

# Learning to Learn and Teach Despite LD

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*A Case Story Published in*

*TEACHING Exceptional Children Plus*

*Volume 2, Issue 3, January 2006*

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## Abstract

A college professor relates his experiences of being diagnosed with learning disabilities while in high school, which affected his education, eventually making possible doctoral degree attainment. As a special education teacher and school psychologist, he cites the challenge of meeting post-secondary obstacles in transition planning for students with special needs. The author emphasizes the key role of his mentors who have given guidance in his educational and professional life. The importance of long-term mentoring support, advocacy, and social awareness for persons with learning disabilities is shared. Suggestions for teachers, professionals, and individuals with learning disabilities are included that pertain to services, accommodations, and the ability to ensure that each individual has a proper perspective of the parameters of LD.

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## Keywords

learning disabilities, mentors, self advocacy

## SUGGESTED CITATION:

Koch, K.R. (2006). Learning to learn and teach despite LD. *TEACHING Exceptional Children Plus*, 2(3) Article 4. Retrieved [date] from <http://escholarship.bc.edu/education/tecplus/vol2/iss3/art4>

## **Introduction**

Life is influenced externally by events, people, and institutions, but internally by psychological, neurological, and genetic factors. When our families and teachers have great expectations but learning disabilities present great obstacles, life becomes a complex but fascinating adventure. I have learning disabilities and my journey in life has brought me face to face with pain and joy, failure and success. My long educational experience was not an easy pathway to a career. I am a teacher: now a mentor, a facilitator, a change agent, a researcher, and an advocate. This story provides insight for people to know of my struggle, challenge, and motivation.

### **High School Diploma and Bachelor of Science Degree**

#### *High School Experience*

Continual failure and discouragement marked the early and middle school years of my academic career. Fidgeting, forgetfulness, disorganization, excessive talking, leaving my seat without permission, not paying attention to details, and being unprepared for class were just some of my problem behaviors. In elementary school, I was often in trouble for misbehaving. In junior high, I was tracked into the vocational school-to-work program as a result of poor academic performance (Koch, 2004).

High school began no differently than earlier educational experiences. I was not a promising student; my teachers expected little of me. My course in life was already well set. By junior year, I seemed certain to continue on with my job at the supermarket after leaving high school. In the middle of my junior year, three things occurred that changed my

life's direction. First, my mother suffered a nervous breakdown. Second, a neighborhood friend of my late father's became my legal guardian. Third, from 1973 through 1975, prior to the implementation of P. L. 94-142, The Education of All Handicapped Children Act, I was enrolled in a school for students with special needs.

At The Mills School, my learning difficulties were evaluated and assessed for the first time (Mills, 1956). I was diagnosed with specific learning disabilities: dyslexia, dysgraphia, and dyscalculia as well as ADHD. This was the best thing that ever happened to me! Suddenly, a viable and blame-free explanation defined all of the learning problems I had experienced in school. I was overwhelmingly relieved.

I also felt some resentment. From kindergarten to my junior year in high school, every teacher and administrator had failed me. They had not cared, or they lacked the expertise to pinpoint the basis of my learning problems. Nor had my parents been able to determine what was "wrong" with me. The quick and easy assumption had always been that I wasn't trying hard enough, or I was too dumb. Regrettably, diagnosis meant that my academic failures were condoned to some degree. Diagnosis also brought a sense of loss for what might have been. I wanted to become a doctor like my great-grandfather, but my basic remedial classes in high school left me unprepared for the academic demands of college.

Now, I had to process how to define myself as an individual with learning disabilities. I was glad to finally know the problem, but I also wanted to deny that anything was less than ordinary with me. In some ways, I preferred the painful consequences of remaining undiagnosed when I could still be considered "normal," though perhaps a little

lazy. Being permanently diagnosed with the label “learning disabled” (LD), I felt like “LD” was stamped on my forehead, prominently identifying me as a second-class citizen in society. These feelings had to be acknowledged and dealt with. These emotions take years to sort through.

As I was grappling with my new label, I began receiving report cards with a brand new message from The Mills School. My first report card stated in part, “K-- has been experiencing success in all areas.” I was succeeding in school! These messages and the positive interventions, teaching strategies, and behavior plans implemented by the teaching staff allowed me to view my label as a source of empowerment. For the very first time in my life, I had hope. With hope, I was willing to risk holding a dream for my future. That dream was to become a Marine Corps officer. My goal upon high school graduation was admission to the U. S. Naval Academy.

### *College on the Horizon*

Although the LD label provided a source of vindication and empowerment, it was only a diagnosis and not a solution to my learning difficulties. I was still unable to organize materials and thoughts in a logical manner, especially when it came to comprehension for reading and listening. My disability included auditory and visual processing weaknesses. Writing cohesively and concisely was problematic. Additionally, my new motivation led to a tendency to rush through materials and assignments.

Being identified with learning disabilities did change my circumstances. I was better able to understand my limitations and how to address them. One solution was to simply minimize distractions and study in a quiet room by myself. It helped to set a timer for 30-minute study intervals, rewarding my

### Advocating

- Ensure that each individual has a proper perspective of the parameters of LD. This information allows the individual to become a self-advocate and not be in a state of learned helplessness. Utilize the expertise of guidance counselors, human service agencies, and employers who support individuals with special needs.
- Model collaborative practices, rather than adversarial confrontation. Treat all participants as though they want the best for the individual with learning disabilities (LD). Expect that a solution will be found.
- Allow the individual with LD to maintain primary responsibility for advocacy through resolution. This provides a sense of control over planned outcomes (Bramer, 1996).
- Maintain currency on due process issues. Know the difference between entitlement and eligibility (Sylvester, 2002).
- Prior to enrollment or employment, register with either the Disability Services Office at your academic institution or the Human Resource Officer at your place of employment. They offer available support services and provide assistance when the necessary documentation is provided.
- Specify post-secondary choices. Take personal responsibility and the lead role for long-term planning.

self with short breaks to get up and move around. The frequent, scheduled movement helped me feel less confined and enabled me to focus on the task at hand. (I still employ a modified version of this strategy.)

Social skills, such as learning acceptable social behaviors and properly interpreting social cues were daily areas of concern. Memorizing general social scripts was a helpful beginning strategy. I have learned to customize these basic scripts to fit less routine situations with varying rates of success. Anticipating and preplanning conversations while using lists to guide my conversation was another helpful strategy that I continue to

regularly implement to this day. Without this framework to work from, I become nervous, stumble over words, and forget what I want to say. It is hard for me to formulate responses before the topic has changed and my point becomes moot. Knowing why I have these problems makes them easier to accept without getting mad at myself or despairing. When I can't easily do what seems so effortless for those around me, I am able to make an accommodation or modification. One example is allowing extra time to accomplish a task that might take someone else half the time.

While I made great strides at The Mills School, my progress was not sufficient to qualify for acceptance to the U.S. Naval Academy. Despite being diagnosed and receiving effective interventions and instruction, my hard work was not enough to compensate for all the years when I had lagged behind my peers. I was disheartened, but still determined. Now that I had a dream and vision, I did not want to sacrifice it.

Instead of finishing a high school diploma at The Mills School, I transferred to a preparatory school. I was hoping to be one of two students recommended each year for admission to the U.S. Naval Academy. At this school, I was expected to do well, but received no special accommodations or support based on my learning disabilities. Once again, my teachers held the familiar attitude that I just needed to try harder. I did, and barely passed even with extensive tutoring. My grades were high enough to receive a high school diploma at age 20, but not to receive a Naval Academy recommendation. My only remaining option was to attend the Marine Military Academy for a college preparatory post-graduate program. The Marine Military Academy conducted student evaluations and taught remedial courses using students' learning styles. This helped me greatly, but

my SAT scores were still too low for the U.S. Naval Academy. However, two extra years of secondary school had taught me the life skill of perseverance. This was to be my saving grace.

### *Undergraduate Years*

I was accepted to The Citadel and entered college with the intention of joining the Marine Corps upon graduation. To succeed I would need to work hard, prove myself, and manage time wisely. I became an education major with a social studies emphasis simply because no foreign language courses were required. Having learning disabilities so hampered my ability to read and write English, that I felt attempting to learn a second language would be futile.

My faculty advisor at The Citadel impacted my life from the first moment I met him. Before I knew about his expertise, work, and leadership in the field of learning disabilities, he accepted my challenge to help me academically. With his tutelage I passed freshman math, though I had taken the class twice previously. I had been so steadfast in my desire to become a Marine. Now I found all of the values that drew me to a military career in this educator. Day by day, he unfalteringly demonstrated honor, courage to do the right thing, and commitment in the way he chose to live his life. Through his mentorship and guidance, I abandoned my goal to become a Marine and decided to follow his example and become a teacher.

In an elective course, "Introduction to Special Education," my eyes were opened to a new world. Although I was a part of this "labeled" population diagnosed with learning disabilities, I hadn't yet learned that my identity did not need to center on my disabilities, however positively or negatively I chose to view them. A dynamic professor challenged

pre-service teachers to believe in students as “individuals with learning capabilities.” I was being explicitly taught to reject a deficiency model for myself and for every person with learning disabilities or other special needs.

## Teaching and Graduate School

### *New Ambitions and High School Teaching*

Upon college graduation, I immediately entered a Master of Education program with a concentration in special education. While working toward my master’s degree, I became a learning disabilities specialist at a high school in Charleston, South Carolina. My teaching experience gave testimony to the equal importance of the explicit curriculum and the implicit or silent curriculum. All of my actions and expectations, no matter how subtle, affected my students’ rate and degree of success, just as my own teachers’ behavior had impacted me. My title of teacher could accurately be defined as facilitator and mentor.

My own mentor encouraged me to pursue an Education Specialist program in School Psychology. The coordinator became another mentor and coached me throughout my time in the program. The Ed. S. thesis was my first serious research effort (Koch, 1988). The work enabled me to envision an academic career, but had highlighted one of my greatest weaknesses. My writing lacked fluency and organization. I could not organize my thoughts and simultaneously employ sophisticated syntax, vocabulary, or semantics. Today, word processing tools have greatly reduced the burden of checking my written work for spelling and grammar errors.

A move to a smaller school district in South Carolina afforded me an opportunity to work as a special education consultant and school psychologist. I saw first hand that

### Mentoring

- Be a mentor. Coach your students. Take a personal interest in daily life and academic success. Share your experience and expertise (Ratey & Maitland, 2001).
- Develop mentor relationships to help in the initial training phase when questions and uncertainties arise. The mentorship should help the individual with LD to not make the same mistake twice.
- Invite former students or community professionals with a diagnosed learning disability to meet your students with LD. Sharing their road to success gives recognition of achievements and challenges. Remember that all individuals can benefit from opportunities, which enhance self-esteem.
- Promote mentors who provide guidance and leadership in the short-term and over the long haul. Pair inexperienced individuals with seasoned professionals.

transition paths for learning disabled youngsters were still as much at the mercy of fate as my own life had been. I realized that for these students to succeed, school transition and career development planning would need to begin in first grade. I wanted to design and implement programs that would be highly beneficial and appropriate for these children. This was my impetus for seeking a doctoral degree.

### *Doctoral Degree*

In 1991, during an admissions interview for doctoral study in a Department of Special Education at a major university, a nationally prominent faculty member told me, “We don’t admit learning disabled doctoral students here.” I was astonished at this close-mindedness to the learning potential of students with learning disabilities.

While at the Council for Exceptional Children’s Southeastern Conference, I was intrigued by a conference speaker from the University of South Florida. I decided to take

her seminar course, Placement of the Severely Handicapped. Soon, I was driving down weekly from my job in South Carolina to Florida to take other courses she offered. This led to my admittance to the University of South Florida's doctoral program after qualifying with Graduate Record Examination (GRE) scores well above minimum under untimed special accommodations. I began educating the graduate faculty about doctoral candidates with LD. There were as many supporters as there were detractors. I had advanced statistics and research courses to conquer as well as qualification tests and candidate interviews to overcome. I had good days and bad days, good grades and bad grades! My dissertation committee challenged me to stop using the LD label as an excuse and start relying on my own strengths and talents. In retrospect, the committee was saying, "You're better than that." Many of the mentors serving on the committee assisted with the development of my dissertation. With their guidance, I completed my dissertation (Koch, 1998) and added Ph.D. after my name! My mentors cheered my lifetime achievements at age 42.

### *College Teaching*

As a college professor, I am reminded of my own disabilities in subtle ways. One example is my need to read journal articles several times in an attempt to formulate and internalize perceptions related to research findings and conclusions. My department chair provides support and intervention by keeping oral instructions as brief as possible. In addition, he provides multiple examples and then recaps what has just been said. Sometimes he will assist me in the development of a list of priorities using clear, explicit language. He has paired me with a university professor who possesses nearly 30 years of

### Socializing

- Recognize that learned helplessness is a strategy of skills employed to avoid responsibility and ownership.
- Allow the individual time to reflect, develop, and process the most appropriate script. Extra time affords the individual adaptation to the dynamics of potential situations.
- Work in a cooperative fashion. Relationships depend on communication skills that enable individuals to accept failures, achieve goals, trust one another, communicate, and resolve conflicts.
- Suggest tried and proven strategies or procedures for collaboration. Individuals may want to work with others effectively, yet lack the interpersonal skills. Set aside the task for a moment, and focus on the perceived problem.
- Ask the individual to describe the problem, provide solutions, and determine if the matter is resolved.
- Never be rude or show disrespect when attempting to assume responsibility. Always encourage realistic solutions, regardless of the individual's emotional state.

experience at the university level.

After a year in my position, I asked for a number of accommodations. Many I received; others I did not, such as additional time for research completion. Among the accommodations granted was assistance with technology. A scanner and voice recognition software arrived in my office still neatly packaged in the box. As much as I needed this technology, my intimidation factor was such that for months, it sat untouched. I had made one or two calls for computer assistance, but never pressed the matter. Finally, someone took the initiative and hooked the equipment up in my office while I was away giving a conference presentation. I now enjoy the benefits of this technology, as do my departmental colleagues who have no learning disabilities. I am still learning that accommodations are of little value unless I implement

them fully and seek additional assistance if needed.

Maintaining a high level of performance in teaching, along with the research responsibilities of a tenure track position can be overwhelming at times. Anxiety and general fatigue can result. Walking to and from work, exercising, and eating right are known recipes for living well. These simple things help me keep life manageable, enjoyable, and productive.

## Conclusion

Throughout my whole life, school was a struggle. My parents expected me to be a high achiever as they were and accomplish great things, yet my lack of academic success seemed to dictate that I would never amount to much. Not until I was evaluated and diagnosed with learning disabilities was I finally able to learn the skills I needed.

Being identified as learning disabled did close some doors. Some institutions refused to make any special accommodations for me; others viewed my disability as a disqualification and denied me entrance. These experiences were painful and discouraging. However, my story is first and foremost one of triumph over adversity and the power of knowledgeable and caring individuals to positively influence and forever change life scripts. I encourage you to be just such an individual in the lives of others.

It is often difficult for individuals with learning disabilities, diagnosed or undiagnosed, to believe they are successful. Often, they dismiss their unique talents and abilities as commonplace, thinking if they can do it, so too can everyone else (Sylvester, 2002). Individuals with learning disabilities possess intelligence equal to or superior to the general population. They are capable of achieving

success in schools and a vast array of honorable careers. As a mentor, the power exists to reflect and imbue a core belief in the capability of every student to learn and excel, and to foster awareness in the unique abilities of every individual to make a positive contribution in the world.

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