

Learning to Learn Despite LD: A personal story

Kourtland R. Koch

An Article Published in

TEACHING Exceptional Children Plus

Volume 1, Issue 1, Sept. 2004

Learning to Learn Despite LD: A personal story

Kourtland R. Koch

Abstract

This is the story of a college professor with learning disabilities that were undiagnosed until age 17. Failing school, he was excluded from a college bound academic track in junior and senior high school. He eventually went on to earn a doctoral degree after first becoming a special education teacher, certified reading teacher, and school psychologist. His personal story is given along with solutions based on his personal experience and expertise upon which parents, teachers, and service providers can draw to best meet the academic, social, and transition needs of students with learning disabilities.

SUGGESTED CITATION:

Koch, K. (2004) "Learning to Learn Despite LD: A personal story", *TEACHING Exceptional Children Plus* 1(1), Article 2. Retrieved [date] from <http://escholarship.bc.edu/education/tecplus/vol1/iss1/2>

I was not identified as a person with learning disabilities until the eleventh grade. Prior to that time, I had an extremely humiliating, frustrating, and socially and emotionally painful educational experience. My story will be familiar to many individuals with learning disabilities (e.g., Sylvester, 2002). My goal is that my educational life experience with learning disabilities will become a story unique to the past. This goal will only be realized by making available effective strategies, tools, and remedies to teachers, specialists, administrators, and families of individuals with learning disabilities. I hope my story will provide insights and helpful specifics to educators, parents, and individuals who struggle to teach and to learn despite the presence of learning disabilities. Indeed, a student's biggest hope for success depends upon the quality of instruction and interventions received.

My Personal Story

Grade School

I entered first grade at Saint Anthony's Catholic School, where my mother was a teacher. However, due to my uncontrollable behavior in the classroom, the monsignor informed my parents I would not be allowed to continue my education at St. Anthony's. As a result, my parents had no choice but to enroll me in the local public school the following year.

Though I was a behavior problem, I do not think my parents began to understand the magnitude of my difficulties until I was asked to leave the Catholic school. I was retained at the end of second grade. I could not sit still and was disruptive in class. Standing in the hallway for 15 to 20 minutes at a time became commonplace, as did trips to the principal's office when I was discovered wandering the halls. I was

paddled so often that the consequence lost meaning.

My misbehavior provoked numerous parent-teacher conferences that always ended with my promising that I would do better. Despite my good intentions, no one ever provided me with any strategies for actually doing better and neither my behavior, nor academic performance improved.

My written expression grades were dismal, reflecting only the quality of my illegible handwriting, rather than my story content or grammar usage. I was placed in the lowest reading group, the Black Birds, and I felt like a crow—a nuisance bird. Blue Birds and Red Birds received more attention from the teacher. They were assigned fun, creative projects. Our instructional time was limited, and the expectations for the Black Birds were minimal at best. We were “taught” to read using the “look-say” method well characterized by the popular *Dick and Jane* series of the time. But, reading never became easy for me. Even now, as a professional educator, reading is not something I have ever learned to enjoy.

Changing schools had not modified my behavior. As time passed, I continued to be penalized for poor self-control. Still, no positive interventions were forthcoming. Without question, I had become the victim of a self-fulfilling prophecy. My behavior problems continued, and I began falling further and further behind my classmates academically. My self-esteem suffered and I misbehaved more. My teachers perceived me as a poor student. I was living up to every negative impression and expectation they formed for me. My parents and my teachers continued to believe that telling me what I was doing wrong would be enough to straighten me out. What I still lacked and needed was specific and explicit instruction about how to do things “right”. I recall my

early school years as a critical time for my family filled with confusion, devastation, frustration, anger, concern, and stress.

Parental Interventions

After I entered third grade, my mother attempted to boost my self-esteem by enrolling me in the Boys Club. It was the first winning strategy I was given. At the Boys Club, I found a place where I could excel. Participation in football, basketball, and baseball gave me my first, much-needed sense of success. Soon, I lived only to go to the Boys Club and longed not to attend school where I was miserable. With good intentions my mother made attendance at the Boys Club dependent on success and good behavior in school. As high as my motivation was, the skills I needed to succeed in school failed to appear magically. This new behavior plan proved to be disheartening.

My mom stumbled upon a second winning strategy when she enrolled me in a Catholic youth camp. I was to spend eight weeks at camp each summer until I was 13. At summer camp, learning became fun for the very first time. Sister Elizabeth understood how much I wanted to become an altar boy. She worked hard with me so that I could meet my goal. With her help, I memorized the Catholic mass through repetition. She drew pictures on the blackboard to show me where to go. Then we rehearsed my part until it was flawless. I was motivated to learn, given strategies to succeed, and rewarded for my effort. I had earned the privilege of becoming an altar boy.

Catholic youth camp was highly structured and predictable. This structure enabled me to anticipate the camp schedule, putting me on an equal footing with other campers. I was prepared, because I always knew what to expect next. With each passing year, I gained status and added responsibility as an experienced camper. My

How Can Teachers Best Help Students with Learning Disabilities Academically?

- Always first assume the student wants to succeed, but lacks the necessary skills (McGinnis & Goldstein, 1984, 1990, 1997).
- Set challenging, yet realistic IEP goals to meet the instructional needs of students based on current evaluation and assessment of their cognitive, processing, perceptual-motor, and social-adaptive functional levels.
- Do not limit choice of instructional materials to those which are familiar, one has been trained to use, or are easily available.
- Select instructional materials based on the most effective learning strategies and learning styles (e.g., print, aural, interactive, visual, haptic, kinesthetic, olfactory) of the student.
- Make the academics relevant and applicable to the student's life.
- Provide students with choices in learning. Content of material, process by which it is learned, and product that demonstrates gained knowledge are all appropriate aspects for student choice (Tomlinson, 1999).
- Differentiate instruction based on students' readiness levels, students' interests, or students' learning profiles (Tomlinson, 1999).
- Actively collaborate and consult with other professionals such as the general education teacher, therapists, specialists, and paraprofessionals.

self-esteem increased, helping to orient new campers developed my leadership skills.

The single most important intervention summer camp provided was a consistent relationship with loving and caring adults who learned how to work with me over the years. I attribute my growing confidence and self-esteem during my elementary years to summer camp. Each year, I felt a little better about myself. Eventually, I started to believe that I was smart and capable of success.

In spite of my growing success at camp each summer, my parents did not recognize a need to intervene on my behalf at school. During the 1960's, parents continued to trust the school system to address my academic and behavioral needs. However, I was the child who was left further and further behind in school. No one, my parents, teachers, or administrators, really understood why. It was assumed that I was not trying hard enough, or that I was just plain lazy, or a problem child. These natural presumptions meant that teachers were prone to spend their time and energy on more worthy students.

By the end of elementary school, not only was I struggling in reading, but math was also becoming a real challenge. I could not understand math, so I did not enjoy it. The only subjects I did like in elementary school were science and social studies. I was interested in animals, planets, and history. I was also able to perform the activities that the science curriculum entailed because science was highly structured. My social studies teacher would show us movies and bring in guest speakers. Learning these two subjects did not depend on my reading or math ability. Consequently, they were subjects I could master or at least not fail.

Junior High

By the 7th grade, I had been labeled an "at-risk" low academic achiever. I had still never been tested or diagnosed formally. Clearly, the expectations were lower for a poorer performing student. I was placed into a vocational education track and away from the academic track intended for students bound for post-secondary education. The vocational curriculum emphasized essential job skills such as punctuality, dependability, and getting along with employers, customers, and peers.

The vocational program was a way of addressing the needs of students, like me,

How Can Teachers Best Help Students with Learning Disabilities Develop Social Skills?

- Address unacceptable student behaviors. When left unchecked these behaviors may persist and affect social relationships into adult life.
- Include positive behavioral interventions in the IEP to address specific behaviors such as self-control.
- Use behavioral principles cautiously. Be careful not to jeopardize positive reinforcers or opportunities for students to experience success.
- Provide social scripts to help students interpret situations, make inferences about social clues, and predict the consequences of their behavior.
- Teach social skills explicitly and step-by-step, use a scaffolding tool for learning appropriate social responses. Once automaticity is reached, reduce an over-reliance on pre-scripted behavior through monitoring and modifications of learned social skills.

who were perceived as at-risk of dropping out of school. In retrospect, many of my friends in the program did leave high school without a diploma, remained unemployed or underemployed, and were dependent upon their families for support. Additionally, establishing successful, functional relationships was a problem many of us faced. We lacked social skills and struggled to "read" people or social situations properly. With hindsight, it is now easy to surmise that many of my classmates in the vocational education program may have also been identified as learning disabled. Many students were of low socio-economic status,

which was also an indicator of vocationally tracked students.

Halfway through seventh grade, I began living with friends of my parents while my mom was away from home with my father seeking medical treatment for his cancer. Our family had a new crisis, and it was not my school performance. Before the school year was finished, my father would be dead. While I was born into a well-off family, my father's death meant that our socio-economic status plummeted. My mom had to resume working, and I had to enter the work force to help make ends meet. I had joined the ranks of the truly at-risk students. All unnecessary expenses were cut and thereby compounding my loss, this included my involvement in the Boys Club and summer camp.

Prior to my father's death, I belonged in the "preppies" clique, even though academically I belonged with the outcast and misfit kids. In effect, I was able to play both worlds and associate with whomever served my needs at any particular time. However, there was no escape from the misfit label once I became poor. I was an outcast no longer by choice, but because that was now my sole social and academic identity.

My vocational education track included a school-to-work program. I left school each day to work the lunch shift at McDonald's restaurant. I learned valuable work skills, earned money for my family during school hours, and within my first year was named an Employee of the Month. The rewards were high, but not without costs. My academic instruction was limited to just 3 1/2 hours per day. I was performing academically below my grade level, yet it was impossible to catch up with my general education peers who were receiving twice the instruction that I received. At school, my self-esteem spiraled downward.

High School

My high school had no school-to-work program. I was again placed in a full academic curriculum. I was wholly unprepared. Yet, I knew I was a better student than people perceived me to be academically and than I was able to demonstrate. It was frustrating to be an academic and social outcast because I believed I was capable of more. I began to search actively for a place where I could fit. During my junior year, my mother suffered a nervous breakdown and a neighbor, Uncle John, became my guardian. Uncle John enrolled me in The Mills School, a nearby boarding school for children who had difficulty learning. The premise of the Mills School was to develop a remediation plan for each student according to their individual learning styles and make accommodations and modifications in instruction as necessary based upon observations, trial lessons, and accurate assessment (Johnston & Magrab, 1976). I was now almost 18 years old. Just as I was about to finish secondary school, I was to embark upon a new, long, and remarkable educational journey. A knowledgeable guardian, some self-advocacy, and the professional educators who truly understood learning disabilities made this possible.

The Mills School developed a remediation plan for me (a forerunner of the present-day IEP), based upon the results of a psycho-educational assessment (Mills, 1956). The evaluation identified learning styles (e.g., perceptual-modalities) and reading methods (e.g., Orton-Gillingham) to increase my reading comprehension and overall academic success (Gillingham & Stillman, 1997; Orton, 1937). The school psychologist employed selective behavioral techniques to teach me self-discipline, effective study habits, and a love for learning. These interventions worked. One teacher in particular, Mr. B., made learning

an adventure with learning centers and high interest materials and incentives, such as listening to the radio or brewing coffee during class.

The Mills School provided me with a perceptive group of teachers for the first time in my life. I had the good fortune to interact with several outstanding, recognized professionals at the height of their careers in special education and school psychology. These teachers were concerned about my welfare and my future success. They believed I could learn, if only they would teach effectively. I began to seek these teachers out and found them. Several of these teachers have actually worked with me for a lifetime. These long-term relationships have offered stability and support for my academic endeavors first as a student, next as a public school teacher and administrator, and now as a university professor.

Evaluation, assessment, and diagnosis of my learning disabilities afforded me the opportunity to benefit from the same curriculum as the general education population. It was finally understood that I was capable and that I could succeed to the same degree as any student. With diagnosis, I was able to receive necessary accommodations and modifications which would allow me to earn the highest educational degree available in my field—something which would never have been possible if my learning disabilities had remained undiscovered.

Conclusion

Special education has changed dramatically since I was first identified 30 years ago as a person with learning disabilities. My story should never again be repeated due to the significant gains and understanding of what constitutes a learning disability, the impact of legislative mandates, and the promotion of self-advocacy. Teachers and parents should no longer simply write-off a student because he appears to be lazy or dumb. Comprehensive diagnostic practices need to serve as more than just a tool for identification or the determination of a label. Assessment information should be linked to educational goals that not only remediate, but also afford the student the opportunity to develop critical thinking and problem-solving skills related to real-life situations. Students with learning disabilities face many academic and social challenges and the selection and use of appropriate strategies will require constant monitoring and adjustment to maintain maximum academic performance. Finally, above all, teachers must establish high and yet realistic expectations for students with learning disabilities. They must empower students with the necessary skills to become productive and independent citizens of society.

Transition Component of the IEP

The Individual Transition Plan (ITP) is a document that reflects long-range planning for students K – 12, to include post-secondary educational outcomes. Historically, the ITP served as a separate component of the IEP, although current practice has emphasized the IEP as an all-inclusive seamless framework and not as a separate ITP document for planning purposes. The intent of the ITP is to develop the most appropriate outcomes based upon the student's interests and preferences. The ITP is a strategic long-term plan for services, whereas, the IEP is a plan for skill or knowledge acquisition based upon annual review. If the ITP is to serve its intended purpose, it is critical that all persons involved with the student's transition planning are able to provide input into the decision making process. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA 1997) (P.L. 105-17) states that use of an ITP becomes mandatory no later than age 14. By age 16, in addition to stating transition needs, ITPs must indicate transition service providers. The ITP serves as a framework for planning a student's transition from school to the community, employment, or other post-secondary educational outcomes. It states who is responsible for paying for and providing those services beyond high school.

The ITP document should reinforce the importance and relevance of the academic curriculum in moving youth with disabilities toward their post-secondary goals (Hughes & Carter, 2000). These outcomes should be based upon the student's aptitude, abilities, and interests. Psychovocational assessment is a necessary link to establishing student appropriate psycho-educationally determined objectives (Koch, 1988).

All members of the transition planning team-IEP team including the student should advocate in the best interests of the student. Each member has an equally important voice and the opportunity to participate fully. Ideally, each participant will contribute unique expertise and together formulate a document that when articulated will address the educational, socio-emotional, and post-secondary needs of the student. Attitudes of exclusive educator expertise or the use of educational jargon tend to exclude family members and create barriers. Goals and objectives may not truly reflect the intended hopes and desires of the student without equal student and family involvement. When students are empowered and encouraged to practice self-determination, they leave the IEP meeting knowing that they have ownership in a realistic plan to achieve their post-secondary life goals successfully.

During the school day, collaboration, shared lesson planning, co-teaching, and community based instruction are natural goals when all educators reject a philosophy that divides responsibility for students into "yours" and "mine". All educators should have a professional obligation to maintain high expectations for students with learning disabilities and believe in their success. Curricula should promote cooperative learning, self-awareness of abilities, and positive self-concepts. Lesson activities should prepare students to meet labor market needs, and stress self-determination and independence rather than dependence.

continued on following page

Transition component (continued from previous page)

Social skills are an important part of the transition curriculum for all students with special needs and general education students who are unable to form positive relationships implicitly. Job success is highly dependent not just on learning how to perform the job, but on learning social skills such as accepting constructive criticism. It is important to introduce pertinent community agencies and services as students prepare to make a transition from secondary school to a post-secondary outcome. Vocational rehabilitation services are available to students based upon eligibility, not entitlement, beginning at age 16. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA 1997) (P.L. 105-17) gave interagencies, including vocational rehabilitation responsibility in the secondary to post-secondary transition process. Vocational rehabilitation counselors must provide a planned sequence of services designed to assist eligible students with special needs to reach their vocational goals. Students with learning disabilities must avoid an over reliance on IEP committee members and be able to self-advocate by the time they exit the secondary school system. Vocational rehabilitation counselors/case coordinators take the lead in the IEP process, and yet do not have the same accountability or responsibility for the student as the educational system held under IDEA.

The Vocational Rehabilitation Act of 1973, Section 504 (P.L. 93-112) makes it illegal for institutions or organizations that receive federal funds to discriminate against individuals with special needs. This law provides for the free, appropriate public education of adults with disabilities (post-secondary students). Students who choose to disclose their special needs have the legal right to apply to institutions of higher learning and to receive reasonable instructional accommodations and modifications while enrolled. Disclosure with supporting documentation requires strong self-advocacy skills because students need to state their disability, how it impacts their ability to learn, and request the academic supports they require to ensure academic success.

Students who enter the world-of-work are protected against discrimination through the American with Disabilities Act (ADA 1990) (P.L. 101-336) and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act (P.L. 105-220) (Title IV of the Workforce Investment Act of 1998) they are entitled to receive reasonable accommodations and modifications within the workplace. Prior to leaving secondary education or reaching the age of majority (IDEA 1997), all students with disabilities should be aware of their legal rights, connected to appropriate community agencies, and learn how to access life-skills information, and how to advocate for themselves. Educators can best assist students with learning disabilities by focusing on their abilities, and teach them how to take responsibility for their disabilities and how to find their own best solutions.

References

Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990. P.L. 101-336 U.S.C. § 12101.

Gillingham, A., & Stillman, B. (1997). *The Gillingham manual: Remedial training for students with specific disability in reading, spelling, and penmanship*. (8th ed.). Cambridge: Educators Publishing.

Hughes, C., & Carter, E. (2000). *The transition handbook: Strategies high school teachers use that work!* Baltimore: Paul H. Brooks Publishing.

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1997, P.L. 105-17 20 U.S.C. § 1400.

Johnston, R. & Magrab, P. (1976). *Developmental disorders: Assessment, treatment, education*. Baltimore: University Park Press.

Koch, K. (1988). *A psycho-vocational approach to a work experience program for learning disabled students in secondary self-contained setting*. Unpublished educational specialist thesis, The Citadel, Charleston, SC.

McGinnis, E. & Goldstein, A. (1984). *Skillstreaming in early childhood: Teaching prosocial skills to the preschool and kindergarten child*. Champaign, IL: Research Press.

McGinnis, E. & Goldstein, A. (1990). *Skillstreaming the elementary school child: A guide for teaching prosocial skills*. Champaign, IL: Research Press.

McGinnis, E. & Goldstein, A. (1997). *Skillstreaming the adolescent: New strategies and perspectives for teaching social skills*. Champaign, IL: Research Press.

Mills, R. (1956). *Learning Methods Test*. Ft. Lauderdale, FL: Mills Center.

Orton, S. (1937). *Reading, writing and speech problems in children*. New York: W. Norton.

Rehabilitation Act Amendments of 1998, for Section 504. PL 105-220 (Title IV of the Workforce Investment Act of 1998) 29 U.S.C. § 794d.

Sylvester, H. (2002). *The Legend of the Blue Heron: Living with Learning Disabilities*. Farmington, ME: Oxtown Publishers.

Tomlinson, C. (1999). *The differentiated classroom: Responding to the needs of all learners*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Vocational Rehabilitation Act of 1973, Section 504. PL 93-112 U.S.C. § 794.

About the author: Kourtland Koch is Assistant Professor, Dept. of Special Education, Ball State University, Muncie, IN 47306