful for him because "words never seemed to be spelled the way I heard them and words never looked the same twice." For many years, he assumed that writing and spelling were synonymous, and since he could not spell, he felt he could not write. It was only after encountering a computer with a spellcheck program that he realized that writing was connected more to content than to mechanics. In his words: "spending so much time on trying to teach someone with a learning disability to spell might be detrimental to that person's ability to ever learn to write."

The mechanics of writing were very difficult for him to master. "When I am writing, I see a continuous line. I don't see punctuation...and so I don't stop when I read. I don't see where sentences and paragraphs begin or end. I never see any structure when I read and therefore I don't know how to use it when I am writing." His thoughts went faster than he could speak or write them, and he had to stop and start often when trying to express a complete thought. At the same time, he was sidetracked by trying to find out what different words and phrases meant, and he eventually forgot what he wanted to write.

His auditory deficits made it almost impossible for him to attach the correct sound to the letters that represent them, so a phonics approach simply didn't work for him. When the same words were written with a capital letter or a lowercase letter at the beginning, or appeared in different type fonts, he perceived them as different words. His deficits in understanding language made it impossible for him to understand much of what people are saying when they tried to explain things to him, including his own disabilities.

Christopher concludes that labels of deficiency create fewer learning opportunities for kids. In effect, a person's identity becomes attached to the definition of his or her disability.

This is why it is critical that we treat all students as individuals. People differ from each other in many ways, including the ways they learn. Avoid the labels and focus on helpful interventions.

REFERENCES:

*summarized from *Faking It: A Look into the Mind of a Creative Learner* by Christopher Lee and Rosemary Jackson, pp. 21, 25, 28-29. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1992.

Winebrenner, Susan (1996). *Teaching Kids with Learning Difficulties in the Regular Classroom. Strategies and Techniques Every Teacher Can Use to Challenge & Motivate Struggling Students*. Minneapolis, MN: Free Spirit, Inc., pp 23-24.