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Lynn Merlone  
Dolores Moran

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*An Article Published in*

*TEACHING Exceptional Children Plus*

*Volume 4, Issue 4, March 2008*

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## Abstract

Fifth grade students with learning disabilities receive a ten-week unit on learning styles and the special education process as part of their transition to the middle school. Developed by a learning center teacher and guidance counselor, the program is derived from the literature on self-determination and from the work of Mel Levine. The curriculum includes lessons about special education, specific disabilities and learning styles, coping strategies, and advocacy. These lessons highlight learning strengths, and seek to reframe any negative presumptions students have about their educational program. Student review their academic file to learn more about their learning profile. At the end of the unit, students know more about why they receive special education services, feel positive about their learning strengths, and are empowered to take on new challenges as they move to the middle school.

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## Keywords

self-advocacy, demystification, transition,

## SUGGESTED CITATION:

Merlone, L. & Moran, D. (2008). Transition works: Self-awareness and self-advocacy skills for students in the elementary learning center. *TEACHING Exceptional Children Plus*, 4(4) Article 1. Retrieved [date] from <http://escholarship.bc.edu/education/tecplus/vol4/iss4/art1>

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Students often begin their special education careers with a sense of frustration and defeat after many experiences with failure and confusion. Students with learning disabilities may lack a positive or realistic self-concept (Hoffman, 2003), experience negative moods, and rate their self-efficacy as low in comparison with students without disabilities, including those who demonstrate underachievement (Lackaye & Margalit, 2006). Helping these students develop self-awareness of their learning styles, including their strengths and needs, allows them to overcome negative self-attribution (Lackaye & Margalit, 2006), make positive choices (Hoffman, 2003), in addition to developing and achieving personal goals (Palmer & Wehmeyer, 2003; Lackaye & Margalit, 2006; Schreiner, 2007). When the student reaches self-awareness, a knowledge of supports available, and a realistic view of how one's goals and skills can be matched, then the foundation for self-advocacy and self-determination is laid (Palmer & Wehmeyer, 2003; Schreiner, 2007).

Demystification is a process to help students develop self-awareness and self-realization. Developed by Mel Levine (2002), demystification is a conversation that an educator has with students individually or in small groups to help them understand what their strengths are, where they need assistance, and how the school or teacher will help them. The focus is positive, and exact terms - technical or lay - are used. The goal of demystification is to clarify any misconceptions students may have about their needs or difficulties, describe possible options to help with remediation, instill a sense of optimism, and allow students to

**Optimistic messages about the implications of having a learning disability have a positive impact.**

fully participate in their educational planning and programs.

Research has demonstrated that while special educators value the development of awareness and self-determination in students, many feel they need training and information on how to accomplish this work (Browder, Wood, Test, Karvonen, & Algozzine, 2001; Mason, Field, Sawilowsky, 2004). Two years ago, the authors, a learning specialist and a school counselor, developed a program designed to teach students about special education, learning styles, coping strategies, and self-advocacy. The purpose of this paper is to give an overview of a ten-week unit that incorporates ideas on self-awareness and self-advocacy from the self-determination literature and from Levine's model of management by profile. The authors hope that some of our ideas may provide a starting place for other educators who are interested in offering instruction of these skills to their students.

### **Program Description**

Fifth grade students in the learning center have participated in the Building Awareness - Fifth Grade Smarts unit for the past two years. We selected this age group because students are cognitively ready to utilize this information (Palmer & Wehmeyer, 2003), and because fifth grade is the final year at the elementary school for our district. This unit is part of the students' transition plans, along with visits to the middle school, writing activities for the students, and consultation with middle school staff. There are four main points emphasized throughout the lessons that form the core message we hope these students will remember:

- Students in the fifth grade learning center can do fifth grade work. The phrase we use here is, “Students in fifth grade learning center have fifth grade smarts.”
- Everyone’s mind has strengths.
- Practice can strengthen needs.
- Self-advocacy is important and effective when one understands one’s learning styles, learning strategies, and knows how to seek help assertively.

The ten-week curriculum has two sections. The first five lessons come from Mel Levine’s (1993) book *All Kinds of Minds*, an overview of his work written for students. The first lesson is an introduction to the brain and its functions. Parents and educators need to pay attention to identify students’ interests and abilities, and engage them with experiences that will enable them to move forward

(Fernandez, 2008). Often, school systems set goals that challenge students in their area of disability, such as performing well on standardized tests and achieving good grades. Many students with learning and behavioral challenge have difficulties with executive function – making expected tasks such as planning, understanding, attending, and remembering arduous and frustrating (Brown, 2008). In our introductory lesson, we liken the brain to a control center that houses a huge storage area of many files. We identify parts of the brain and review some of their tasks. During the next four lessons, we focus on the brain’s functions as attention, memory, organization, and behavior. We chose these topics because most of our students have demonstrated needs in these areas. Each lesson begins with an overview of the function, includes an activity to self-assess the student’s strengths and needs in that area, and ends with strategies for improvement.

**Figure 1: Student Survey**

<i>TRUE OR FALSE: What It Means to Have a Learning Disability</i>		
T	F	I cannot do well in school because I have a learning disability.
T	F	It will be hard for me to get a job because I have a learning disability.
T	F	Students with learning disabilities don’t go to college.
T	F	I will probably be in a learning center until I graduate high school.
T	F	Students who have a learning disability with one subject are sometimes gifted in another subject.
T	F	Having a learning disability means I’ll have less choice in what kind of job I can have.
T	F	I can name some strengths or talents that I have.
T	F	Understanding my learning disability will make me a better student.
T	F	I can learn to use the things I’m good at to help me with those classes that are hard for me.

The second group of five lessons, derived from the curriculum *Who I Can Be is up to Me* (Campbell-Whatley, 2004), teaches the students about special education and self-advocacy as it applies to them in fifth grade. As educators, we need to teach and model the

perseverance that the students will need in order to handle the challenges of their learning disabilities (Brown, 2008). This section begins with a True/False survey to measure the students' perceptions regarding of the implications of having a learning disability.

**Figure 2: Unit Overview**

<i>Lesson I: The Brain</i>	<p>What is “mind work”?</p> <p>How does the brain function?</p> <p>How can I make my weak mind functions stronger?</p>
<i>Lesson II: Attention</i>	<p>Why paying attention is important?</p> <p>How can I pay better attention at home and at school?</p>
<i>Lesson III: Memory</i>	<p>What is short-term, long-term, and working memory?</p> <p>What are some strategies to improve my memory storage and retrieval?</p>
<i>Lesson IV: Organization</i>	<p>How does being organized help me be a better student?</p> <p>What are some tools and procedures at school that keep students organized?</p>
<i>Lesson V: Behavior</i>	<p>What are some rules at school or home that I need help to understand?</p> <p>What strategies can I use to improve my behavior?</p>
<i>Lesson VI: Defining a Disability</i>	<p>What is a physical, emotional, and learning disability?</p> <p>What is my learning disability?</p> <p>What are my learning strengths?</p>
<i>Lesson VII: A Learning Disability Can't Stop Me!</i>	<p>Who are some famous people who successfully overcame a learning disability?</p> <p>What does this tell me about me and my learning disability?</p>
<i>Lesson VIII: Getting the Special Education Supports I Need</i>	<p>What is an I. E. P.?</p> <p>How did I get to have special education supports and services?</p>
<i>Lesson IX: Asking for help</i>	<p>What is a modification?</p> <p>How do I ask my teachers for help?</p>
<i>Lesson X: Self-Talk</i>	<p>What is negative and positive self-talk?</p> <p>How can I change my attitude, especially if I'm frustrated or having a bad day?</p>

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During the course of these next five weeks there are a variety of activities to give students definitions of disabilities, to learn about famous people who overcame learning difficulties, an overview of the process to identify and recommend placement in a learning center, how to advocate for oneself and ask for help, and overcoming frustration and changing one's attitude. The phase of the program ends with a retake of the survey and an evaluation. Figure 2 features a bulleted outline of this unit.

The final phase of this unit is the exit interview with the guidance counselor. Here, students may review their special education file, including test results, the IEP, and relevant documentation regarding response to intervention. Fifth grade is the year where students take part in a career awareness program that involves exposure to multiple intelligences and an interest inventory, so we include these ideas in the context of this meeting as appropriate.

### Results

A short evaluation concludes the unit. It begins with a listing of the ten lessons, and then asks the student to list the following: what they think they will remember in middle school; what they found most important; and whether next year's fifth grade students should receive these lessons. Listing topics and then asking students what they will remember in the future can be tricky, since the list acts as a cue. However, many of the students have memory issues, which could result in no answer at all. The fact that the answers

to the questions regarding what they will remember and what they found important are quite different from each other suggests that this list may not have led students to particular answers. The top three vote getters for the question of what they will remember were asking for help, organization, and behavior, in descending order. For what they thought was most important, the students' top three choices were what is a learning disability; famous people with disabilities; and a tie between asking for help and changing their attitude. Clearly, the optimistic messages about the implications of having a learning disability

have a positive impact. In addition, student comments, which ranged from feeling comfortable with one's learning style; feeling they could reframe for themselves derogatory comments made about attending special education classes; and feeling more positive about asking questions when confused all

point to the unit's usefulness. For the final question about offering such a program next year, all but one student agreed that it would be helpful for students – again for very positive reasons. These include students' possible misconceptions about learning disabilities and intelligence, as well as teaching students to ask for help and deal with frustration and stress.

The survey given to students at the beginning and end of the unit reveal, in general, a more positive attitude in general among the students. The biggest change is in the students' initial feeling that their disability would limit opportunities to go to college or achieve a career of their choice. At the end of

**The meeting begins with acknowledgment that while the student is aware of his or her learning difficulties, the purpose of this meeting is to see what the child and the school know about the student's strengths.**

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the unit, most students disagreed with that statement.

The final feedback tool for this unit is the file review with the guidance counselor. This meeting begins with acknowledging that, while the student is aware of his or her learning difficulties, the purpose of this meeting is to see what the child and the school know about the student's strengths and needs. This in itself is an empowering experience for the students. Some students are genuinely surprised at learning the areas in which they excel in – or that they indeed have learning strengths. The conversation usually leads to a discussion of multiple intelligences, what types of careers might make use of the child's strengths, why certain interventions are part of the student's program, and the student's goals for the future. For many students, especially those with significant reading or memory issues, the meeting takes on a reassuring tone, given that many adults who are happy with their lives do not read or remember well. While memorizing and reading are huge parts of the elementary school, the students will learn many strategies and tricks to be independent as adults. During this meeting, we may review some of the points from the curriculum: do one's best, ask for help before getting too confused or frustrated, and use a stress-reducing strategy or activity. Finally, students discuss what new or important concepts they learned from the Building Awareness-Fifth Grade Smarts program, which gives another opportunity for clarification and evaluation. The student's body language alone demonstrates that they see their school career and achievement in a more positive light.

One challenge to assessing the effectiveness of such a program is whether students actually apply the skills they learned in the classroom to real life settings (Browder et

al., 2001). This is difficult to assess in the setting described in this paper because these students move on to the middle school. We lay the groundwork for students to continue with this work by informing the learning specialists at the middle school of this program, and by including some of the skills taught in the students' IEPs. In the meantime, the students have a few months at the end of their fifth grade year to practice skills. They leave our school and our learning center with a better understanding of what it is they need to work on for the following year and perhaps the rest of their lives. They are in a better position to advocate for themselves as they move on in their education.

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### About the Authors:

**Lynn Merlone, M.S.W.** is a Guidance Counselor at Jaffrey Grade School in Jaffrey, New Hampshire.

**Dolores Moran, M.Ed.** is a Learning Specialist at Jaffrey Grade School in Jaffrey, New Hampshire.

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### Figure 3: Books for Upper Elementary and Middle School Students

***All Kinds of Minds*** by Dr. Mel Levine. Educators Publishing Service 1-800-225-5750. [www.epsbooks.com](http://www.epsbooks.com)

An overview of learning difficulties, including attention deficits; reading and language disorders; and memory, motor and social skill problems in story format. Each area features the students' strengths, how teachers help them address their weakness at school, a look at their future as grown-ups, and strategies to improve each learning difficulty.

***Career Game Explorer Edition*** by Rick Trow Productions. 1-800-247-9404 [www.careergame.com](http://www.careergame.com)

Based on the work of John L. Holland, this inventory for upper elementary students matches skills and interests to possible career areas. The color-coded workbooks are visually interesting, which makes for a fun introduction to career choice making.

***Doing and Being Your Best*** by Pamela Espeland and Elizabeth Verdick. Free Spirit Publishing. 1-800-735-7323. [www.freespirit.com](http://www.freespirit.com).

Part of the *Adding Assets Series for Kids*, this book helps students be aware of boundaries and expectations that exist in families, neighborhoods, and schools. Chapters on adult and peer role models help the reader realize there are resources available to help one meet one's own, and others', positive expectations.

***Getting Organized without Losing It*** by Janet S. Fox. Free Spirit Publishing. 1-800-735-7323. [www.freespirit.com](http://www.freespirit.com).

A self-help manual for managing time, materials and space. This humorous book includes lists, charts, and samples of strategies for the student to try.

***The Mind that's Mine*** by Mel Levine, Carl W. Swartz and Melinda B. Wakely Educators Publishing Service 1-800-225-5750 [www.epsbooks.com](http://www.epsbooks.com)

Another overview of Mel Levine's work in manual format. Some of the chapters in this book cover the same topics in *All Kinds of Minds*, and refer to this book. Additional topics include an overview of the brain, problem solving, skill building, and noticing one's strengths (called affinities).

***The School Survival Guide for Kids with LD*** by Rhoda Cummings and Gary Fisher. Free Spirit Publishing. 1-800-735-7323. [www.freespirit.com](http://www.freespirit.com).

An affirming book that gives strategies for strengthening learning difficulties and for coping with the stresses that learning differences can bring. The book includes very specific suggestions, such as using fingers to multiply by nine or developing a word bank to help with spelling.

***Who I Can Be is up to Me: Program Guide and Student Manual*** by Gloria D. Campbell-Whatley. Research Press. 1-800-519-2707. [www.researchpress.com](http://www.researchpress.com).

Already cited in the reference section, this curriculum outline and workbook make a good starting point for teaching self-advocacy and self-awareness.

***You're Smarter than You Think*** by Thomas Armstrong. [Free Spirit Publishing](http://www.freespirit.com). 1-800-735-7323.

An overview of the eight multiple intelligences based on the work of Howard Gardner. Chapters include self-assessment, a description of each intelligence, strategies to strengthen weaknesses, and kid-friendly resources

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## Figure 4: Web-based Resources for Students, Parents, and Teachers

All Kinds of Minds ([www.allkindsofminds.org](http://www.allkindsofminds.org)).

*Based on the work of Mel Levine, this site on learning and learning differences includes research updates and articles, interventions and strategies, and resources for parents and educators.*

BrainConnection ([www.brainconnection.com](http://www.brainconnection.com)).

*Information (including games for students) on a variety of topics related to the brain and its function for adults, students, and educators. Topics areas include general, education, and clinical.*

Indiana University on Disability and Community ([www.iidc.indiana.edu](http://www.iidc.indiana.edu)).

*This university-based resource has seven focus areas. The last two top bars of the Home Page - Disability Information and Family Resources - are especially helpful for students and parents.*

LD OnLine ([www.ldonline.org](http://www.ldonline.org))

*Topics related to learning differences and attention deficit disorders for parents, students, and educators.*

Schwab Learning ([www.schwablearning.org](http://www.schwablearning.org)).

*Website for parents of students with learning and/or attention difficulties. Information about specific learning difficulties, topics related to education, and child development from the early years to post high school is easy to access with pull-down menus.*

Spark Top ([www.sparktop.org](http://www.sparktop.org))

*Interactive website for students with learning disabilities and/or attention deficit disorders. It features easy-to-understand information, chat rooms, games and activities, as well as a teacher resource section.*