

How Can I Best Prepare My Students So That When They Re-enter A Regular Class They Will Feel Good About Themselves and Experience Academic Success?

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Biography



Margaret entered the teaching profession in Glasgow, Scotland in 1970. However, after immigrating to Canada in 1974 she put her career on hold while she raised her family. After obtaining a Bachelor of Arts from Waterloo University she resumed teaching in 1991. She also obtained Specialist Teacher of the Blind and Specialist in Special Education qualifications. Margaret has since taught in various special education classes as well as grade three for a number of years. She is presently teaching a pilot project class of students with learning disabilities (differences) at Banbury Heights School in Brantford, Ontario.

Abstract

Since beginning teaching this class in September 2003, I have regularly reminded my students that our class is not “the real world” and to that end we have frequently discussed what the students have to learn and do to make a successful transition back to a regular class when the time comes. (A maximum of two years). We have all been completing weekly electronic journals noting our thoughts, feelings and findings along the journey. This paper is an attempt to condense these journals into an informative account, which hopefully will be used as a guide for similar projects.

Context

This pilot program attempts to:

- provide something different from what Learning Disabled (LD) students are currently receiving in regular class
- focus on skills to improve functioning in a regular class
- have time limited, intensive, “in and out” approach
- teach keyboarding and self advocacy skills
- emphasize the use of assistive technology
- include remediation
- help students understand their learning disability

Selection Criteria attempts to:

- meet the criteria for an LD diagnosis
- not present with significant behavioural challenges
- have a willingness to engage in learning opportunities
- have parents/guardians who are supportive and willing to cooperate with the goals of the program

Observations

When I was interviewed then hired for this project I was told that the program “The Mind That’s Mine” by Dr. Mel Levine was to be implemented in the class. Since I had never heard of Dr. Levine I quickly realized what my summer reading would be!

In September I was fortunate to join a staff that was extremely supportive, not just in welcoming my students and me to the school, but which also had a desire to learn more about the work of Dr. Levine. I was also delighted to find nine computers set up in the classroom. Since the students were going to be at the computers for fairly long time spans I bought cheap stools at Ikea to promote proper posture. I called our class the “Junior Tech.” class



No Attention Problems Here!

because I wanted to make this a positive experience, especially since most of these students had come out of regular classes and knew that they would be returning there within a two-year time frame. Also, these students have had many failures in their young lives and I wanted them to be as successful as possible. The children did indeed feel very special.

Early Days

My initial feeling was one of relief that the students had no extreme behaviours. The main problem they presented was one of work avoidance, especially regarding anything to be written. The students played with laces, dropped pencils, picked at skin, went to the washroom, etc... We discussed having to pretend

in a regular class so that other students would not make fun of them. I tried to make them realize that now they had an opportunity to be honest and admit problems. BUT in admitting this, it meant that they had to try even harder to focus, pay attention, be positive, have a good attitude, persist and be responsible. (These words were often used in our class throughout the year.) We discussed Dr. Mel Levine and how they would be learning about how they learn using “The Mind That’s Mine” and “All Kinds Of Minds.” I was trying to emphasize that LD means having to work differently but not less. This class would not be a quick cure – only a means to develop the learning strategies to help them cope with their learning differences.

Reading and Writing Process

Early in the school year I administered the Slosson Oral Reading Test and Morrison McCall Spelling Levels with all students. The results were lower than I had expected for most of the students. Data collected in each of the three terms is included later in the paper.

In February/March 2004 our Learning Resource Teacher also did some of the Woodcock Johnson subsets with my students. Laurie Pearson (Psycho-Educational Consultant) then charted the results which I have inserted

BANBURY JUNIOR TECH/LD

Academic Achievement *

*Standard Scores based on Age Comparisons with est. S.E.M

Student #	Dates of Assessment	Word Reading ± 4-5	Reading Comp. ± 5-7	Calculation ± 8-10	Math Reasoning ± 6-8	Spelling/ Dictation ± 6-8	Writing ± 9-13
1	Nov. 01 WIAT	71	69	84	77	73	n/a
	Mar. 04 WJ-R	81	100	95	117	69	93
2	June 03 WIAT-II	68	71	81	97	74	n/a
	Mar 04 WJ-R	92	108	85	119	77	95
3	Feb 03 WIAT-II	66	70	78	88	74	86
	Mar 04 WJ-R	88	114	88	119	80	100
4	Dec. 02 WIAT-II	65	73	82	86	63	72
	Mar 04 WJ-R	71	82	72	93	73	71
5	Jan 01 WJ-R	86	91	115	100	84	117
	Mar/04 WJ-R	89	106	85	97	83	89
6	Feb 01 WJ-R	78	78	84	87	83	89
	Feb /04 WJ-R	87	98	82	87	83	100
7	Mar 03 WJ-R	71	95	78	97	77	92
	Mar 04 WJ-R	84	91	81	96	78	97
8	Dec 02 WIAT-II	67	66	75	106	73	79
	Feb 26/04 WJ-R	84	99	87	119	81	94
Average	Pre:	71.5	76.6	84	92	75	89.2
	Post:	84.5	99.75	84	106	78	92.4
	Diff:	+13	+23.15	0	+14	+3	+3.2

here. Although some areas demonstrate little improvement, it must be noted that the greatest gains were made in areas where learning strategies and problem solving were able to be implemented.

Our term continued with activities centering around sight word retrieval, word attack and decoding skills, spelling, (using Target Spelling to allow each student to proceed at own pace), keyboarding and other computer skills.

Reading – In September, Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA) levels ranged from B to L with most being around F,G, but the student who was at level L had difficulty with comprehension. At the beginning I emphasized reading for information. We perused all school and class newsletters together to find the important information. When the students realized that I did not expect them to read every word they became less anxious.

I introduced them to paired reading with books that were fairly easy for them. They all had the habit of guessing at words rather than taking time to decode. As time passed and instant retrieval of sight vocabulary increased, the students gradually became more interested in trying to read. The first time I saw two students sitting in a corner, obviously enjoying a book, my heart leaped. One of my students was very resistant towards reading simpler books. He wanted to read Harry Potter and similar books. Unfortunately he read only the simplest words and skimmed the remainder. This student made the least progress during the first four months until he realized that even the lowest students were catching up to him. Then he put more effort into reading at an appropriate level.

By the end of November I had some fear about whether I could make any difference in the learning of Michael L. who came into the class able to read only a couple of words. With much repetition he gradually grasped how to read word families. Next step was practicing recognizing a set of Dolch sight words. Again, after lots of work, he began to catch on. On one memorable day I started holding my breath when he was about half way through, then tears started into my eyes, then rolled down my face because he read all fifty words with hardly any hesitation. He was so proud and happy. We all hooted and hollered. It was a magical moment. What was so special was that all the students celebrated this achievement together.

As I write this in early May, I now have a group of students who read for information and for pleasure. Their DRA levels range from H to P and they now happily attempt to decode multi-syllabled words. (Partly thanks to our phonemic awareness program). Some students continue to have difficulty decoding multi syllabled words. I try to emphasize that they should find smaller words or chunks within the large word but at times this requires too much focus and guessing is quicker and easier. As can be seen from the following chart, by May sight vocabulary has significantly increased in some cases and there has been at least one grade increase in every student. In May I also assessed using the Schonell word list. I did not have a base line from earlier in the year and with this sample the results were as much as one grade level lower. In September I will use both lists for base line data.

Slosson Oral Reading Test (Sight Word Reading) by Grade Level

	September 2003	December 2003	May 2004	Grade Increase
Student 1	2.8 (Should be 6.0)	2.8	4.35	1.55
Student 2	3.9 (Should be 6.0)	4.6	5.4	1.5
Student 3	2.3 (Should be 5.0)	2.95	4.0	1.7
Student 4	3.0 (Should be 5.0)	3.0	4.1	1.1
Student 5	1.1 (Should be 5.0)	1.9	3.25	2.15
Student 6	0.1 (Should be 4.0)	1.2	2.3	2.0
Student 7	0.3 (Should be 4.0)	1.75	4.1	3.8
Student 8	0.4 (Should be 4.0)	1.55	4.0	3.6

Writing – There was great avoidance over any writing activity I presented. I encouraged ideas and told them not to worry about spelling or punctuation. I gave the choice of starting on paper then using the computer to edit and save or they could use the computer directly. Some preferred starting on paper while others preferred the computer. Joey especially would shake with anxiety. I tried to help him realize that this was a safe environment and he would get lots of help. I felt badly for him but had to continue to encourage him to move ahead. I gave assignments 1) I would never eat.... because; I love to eat.... because, 2) I like when my teacher... because; I don't like when my teacher.... because. Even when I suggested to him that he could tell me the story and I would scribe for him, he was hesitant.

As the first term progressed I had the students do a weekly journal (every Friday at 2:30 p.m.). I explained that I would only read them with their permission. I would be watching, however, for output as I wanted the amount of writing to increase. My theory was that if I expected quantity, hopefully some of it would turn into quality. This worked to a degree and I had at least some writing being done without anxiety.

As time passed however, the students and I became frustrated with the spell checker not recognizing words. The main problem was a lack of phonemic awareness. Unless all the sounds of a word were included, the computer could not give appropriate suggestions. The children would do anything to get rid of those red lines! A favourite word that came up was “toucan” as in “we had are pitchers toucan.” No red lines!! At least this one was able to be interpreted, (we had our pictures taken) but many were impossible!!

Then I began an intensive phonemic awareness program that I received from Trillium School – a Provincial Demonstration School in Oakville. (I would be willing to share this program with any interested teachers.) Instead of my word wall that wasn't being successfully implemented in this class, I began my phoneme wall. After learning a primary phoneme e.g. o_e as in note, we would then search for secondary examples e.g. oa – coat, o – so, ow – low, ew – sew, oe – toe and oo - door. The children became adept at finding other secondary examples for spelling sounds. Now when they were writing on the computer, if they didn't know the spelling of a word, they could try other examples of the phoneme and if they had entered all the correct sounds, the computer often gave the correct spelling. I was not so concerned about exact spelling as long as it was understandable, but some of the students focused on the red lines, so the sooner they could spell correctly the better!

I also use the Target spelling program so that the students can move along at their own speed. I use any volunteer help (even visitors!) to ask spelling words and my students are incredibly proud and pleased with the progress they have made. There is some healthy competition going on between various children to see who can get new words first! Although I do emphasize that they all learn differently and some may not be able to proceed as fast as others). I notice some transference to all writing activities but editing continues to be a huge job.

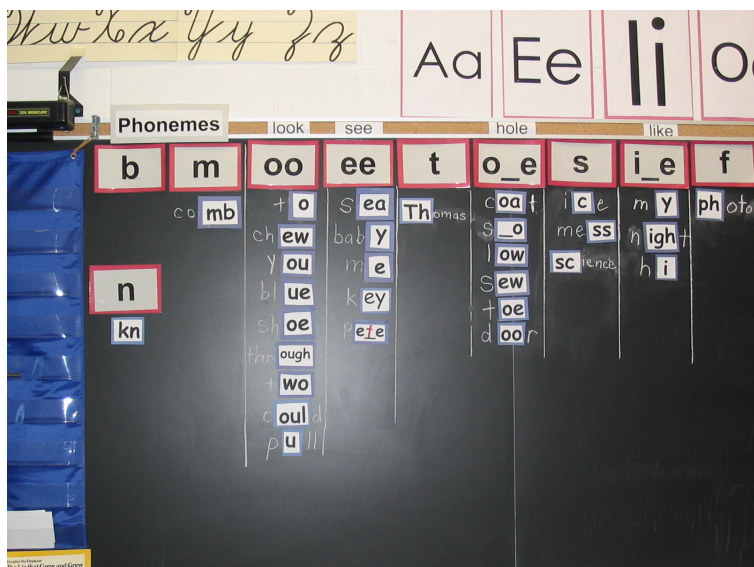
My students have also enjoyed completing book reports on the computer. I make up the questions based on comprehension, grammar and phonemic awareness. Recently I have begun to add a few HOTS (higher Order Thinking Skills) questions. Jesse said that he had never written so much in all his life!

As of early May, I have a group of students who get excited about attempting to spell long words. They know that if they come close the computer will recognize what they are attempting to say. Recent words which were attempted and successfully spelled or spell checked by some of them included: procrastinating, attention, cooperated, attempting, concentration, participating, and suspension. During a recent story writing assignment Joey said “I love writing stories!” What a difference since September in attitude as well as some increase in ability. I have also encouraged them to hit “File” then “Properties” on the computer to get information about their writing. This tells them how many words are in their longest sentence, and the average number of letters in a word. Then they can tell if they have run on sentences or are using too many three letter words. We have specific times for checking this out

or they would spend too much time at it. I have just checked this paper and I have discovered that my longest sentence has fifty two words. I had better get editing!

Morrison McCall Spelling Test by Grade Level

	September 2003	December 2003	May 2004	Grade Increase
Student 1	2.3 (Should be 6.0)	3	3.7	1.4
Student 2	3.4 (Should be 6.0)	4.1	5	1.6
Student 3	2.3 (Should be 5.0)	2.6	3.7	1.4
Student 4	2.5 (Should be 5.0)	3.4	4.1	1.6
Student 5	2.4 (Should be 5.0)	2.65	3.4	1.0
Student 6	0.0 (Should be 4.0)	1.7	2.3	2.3
Student 7	1.9 (Should be 4.0)	2.6	3.4	1.5
Student 8	1.5 (Should be 4.0)	2.4	3.6	2.1



Phoneme Wall

Computer Technology

As term one progressed, the students quickly became comfortable with all basic word processing skills. Repetition of computer moves definitely helped the students reach a comfort zone. We learned a lesson when Jesse somehow lost all his journal entries from the beginning of October to the end of November. Since then we either back up to a floppy or print out hard copies every so often.

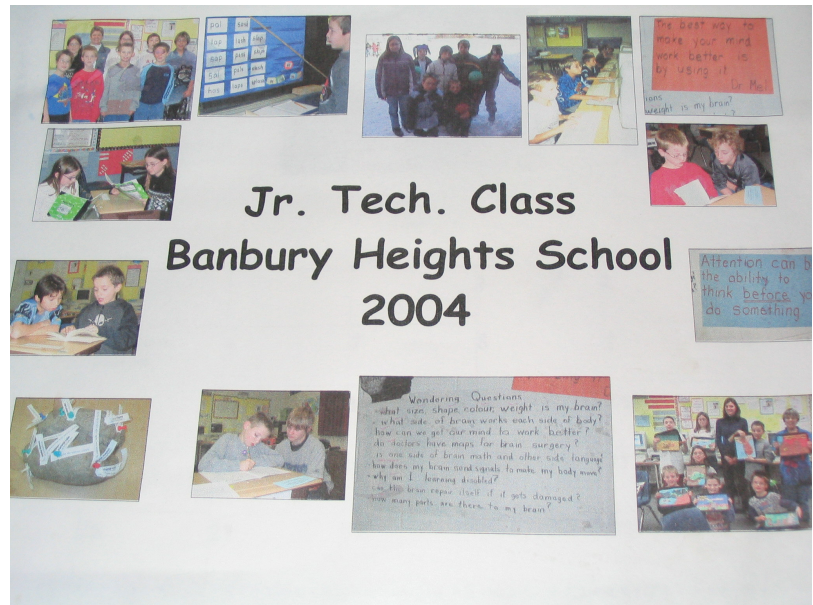
Microsoft Publisher became a favourite for making cards, notices to go home, charts, and timetables. Corel WordPerfect was used for all regular classroom assignments. In December each child made a calendar as a family Christmas gift. They used Publisher Wizard to format the pages then added personal information to the table on each page. They also took digital photographs of each other that they then imported into each page of their calendars. Although the students found the initial stages of this assignment quite complex, they quickly began to zoom around and between programs. They loved downloading images from the internet onto their calendar pages. We spiral bound the finished product and the students took them home with great pride.

Keyboarding techniques continue to improve through daily practice on “All the Right Type” and although not always used correctly in all keyboarding activities, with regular reminders about fingering, the children are gradually refining their skills. A couple of my students have completed all tasks on “All the Right Type” and have moved on to “Almena” using the testing sections. They are very excited about this and it has also spurred on the others to increase their focus.

Recently my students completed a nine-page slide show using Corel Presentation. With help from Mr. Tom Pappas, Information Technology Consultant, they were able to include a video section and some voice overs.

Although this project took considerable time, hopefully there will be many positive applications in the future. We have also used Kidspiration for making charts and Corel Quattro Pro for graphing activities.

Many of my students will shortly be receiving laptops and other equipment through Intensive Support Amount (ISA) funding through the Ministry of Education due to their special educational needs. Our next step will be successfully implementing this new technology and software (Dragon Naturally Speaking, and Kursweil). Two of my students are returning to regular classes in September so hopefully this technology will be set up in time for some introductory work to have been done before the end of June.



The Finished Product

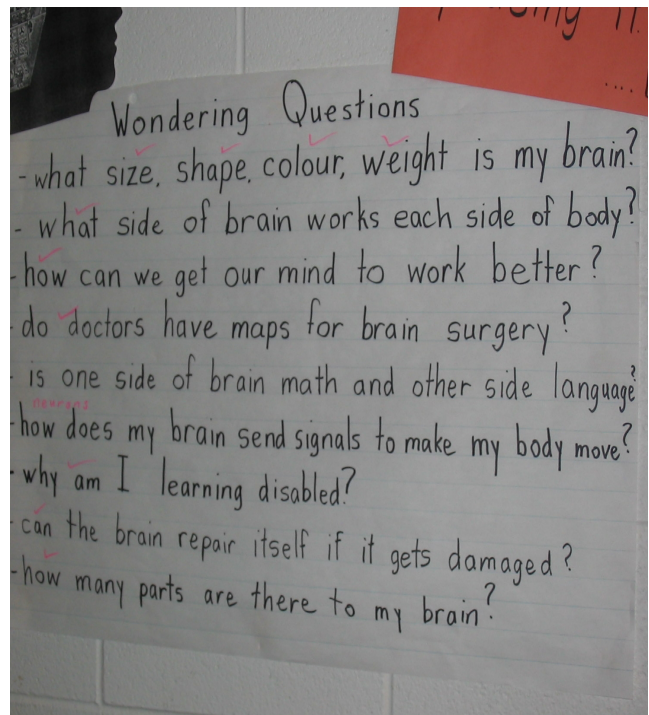
Dr. Levine's Curriculum

Dr. Levine's philosophy is akin to my own. Having a learning disability (learning difference) is a problem but not an excuse. It means you have to work harder, maybe differently, and probably longer to be successful, but it will be worth it.

The first section of the Levine curriculum deals with how the brain works and differences in thinking. I was nervous about tackling the brain vocabulary, however, the way Dr. Levine interacted with the children on his video invited my students to become involved. They were enthusiastic about asking "Wondering Questions" and learning about the brain.

When Marlie was having a difficult time following directions in the correct order she said "I am having a problem with my left cerebral hemisphere!" The vocabulary was difficult but not overwhelming. They came up with strategies (a word frequently used in our class) to help themselves remember various parts of the brain. Mathew suggested, "well, a motor is in the front of a car and it makes all the other parts move so the motor cortex is in the frontal lobe and it helps make all my body parts move." They had other suggestions for cerebellum and hypothalamus.

I began reading "All Kinds of Minds," written by Dr. Levine. This is the story of five junior age students and



Wondering Questions

their various types of strengths and weaknesses. As we read each chapter during the school year, the students were able to relate to the difficulties of the students in the book. They also took to heart some of the strategies that were suggested.

As we progressed through the school year the students participated in curriculum activities designed to focus the students on various learning skills. Each module gave many understandable and enforceable strategies to help the students reach their learning potential. During a language activity Michael L. was able to finish with very good results ahead of many of the others. They were amazed to which Michael responded, “I just focused. I knew that was the key to getting it done.” (WOW!)

Another time Michael R. was struggling to remember a word. He said “I keep trying to get it into my long term memory, but it hasn’t gone yet.”

One time when I was saving something from a file to one, in another program, I had a mental block. The kids were highly amused at having to help me and made all sorts of comments about retrieving the information from the correct file in my memory bank. Some of them even wrote about that in their Friday journals. They are keeping me on my toes! I tell them that they have to activate as many neurons as possible when they are young because as they age - like me - some of the brain cells seem to go to sleep.

My students fill out a “Concentration Cockpit” card every morning. This helps them to think about how focused they are. If they mark high I encourage them to keep that momentum up all day. If they mark low we discuss what can be done to help our concentration.

Peer Interaction

During early discussions on differences in learning it came out that grade 7’s have been calling them names in the lunchroom and hallway. We discussed what could be done and how some of it may continue even after we talk to the 7’s. We discussed how they should handle it. They decided it would not be wise for them to say anything back to the 7’s. Some of the 7’s may be jealous of our great class and technology. Joey said he would imagine himself as the rotten guys’ boss one day! Thankfully, with some support from our school administration, this problem was quickly resolved. Other than this one negative experience, most of my students have been mixing well with the remainder of the students. They all go out to other classes for gym, music and some go out for math. The regular class teachers report that there are few problems and that most of my students are well accepted. When all the ISA equipment started piling up in our classroom, I had many students from other grades commenting on how lucky my students were. This has helped to give my students a sense of positive importance.



A Model Brain

At recesses Michael L. has a really difficult time. He usually hangs around a teacher on duty. Other students have invited him to play and he does for a short time, then drifts away. I believe that he would be the same way even if he was at his home school. More recently he was expressing loneliness and has since become a kindergarten helper, which is helping his self-esteem. We will continue to monitor this situation.

Parental Involvement

In June 2003, before this class opened, I was heartened and excited by the number of parents who attended a meeting to discuss the program. I assumed that since part of the selection criteria was that parents be supportive and willing to cooperate with the goals of the program that this interest would continue throughout the school year. I found out that some of the parents seemed to think that this class would be a quick cure. Parental involvement has ranged from fairly regular at best to non-existent at worst. Although I sent homework home on a regular basis, few parents monitored it. Through our Levine work we discussed television watching and video game playing and I also included it in my newsletters for parents. Dr. Levine suggests that these activities take no mind work and therefore do not stimulate the brain in any way. Unfortunately it is much easier to watch TV than practice reading so you can guess which one usually gets more attention. I have had to resign myself to this, and work as much as possible to make changes from within the classroom. I have noticed that the two students who have most parental input have made the most progress. One of these parents is extremely thrilled with the program and the progress her son has made. At her son's recent IPRC she said:

It is a gift for all of our family. My son comes in through the door smiling with his accomplishments instead of being angry and yelling about his failures. It brings tears to my eyes. He has been given the tools to not feel down on himself. His strength is that he now understands his weaknesses.

Behaviour

Two of my students were in regular classes at this school last year. One especially, had numerous behaviour problems in class and on the yard and had to visit the office on many occasions. All teachers have commented on the improved attitude in both students. During the next year I will continue to employ strategies to help all my students maintain a positive image so that they will not feel the need to attract negative attention when they return to regular classes.

During the school year I participated in workshops on the "Tribes" process. This meant that I was out of class for four full days from November to March. I was fortunate to have the same supply teacher on each day. After her final day she left me a very gratifying letter stating how much improvement she had seen in the attitude, work habits and achievement of the students during this time period. In her letter she noted: "This program is so amazing and it is exciting to see the students take control of their own learning. It inspired me to get [A Mind At A Time](#) and get involved in it some more."

Some negative behaviours such as lack of focus, helplessness and lack of persistence continue in varying degrees among all the students. Next school year we will see how well they are able to work independently when I am focusing more attention on the new members of the class.

Self-Advocacy

I read recently that students with learning disabilities need grit, determination and resiliency to succeed. My students display flashes of these characteristics and I hope that with more encouragement and some success, they will become more motivated. I want my students to become self advocates by knowing how and when to seek help and guidance. However, I believe that they first have to become self motivated. A favorite comment from a couple of my older students is, “I don’t get it.” This is said before they have even tried to solve a problem or answer a question. It is also said quite regularly about homework. When I pry a little deeper I usually find that they just didn’t bother to try or else they expended little effort over it. A touch of learned helplessness. Dr. Levine would say that we have to hook them in some way and I agree to a certain extent. But there are times when the hook is too small to attract my students and then they just have to be self-disciplined.

The students who go to Grade 5 for math have been given many opportunities to report for help before school. Only one has gone even although I have offered to go with the others. As this project continues, self help and self advocacy are going to become an integral part of its success, especially when students begin the transition back to regular classes. We will be developing a rubric before the end of this school year. Meanwhile, the two students in my class who are going to regular classes in September are being given suggestions and are role playing how and when to ask for help.

What’s Next?

Since two students are returning to regular grade six classes, there needs to be contact with the receiving schools to enable a successful transition. These students are not working at grade level and although they have learned many strategies to help them be proficient in many areas, they will continue to require support. We will be inviting staff members from the receiving schools to come to see the students in action. The receiving teachers will hopefully realize that these students don’t have to learn to spell every word or learn all times tables as long as they can use their technology to access the correct information. It is a definite change in mind set and some teachers may have difficulty accepting it.

I will have two new students in my class next school year. One of my problems will be how to work through the Levine curriculum and phonemic awareness with them while keeping the rest of the class focused on independent tasks. As already mentioned, most of my students have received ISA funding and will be set up with laptops, printers, Kurzweil, and Dragon Naturally Speaking. I am hopeful that, by that time, I will have a group who will be able to use each other as peer helpers. I don’t expect everything to run smoothly but teaching is all about patience, flexibility and challenges. I am delighted that the two students coming in will be grade four age next year. I believe that the chance of making a real, long-term difference in these students is to catch them at an early age. If I had my wish, I would have them enter this program at Grade 3 age.

Just before the end of the school year, a former student of mine is coming in to discuss what it means to have a learning difference in high school and in the workplace. I met him recently after not seeing him for a number of years. I always think of him as one of my successes from a previous communications class. He was desperate to read and tried so hard. I can even remember the day that he made a connection between letters and words and the light went on! Then there was no holding him back (although it was never easy). What impresses me now is that he is polite, personable and happy with the direction of his life. Hopefully his visit will raise some recognition and awareness in my present set of students.

In Conclusion

This has been one of the most exciting years in my teaching career. I have been learning along with my students, especially technological idiosyncrasies. I had extremely high expectations for myself and for them. In the most part, I have been pleased with our success rate. We have had many moments of joy, especially when we were celebrating outstanding achievements. There have been some moments of despair when there seemed to be a downward tumble. In my journal entry of January 29, 2004 I wrote "I did some ranting today about responsibility, self-advocacy, and independent work. I don't know why I did it because it just made me feel bad and I'm sure the children didn't feel good either. Roll on next week!!" So you can see that it wasn't always smooth sailing!

Although I have included many of my thoughts and results, we cannot make conclusions about this project for another few years. Only then will we be able to see if these students have been able to re- enter a regular class and continue with the learning that was begun here.

In later years will these students become productive members of the workforce, pursuing activities for which they have an affinity? Will they become positive role models and recognize the need to promote reading as a positive activity when they have their own children? Most importantly, will they be happy?

These are my hopes and dreams for this unique group of children.



A Group of Stars

References

Levine, M. (2002). *A Mind At A Time*, New York: Simon & Schuster