

# Try a Disability on for Size: Sensitizing School Personnel

Mary Jane Anderson

## ABSTRACT

Education professionals may feel uncomfortable or unprepared when interacting with students with disabilities within school settings. Several federal mandates have been passed in the last 30 years to ensure that students with disabilities receive the same educational services as students without disabilities. Although these students are now in the school setting, minimal training is conducted with regular educators – classroom teachers, principals, counselors – to sensitize and prepare them to work effectively with students with special learning abilities. Creating a school climate that accepts and embraces all students is typically part of the school counselor's role. This paper outlines hands-on activities that counselors can use as an in-service training for school personnel. The activities simulate perceptual, learning, and physical difficulties to help participants feel and respond to what everyday life may be like for students who live with disabilities. A list of materials, procedures, and questions for reflection and discussion are included for each of the ten activities.

## TRY A DISABILITY ON FOR SIZE: SENSITIZING SCHOOL PERSONNEL WHO WORK WITH STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

Teachers, counselors, and principals often are at a loss when faced with interacting with students with disabilities. These education professionals may be unfamiliar, uncomfortable, and overwhelmed by a child's disabling condition. Feelings of inadequacy and an inability to relate may cause professionals to shy away from, overlook, or even ignore the many needs of students with special learning abilities. Beginning with the passage of P. L. 94-142, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975, public schools became responsible for educating students with special needs in the least restrictive environment. Since that time, the revisions of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) have further shaped the course of special education services ranging from segregated classes in schools to mainstreaming, to, in some districts across the country, the full inclusion of all students with special needs into regular education classrooms. Although these students are now in the school setting,

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minimal training is conducted with regular educators — classroom teachers, principals, counselors — to sensitize and prepare them to work and interact effectively with students with special learning abilities.

Creating a school climate which accepts and embraces all students is typically part of the school counselor's role. To help every child achieve academically, counselors must identify learning and social barriers that negatively impact the student's ability to succeed.

Sometimes those barriers come from disapproving, judgmental or stereotypical attitudes of school personnel. In most cases, educators are not intentionally critical or uncaring — they simply lack experience with or do not understand special learning populations. When impediments in the school environment are discovered, counselors should advocate for change and develop programs to address student needs. One such program is the implementation of staff training to increase sensitivity to students with special needs.

Specific sensitivity training about the impact of having a disability can help to alleviate the distancing that sometimes occurs between helping professionals and students with special needs. The use of experiential activities in sensitivity training has been found to be an effective way to foster cognitive development (Epstein, 1994). Research has revealed that individuals with advanced levels of cognitive development have greater self-knowledge and self-awareness, enhanced self-confidence, self-esteem and internal locus of control, and possess more tolerance and respect for differences (Reiman, as cited in Brendel, Kolbert, & Foster, 2002; Sidanius, Pratto, & Bobo, 1996; Vogt, 1997). Experiential

activities also aid in forming more positive attitudes towards others (Brewer, as cited in Srull & Wyer, 1988; Petty & Cacioppo, 1981) and in creating more positive and caring responses and behaviors towards others (Epstein, as cited in Tyler & Guth, 1999). Filer (1982) also noted the importance of using real-life interactions with people with disabilities, as well as role-plays and simulations as a way of creating empathy and reducing avoidance behaviors in counselors in training.

The simulations presented here have been gathered over the last thirty years. Except for those otherwise cited, the activities were obtained from a Council for Exceptional Children's Annual Conference workshop (Stayton, O'Brien, & Davis-Wilson, 1980) and are used here with permission. They may be used with one leader where all participants do the same activity at one time. Or, if the directions are copied and posted, the activities may be set up as stations around the room through which participants move in small groups of two to four (with the exception of activities one and nine, which are designed to be completed with a large group). In workshops conducted by the author, attendees are asked to write a short reflection after completing each experience. These are helpful later during the debriefing and discussion period.

If the presenter keeps things moving, the ten activities presented here should take approximately two hours for participants to complete and discuss. It may be helpful to prepare a short list of definitions of different disabilities that are commonly seen in students in your school or district. Adding some suggestions for modifications that can be made in the classroom setting and tips

for successful interactions with students with disabilities may also be useful.

### **ACTIVITY 1 THE STIGMA OF LABELING**

(Idea from Dan Jacobs, University of New Orleans special education graduate student, 2000.)

#### **Purpose**

In this activity participants will gain a sense of the stigma placed on children with special needs through the diagnostic labeling process that is required for students to access special education services.

Materials: Index cards, pencils, envelopes

#### **Procedure**

1. Instruct the audience to think of one of their worst physical or personality attributes, write it down, and put it in the envelope. Explain that they will not have to share what is on the card with anyone.
2. Instruct them to turn that attribute into an adjective, and to put the adjective before their name. For example, a person whose worst attribute is his big ears would think of himself as "Big-Eared John".
3. Instruct participants to imagine being referred to by this attribute for their entire lives, to consider that people have made decisions about their access to services, including what kind of education they received, potential career choices, employment opportunities, social activities, and daily living activities, based solely upon this description.
4. Ask the audience to consider the fact that this information may be shared with a number of different individuals throughout the day, months, and their

entire lives. Some of these individuals really care about them, because they are family members, clergy or teachers. Others may not be so closely connected with them and really don't care about them. Instruct them to think about the fact that some of these people may actually resent them, because they represent changes in the systems, they take more time, create more work, and should just "stay in the special classes."

5. Have participants consider the fact that while this information about them is supposed to be kept strictly private, that individuals seeing your attribute may have varying degrees of regard for the term confidentiality, and some may even disregard it completely.
6. Lastly, enlighten participants to the fact that, through this experience, they have gained some sense of what children with disabilities go through every single day in schools across the country. This kind of experience happens when we look at a person with a disability solely in terms of their disability, and we do not consider the other gifts and talents that the person may have to offer. Labeling and stigmatization happens when we think of persons as being a disability vs. having a disability. This exercise emphasizes the need for using person-first language in working with persons with disabilities.

#### **Discussion Questions**

Which aspect of the exercise made you the most uncomfortable?

How did you feel when thinking about the above possibilities?

What might you do differently in your interactions with persons with disabilities in the future?

**ACTIVITY 2**  
**PHYSICAL DISABILITY SIMULATION**

**Purpose**

To help participants gain a sense of what it is like to have restricted use or no use of hands

Materials: Duct tape or string, coloring sheets, crayons or markers

**Procedure**

1. Assist participants in tying their dominant hands behind their backs and completing the coloring activity using only their non-dominant hands. Or, assist participants in duct taping 3 fingers together on the dominant hand and use the taped hands to color the worksheet.
2. Occasionally scold the participants for not working faster, for coloring outside the lines, or for the work being so messy, to help them feel the pressure some teachers and parents may place on children.
3. Have them work quietly for about 5 minutes, then share some of their thoughts with others.

**Alternate Activity for Physical Disability Simulation**

Materials: Plain paper, pencils

**Procedure**

1. Instruct participants to write their names in their best penmanship on a blank sheet of paper with their non-dominant hand, and then ask them to reflect on the experience.

**ACTIVITY 3**  
**FIGURE-GROUND PERCEPTION DISORDER**

**Purpose**

This activity will enable participants to experience an inability to visually attend to relevant stimuli while ignoring irrelevant stimuli, referred to as a deficit in figure-ground perception.

Materials: Faces/vase picture\*, beautiful woman/old hag picture\*

**Procedure**

1. In groups of two or three, instruct participants to look at the picture and describe to their classmates what they see. Ask them to explain to each other how what is seen by them may be different from what is seen by others.
2. Difficulties with figure-ground perception can occur auditorially as well as visually. What difficulties might people have when they cannot block out excess stimuli?
3. Have participants write some reflections on the experience.

\*To access the pictures, perform a Google internet search for "figure-ground perception" and "faces/vase" picture (Wertheimer, 1912) or "beautiful woman/old hag" picture (Leeper, 1935).

**ACTIVITY 4**  
**LEARNING DISABILITY SIMULATION - PHONETIC PERCEPTION**

**Purpose**

In this activity participants will experience the difficulty of not being able to remember, from one reading experience to the next, standard phonetic rules of the English language.

Materials: Word cards on which phonetically spelled words are printed

**Procedure**

1. Hold up first card. Ask participants to sound out words aloud.
2. Accept correct answers, or give them, as needed, and repeat procedure for all word cards. Add some of your own!  
Phat=fat (ph as in elephant)  
Pheym=fame (ph as in elephant, ey as in they)  
Tioet=shut (ti as in action, oe as in does)  
Ghreim=frame (gh in cough, ei in weigh)  
Ghrend=friend (gh as in cough)  
Ghoti=fish (gh in laugh, o in women, ti in station)  
Pon=pawn (o as in dog)  
Fut=foot (u as in put)

**Discussion Questions**

What parts of the activity did you find most difficult? How could you cope better?

**ACTIVITY 5  
VISUAL IMPAIRMENT SIMULATION**

**Purpose**

In this activity participants will gain a sense of what it feels like to have three different problems with vision.

Materials: Simulation goggles\*; coloring sheets, word find puzzles or mazes; pencils and/or crayons

**Procedure**

1. Ask participants to try on each pair of goggles, then complete the activity sheets. They should discuss their feelings and difficulties within the group as they proceed. Ask what the experience makes them think about and write some reflections.

\*The goggles simulate the visual impairments glaucoma, (safety goggles smeared with glue), tunnel vision (goggles covered with black construction

paper with a small hole in the center of the paper), and peripheral vision (goggles covered with black construction paper except on the sides).

**ACTIVITY 6  
LEARNING DISABILITY SIMULATION -  
WRITTEN LANGUAGE DIFFICULTY**

**Purpose**

To acquaint attendees with the difficulty some may have in forming complete sentence patterns.

Materials: Strips of paper with the following words written on them: anticipate not any aggression do I further of acts rebels the by

**Procedure**

1. Tell participants that not all people have the ability to put words together in sentences that form structured language patterns as we know them, and that this activity will help them get a sense of that.
2. Distribute paper strips. Encourage participants to quietly try to figure out what the sentence says. After a few minutes, select volunteers to read it, even if they don't raise their hands. If no one can figure it out, share the secret sentence: I do not anticipate any further acts of aggression by the rebels.
3. Discuss strategies used for figuring out the sentence, how they felt when they could/couldn't do it, and how they think others may feel under the same circumstances.

**ACTIVITY 7  
PHYSICAL IMPAIRMENT SIMULATION  
USING A WHEELCHAIR**

**Purpose**

To help participants experience using a wheelchair

Materials: Wheelchair (usually available for loan from medical services store); strips of paper with written directions to travel to several destinations in the building (place paper strips in a large manila envelope).

**Procedure**

1. Instruct participants to select one strip of paper from the envelope.
2. Using the wheelchair, they are to follow the instructions on the strip. Allow a limited time (5-10 minutes) to complete the task. If you have a large group, two to three students may follow, but not assist, the person in the wheelchair and make observations as to the difficulties they encounter or responses from others.
3. Participants should write reflections to be discussed at the end of class.

Possible tasks for the strips:

- Imagine there is a fire and get out of the building through the nearest exit. Return to group.
- Find a soda machine and buy a soda. Return to the group.
- Get a drink of water from the nearest water fountain and return to the group.
- Use the nearest restroom facilities and return to the group.
- Ask someone for directions to a telephone and find it. Return to the group.

**ACTIVITY 8  
VISUAL-MOTOR COORDINATION  
DISORDER SIMULATION**

**Purpose**

Through this activity participants will experience an inability to coordinate vision with hand movements while tracing or completing a simple design when looking in a mirror.

Materials: Mirrored tiles (from hardware store) sized 12x12, pencils, file folders, maze or connect the dot worksheets

**Procedure**

Participants will work in pairs for this simulation.

- Place a maze worksheet flat on the table in front of you.
- Hold a file folder horizontally over the maze worksheet, blocking your direct line of vision to the maze worksheet.
- Your partner should stand facing you, holding a mirror at a 90° angle, thus allowing you to view the worksheet only from the reflection in the mirror.
- While looking at the mirror, work through the maze.

\*See an example of how to hold the folder at <http://pe.usf.edu/projects/civitan/projects/roleplay.htm>

**ACTIVITY 9  
LEARNING DISABILITY  
SIMULATION - DYSLEXIA**

**Purpose**

This activity will help participants develop a deeper understanding of what it is like to have dyslexia and other reading difficulties.

Materials: Two handouts - several copies of "An Experience in Specific Learning Disability," one copy of the Translation of the "An Experience in Specific Learning Disability"

1. Randomly distribute "An Experience in Specific Learning Disability" handout to all participants except one. The participant who did not receive the "An Experience in Specific Learning Disability" handout will receive the translation handout. Remember who received the translation handout, but act as though everyone in the group received the same handout.
2. Ask two or three participants to read aloud their handout. Allow time for them to struggle with their understanding, pronunciation, and interpretation. As they struggle, rush the participants by putting your hands on your hips and/or ask them to speed up their reading.
3. After a few minutes ask the participant who received the translation handout to read it aloud. After that, provide others with the translation. Then ask the following reflection questions:
  - What were you feeling as you began and continued through the exercise?
  - What questions and thoughts did you have as you heard the translation being read easily?
  - Based on this activity, how might you change your interactions with others in the future?

AN EXPERIENCE IN SPECIFIC LEARNING DISABILITY AND HOW IS YOUR VISUAL PERCEPTION?

Please decode the following:

E ach chilb miths le ar mimp biza dili tyis a niudiuib uald ut s omeg sne ral

oberact eris tic a bo exist:

ye oraye yas ever ape or ado veanerape lwtel lip ence; so me oft he we re gre nelevt syw gto ws ap pear tod e — bis or ber sof wotor ac tivity; d. so r ber sofe wotional ity; b. sor be Rs off ber ceptiou; D i sorbersof concegtion; D, so. R be r s o f a tt en tiow; d, s orbers ofwe wory.

NOW letsbiscus ssowe of your "percegtual grodlews."

1. li ststeom eo F the things t hat we bey onrr eab inp t ask wor ebiff ie ult.
2. I is tso we o Ft he thi ng s yon bib t haten ad led yo u tor eab tyis pager. Wh atmere so we of yo ur re ac ti ou so rt ho ug tsw hi le ntt emgt in gtor ea bthis?

Translation:

Each child with a learning disability is an individual but some general characteristics do exist:

He/she has average or above average intelligence; some of the more prevalent symptoms appear to be — disorders of motor activity; disorders of emotionality; disorders of perception; disorders of conception; disorder of attention; disorders of memory.

Now let's discuss some of your "perceptual problems."

1. List some of the things that made your reading task more difficult.
2. List some of the things you did that enabled you to read this paper. What were some of your reactions or thoughts while attempting to read this?

**ACTIVITY 10  
READING DISABILITY SIMULATION -  
SPECIFIC LEARNING CHANNEL  
LIMITATIONS**

**Purpose**

During this activity participants will experience the difficulties and

frustrations when asked to use only their visual learning channels, and, specifically, what is experienced by children who learn well by what they hear, but not by what they see.

Materials: Ladle Rat Rotten Hut Handout

### Procedure

1. Direct participants to take a copy of the passage and read it silently. Tell participants to raise their hands when the passage starts to make sense.
2. When everyone has raised their hands, or has reached their tolerance level, take turns reading some of the passage aloud. Allow people some time to struggle with the reading.

### Reflection Questions:

- How do you think you would feel if everyone around you read the story immediately?
- Can you think of instances in schools when this may occur? Discuss, and then write some reflections.

### LADLE RAT ROTTEN HUT

Chace (1956)

Wants pawn term dare worsted ladle gull hoe lift wetter muder inner ladle cordage honor itch offer lodge, dock florest. Disk ladle gull orphan worry putty ladle rat cluck wetter ladle rat hut, an fur disk raisin pimple colder Ladle Rat Rotten Hut.

Wan moaning Ladle Rat Rotten Hut's murder colder inset, "Ladle Rat Rotten Hut, heresy ladle basking winsome burden barter an skirker cockles. Tick disk ladle basking tutor cordage offer groin-murder hoe lifts honor udder site offer florist. Shaker lake! Dun stopper laundry wrote! Dun stopper peck floors! Dun daily-doily inner florist,

an yonder nor sorghum stanches, dun stopper torque wet strainers!"

"Hoe-cake, murder," resplendent Ladle Rat Rotten Hut, an tickle ladle basking an stuttered off.

Honor wrote tutor cordage offer groin-murder, Ladle Rat Rotten Hut mitten anomalous woof.

"Wail, wail, wail!" set disk wicket woof, "Evanescent Ladle Rat Rotten Hut! Wares are putty ladle gull goring wizard ladle basking?"

"Armor goring tumor groin-murder's," replisal ladle gull. "Grammar's seeking bet. Armor ticking arson burden barter an shirker cockles."

"O hoe!" Heifer gnats woke, "setter wicket woof, butter taught tomb shelf, "Oil tickle shirt court tutor curdage offer groin-murder. Oil ketchup wetter letter, an den-O bore!"

Soda wicket woof tucker shirt court, an whinny retched a cordage offer groin-murder, picked inner windrow, an sore debtor pore oil worming worse lion inner bet. Inner flesh, disk abdominal woof lipped honor bet, paunched honor pore oil worming, an garbled erupt. Den disk ratchet ammonol pot honor groin-murder's nut cup an gnat-gun, any curdled ope inner bet.

Inner ladle wile, Ladle Rat Rotten Hut a raft attar cordage, an ranker dough ball. "Comb ink, sweat hard," setter wicket woof, disgracing is verse.

Ladle Rat Rotten Hut entity bet rum, an stud buyer groin-murder's bet.

"O Grammar!" crater ladle gull historically, "Water bag ieer gut!" "A nervous sausage bag iee!"

"Battered lucky chew whiff, sweat hard," setter bloat-Thursdays woof, wetter wicket small honors phase.

"O, Grammar, water bag noise! A nervous sore suture anomalous prognosis!"

"Battered small your whiff, doling,"  
whiskered dole woof, ants mouse worse  
waddling.

"O Grammar, water bag mouser  
gut! A nervous sore suture bag mouse!"

Daze worry on-forger-nut ladle  
gull's lest warts. Oil offer sodden , caking  
offer carvers an sprinkling otter bet, disk  
hoard-hoarded woof lipped own proe  
Ladle Rat Rotten Hut an garbled erupt.

Mural: Yonder nor sorghum  
stenches shut ladle gulls stopper torque  
wet strainers.

### CONCLUSION

It is helpful to have a brief discussion period after completing the activities. It is not uncommon for participants to describe an eye-opening experience after working through the disability simulations. Experiencing the various difficulties encountered helps attendees tap into the affective realm, and feelings such as "frustrated, discouraged, stupid, embarrassed, angry, overwhelmed, helpless, powerless, afraid, and ashamed" are often expressed. Behavioral responses may be communicated also: "I wanted to hide, to turn around and give up," "My mind kept telling my hand to go in one direction, but my hand wouldn't obey," "I couldn't wait to get those glasses off — I can't imagine what it would be like to wear them all the time," and "I felt like I didn't have a clue as to what was being read, like I would never be able to catch up, and why bother trying? No wonder kids act out when they have such academic troubles!" The richness that comes from experiential learning is something that cannot be captured in a textbook, lecture series, or even through observation. Although these activities have been

developed for use with school personnel, they may just as effectively stimulate parents to gain insight into their children's special learning difficulties.

In our society, and especially for school-age children, the stigma of being different is enormous. It is our duty as school counselors and advocates to help teachers, paraprofessionals, parents, principals, and students to develop a deeper understanding and regard for the often profound challenges students with disabilities face every day. Ultimately, what we want people to acknowledge is that while some learning and intellectual differences may exist, we have more similarities than we have differences. Students with disabilities have the same basic needs, desires, and dreams for the future as persons without disabilities. Developing an understanding of and interacting with students with disabilities provides the opportunity to practice true acceptance of others, and to consider more deeply what it means to be a valid and contributing member of our society. It also calls for us to develop patience, to be grateful for our own capacities and talents, and to acknowledge our own shortcomings and challenges.

As humans, we often fear most what we know or understand least. Having an encounter in which participants can gain a sense of another's experience, even momentarily, is a powerful and valuable learning tool. School counselors can share these opportunities for the enrichment of the entire school community.

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