

Teaching Writing to Elementary School Children with Learning Disabilities

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Introduction

Special teachers help children with all aspects of their learning goals. Even with these special teachers, the question becomes how does a teacher present and teach writing to elementary school children who have learning disabilities? This report will delve into the background of learning disabilities, theories of teaching writing, and strategies for teaching writing to those children with learning disabilities. The result of this report will show some suggestions for how teachers should spend their lessons, every day, helping children who need extra time and effort to ultimately become knowledgeable teenagers and adults.

Each day, every teacher, in every school, has the task of teaching to many children. Teaching classes of 20 or more children, the teacher has to take into account the learning levels each child possesses. Some children have the ability to follow the instructions from their teacher, while others lag behind and have to rush to learn. There are still other children in each of these classes, because of their own learning deficiencies, who have trouble and lag behind the slow learners. With 20 children in the class, the teacher has to multi-task, switching gears for each child, based on each child's learning level. For some teachers, this is a daunting task. The teachers are unsung heroes, helping each child learn to the best of his or her ability. However, some children need additional help. Within each school district, there are teachers who give the extra helping hand to those children who need it.

The issue of teaching writing to a child with a learning disability is of great importance to me as the writer of this report. My child, Cassiopeia Hennes (Cassi), was diagnosed with a learning disability. Her learning disability is named Auditory Processing Disorder. Her disability was

described as such by her Kindergarten teachers: “While in class, the teacher would read a story. She would ask the children questions about what was read. Cassi was unable to answer the questions, sitting with a blank stare on her face. A few hours later, after being read another story with questions from the teacher, Cassi was then able to answer the questions from the first story.” After this explanation, Cassi was given a full-blown set of evaluations, which helped the educators determine what type of learning disability she had. The result was Auditory Processing Disorder, which means, in the simplest terms, her thinking processes take an exponentially longer amount of time to process what normal children can process.

With special help from teachers in her schools and documentation on an Individual Education Plan (IEP), Cassi gets special accommodations, allowing her extra time on exams, speech therapy, and special education help in all areas of her learning. In the Appendix of this report, comprehensive plans are shown, explaining what strategies are being applied to Cassi to help her with her learning disability. At the time of this report, the first grading period has passed for Cassi. Results of those strategies are also included to show where her learning process is for her second year in school.

Types of Learning Disabilities

To begin with, what exactly is a Learning Disability? Often referred to as an LD, a learning disability is when the child has problems with learning in school. This report talks about the issues a child has with writing because of their learning disability. There are many different types of learning disabilities. They include the following:

- **Auditory Processing Disorder** – Every normal person often takes time to process what they read and hear for a response. However, a child with this disorder, the processing time is exponentially longer, including blank stares from the children.
- **Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)** – Children with this disorder typically have trouble focusing on lessons and homework. They may also not pay attention to their teachers. The difference between this disorder and Attention Deficit Disorder is the addition of hyperactivity in the children who have ADHD.
- **Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD)** – Often coupled with ADHD, children with this disorder do not have the extra issue of hyperactivity.
- **Dyslexia** – This disorder happens when children reading and writing switch the order of words, phrases, math skills. A normal child will see the word “B – A – T” but the child with this disorder may see the word backwards, thus pronouncing and possibly writing the word incorrectly.

Writing Assignments

Teachers have to be very conscious about how they teach and create writing assignments for their children. For any child, the writing assignment must be clear and concise, with the teacher’s expectations explained before the process starts. Children need to be given age-appropriate and level-appropriate writing assignments. In elementary school, assignments given include learning of vocabulary and creation of sentences. Writing for humans, as we grow up, is not innate to us, but is a process that has to be learned and taught. Those people who teach writing had to have learned how to teach writing to enable them to pass on the teachings they have learned.

At the same time, each school district has a process in which children learn writing. Each year, this process includes goals that must be attained by the children. Each teacher who works within a particular school district has to be aware of the guidelines set forth by their administration. “A knowledge of district or state guidelines across grade levels is important to proper planning because they specify the particular skills students are expected to master from grade to grade” (Williams, 280). Just because a someone is teaching children in second grade doesn’t mean they are not aware of what was taught to them in first grade, preparing them for second grade, nor are they unaware of what is needed to prepare these children for third grade. Teachers need to know the writing skills that were taught in the previous grade and prepare those skills to advance them. They are teaching the children the skills needed to be a good writer.

“When you stop to think about the wide range of skills that are needed to be a good writer, it is no surprise that so many students with learning disabilities struggle with written expression. For example, children with reading disabilities often have serious difficulties with spelling, which in turn has an adverse affect on their ability to communicate in writing. Also vulnerable are children who have weaknesses in areas such as vocabulary, reading and listening comprehension, word retrieval, and those who have trouble with the basic mechanics of writing (e.g., handwriting, spelling, capitalization, punctuation, and sentence structure)” (National Center for Learning Disabilities).

Teaching a child with a learning disability can be a difficult task. If the school district has the capability, there is a plan documented with tasks that the child will use, developing their skills.

This plan is called the Individual Education Plan (IEP). The IEP is a document that is developed with the help of various individuals, including the parents of the child, the school's psychologist or guidance counselor, the child's teacher and special education teacher, and speech therapist (if needed). Meetings occur each year to determine what level of help the child will need for the next year. Then, at the end of each grading period, a report is sent home to the child's parents, alerting them of the progress. Because the document is a fluid one, the plan can be changed at any time during the school year.

For any child with a learning disability, this task of teaching that child writing becomes even more complex than teaching a normal child.

Teachers, both regular and special, observe a child's spelling and attempt to correct the errors made in spelling words. For the average child this is sufficient; he or she will learn to spell incidentally by reading, by some phonics and phonic generalization, and by the memory of how the word looks. But for children with more severe spelling disabilities, the teacher or examiner needs a more penetrating assessment (Minskoff, 217).

What this means is that normal children can learn how to spell on their own, with the corrections made by the teacher. For the learning disabled child, other avenues of reviewing errors need to be completed. Examples can include the following:

- Have the child write the words in repetition so the he or she recognizes the word on sight;
- Have the child create sentences to produce correct uses of the words, while having the child read the sentences with the words in them, allowing them to see, hear, and read the correct uses;

- Have the child learn smaller groupings of words each week rather than a larger grouping of words in smaller test times, allowing the student to continually use the words over the course of a grading period and preparing the child to write better with newer words.

As part of her learning process, Cassi uses these examples to achieve her vocabulary goals.

Instead of taking the words in larger groupings, vocabulary is broken down into more manageable chunks. With her specific disability, the teachers and evaluators determined her best course for learning was to learn in smaller chunks. In the end of each grading period, she has learned all of the vocabulary goals her classmates have learned, but has also been taught their meanings, along with creating her own sentences using each vocabulary word.

Strategies for Teaching

There are many strategies teachers can use when developing learning plans. First and foremost, each LD child has his or her own development plan, with specific goals that must be met. A generalized program can be developed to help LD children write better.

“Graham and Harris (1988) made 10 recommendations that should be considered in developing writing programs for student who have special needs” (Hammill, 141). These recommendations “are based on recent conceptualizations of the process of writing, principles of effective writing instruction, and current knowledge of exceptional students’ writing abilities” (Hammill, 141). That list of suggestions includes the following:

1. “Allocate time for writing instruction.
2. Expose students to a broad range of writing tasks.

3. Create a social climate conducive to writing development.
4. Integrate writing with other academic subjects.
5. Help students develop the processes that are central to effective writing.
6. Automatize skills for getting language onto paper.
7. Help students develop explicit knowledge about the characteristics of good writing.
8. Help students develop the skills to carry out more sophisticated composing processes.
9. Assist students in the development of goals for improving their written products.
10. Avoid instructional practices that do not improve students' writing performance"
(Hammill, 140-141).

With all of the time constraints pulling teachers and students over the course of a school day, teachers need to make sure they allocate enough time in the daily schedule for writing. Depending on the assignment, this might mean one day the schedule needs to be flexible for longer periods of writing. Within an elementary school environment, not only do the children work with the teacher for all of their learning requirements each day, they also have requirements for learning with a music teacher, art teacher, and gym teacher. The classroom teacher needs to use time management skills to give the children the opportunity to learn writing skills with enough time for the learning.

The teacher also needs to assign different writing assignments. Even if the teacher has only had experience with a small range of writing assignments themselves, they need to learn themselves to express the importance of different writing styles to the children. Because the teachers are typically the same teacher for all subjects in an elementary school environment,

the teacher has many opportunities for teaching writing not only in a language arts-specific time, but also can be taught during other subjects. When it comes to science, in that elementary school, the children are learning new topics and new vocabulary. The teacher can have the students write about the science subjects they are learning. Example: Have the children write a story about how the weather man does his job. Or, write a story about what you see each night when you look, at the moon.

While using the instruction intended for normal children, the same writing assignments can be given to LD children, on a smaller scale. The goal of helping LD children is for them to succeed, even on a small scale, so by giving them work that is appropriate for their learning level and helping them to achieve their goals. This process engages the children into wanting to learn more. Specific activities that will help an LD child in their learning goals include:

- punctuation and capitalization (How do we use words when we write? Where do we put the period? What gets capitalized?)
- vocabulary and grammar (How are those words spelled? Can the child create a sentence of their own using the vocabulary? Is the grammar correct and if not how to explain to them the correct approach?)
- sentence and paragraph construction (How is a simple sentence formed? How do sentences with the same ideas become paragraphs?).

Throughout a child's elementary school life, teachers are preparing the children for more advanced learning as they continue through high school and into college.

Writing Assessments

Assessing an LD child then becomes an even larger task. The teacher needs to be fair in the grading of writing completed by the child. At the same time, they also need to remember what the learning plan is for that child and take into consideration the best approach in grading. Often, for a learning disabled child who needs help with language arts, the grading does not come from the child's regular teacher, but rather from the child's special education teacher(s). Children with learning disabilities require special developmental goals to achieve their writing tasks' assessments.

Assessment Rubrics

Within an elementary school, each grade is composed of multiple classes, with each class having a main teacher. Each team of teachers works together to present learning to all of the classes the same way and assess the same way. By working as a team and completing this process, they are grading all of the children equally and fairly, using the same requirements for grading which is called a rubric. "Evaluators have to agree on the characteristics of good writing before any scoring can begin, so the first task is to analyze some writing samples that show a range of skill, from good to bad" (Williams, 319-320).

In all classes, there will be writing from children who represent the best writing samples, good writing examples, and those that need improvement. Based on the fact that many learning disabled children have trouble with language arts, these children typically will fall into the range of "those that need improvement." The teachers, knowing the issue exists for children having language arts problems, need to understand how to assess the child based on

the rubrics used on the class as a whole and on the child with their individual learning goals. Because the child has already been assessed for their learning disability, their goals might be the same as the general rubric for their class, but the timeframe given to complete that assessment is longer. Within the general population, a writing assignment might be assessed with one final grade. Whereas a learning disabled child may receive multiple grades for each piece of their overall writing assignment, these grades are then averaged into a single grade, giving them the same result as the general population.

An example of a very good composition assessment is “has a beginning that lets readers know clearly what the composition is about; gives readers much information; is interesting; has fewer than three errors in capitalization and spelling” (Williams, 320). For the normal children in the classes, this might be a good standard for all writing assignments. However, for a learning disabled child, the standard may need to be lowered to allow them to feel achievement in their writing assessments.

For the LD child, the composition that is considered good for the general population may be the level at which the teacher determines they have written a very good composition. This example states that the composition “has a beginning that lets readers know what the composition is about; gives readers some information; has at least one interesting point; has fewer than five errors in capitalization and spelling” (Williams, 320). The teacher may want the LD child to be able to achieve the very good level of writing assessment that the normal children achieve, but the process of assessment may take longer for the LD child.

No Child Left Behind Act

When assessing an LD child's writing, the teacher also has to take into consideration the federal law and the "No Child Left Behind Act." Enacted in 2002 by President George W. Bush, the act makes school districts and individual teachers more accountable with assessing students. Here are the facts about the law that pertain to this report: "Accountability: No Child Left Behind holds schools and school districts accountable for results" (Department of Education). This means they are responsible for making sure each child learns. Not only does your child get a report card each grading period for the work they do, the school district and individual schools receive report cards based on how they are succeeding at teaching the children. If the children are not succeeding, what does the school need to do to improve? As a parent, if you feel your child is not learning what they should, if the school's report card shows the school in an improvement grade, the child can be transferred to another public school should the opportunity exist. The children within a school whose report card shows need of improvement will get free tutoring and extra help with homework needs, which is called "Supplemental Educational Services" if your child is qualified. Children with documented learning disabilities qualify.

In regard to assessment and reading/writing, this act requires annual testing in reading and math every year for children in grades 3 through 8. These exams help the school and district determine if your child is learning and what might be needed to get the extra help to pass the exams. Finally, this act is about making sure children learn to read. Extra funding has been provided to accomplish this goal. Without reading, children cannot write.

“Writing assessment requires teachers to consider a complex array of variables, some of which are unrelated to specific mastery of a given writing lesson” (Williams, 297). In most cases, the LD child cannot be assessed based on the standards for normal children. Because the child has specific learning goals, the assessment must be based on those goals. Indeed, the teacher and special education teacher work with the child, presenting the assignments and assessments in the same manner as the child’s classmates. However, with that being said, the assignment given will be assessed in a different format. The child may get all of the same assignments as his or her classmates get; this process may only be a process of show for the child so he or she doesn’t feel left out. The child may get the homework as “try this” exercises, allowing the parents the ability for extra explanation that the teacher may not have the time for in class.

“Any given class will have good, average, and poor writers” (Williams, 299). In the case of a learning disabled child, they may be seen as poor writers. With the help and assessment of the special education teacher, the child’s writing will be targeted based on the IEP’s goals. An example of writing assessment goals is presented in Appendix B and C, showing which writing (or language arts) goals are being given for assessment. Exercises and exams are created specifically for this IEP. The child learns language arts based on his or her individual plan, even though they are given the opportunity to complete the same assignments given to the classmates. Because of the lower level of knowledge the LD child has in regard to writing and language arts in general, the assignments given in class are not graded, just reviewed to see that the concepts are being learned. Without the grade, the child does not have the fear of failure, nor does the parent worry that the child is failing school.

Conclusion

There are many different ways to teach writing to children with learning disabilities. With all of the different avenues available to teachers, ultimately, the bottom line for teaching to a specific child starts and ends with his or her own IEP. A team of teachers, specialists, and parents of that child gather to determine the best course of action for the child to accomplish their learning tasks. Teachers need to give each child enough patience with learning. Many children do not get the time needed to adequately learn all that is needed of them. Even normal children deal with difficulty in all areas of learning, particularly with writing.

Writing is not a natural process for a human. To be able to communicate our thoughts and feelings, the process of writing (and reading) must be taught. For a child, even a learning disabled child to learn, the teacher must know how to teach the children, understand that each child learns at a different pace, and help each child's process along. With an LD child, that process takes place with multiple teachers, assisting the child learn within each area of their specialty. Classes are smaller, giving the children more personal attention when it comes to learning and assessment that they may not get in their regular class. The special education teacher also has the opportunity to help the child with their IEP goals, one by one. To help the child succeed, this process happens every day, with every learning disabled child, with every special education teacher, in every school in America.

Appendix

The Appendix documents consist of four separate items regarding how the school district Cassi Hennes attends completes her IEP tasks and goals.

Appendix A: This document is the official report card given out to each child in the elementary school. Based on her learning plan, Cassi is reading below her grade level, which is second grade. Her learning disability has caused her to still need improvement in other areas besides her language arts skills. Among them, she still needs to improve her listening and responding skills and following directions. Being in second grade, Cassi has 15 learning components related to reading and writing. As of the first grading period, she only mastered two of the 15 tasks. The other two components of her grading deal with math and science. Of these two sections being graded, the majority of the learning tasks have been mastered.

Appendix B and C: These documents are the learning tasks developed by the IEP team. Appendix B deals with learning objectives for the special education teacher/regular teacher/speech therapist, while Appendix C deals with just speech therapist results. For her individual plan, there are five major areas of improvement and which teacher will help her accomplish those goals. Within each area of improvement, there are individual tasks to be completed. Each grading period, each of these tasks will receive grading information in regard to mastery of the task. An example of a writing task is: "Cassi will use adjectives to create longer, more descriptive sentences that make sense with cues 80% of the time." Based on the grading for this period, they have not introduced this task yet. However, something simple as

“Cassi will write sentences with spaces between her words with cues 80% of the time” has received grading of Making Adequate Progress.

Appendix D: As reading and writing are learned processes, part of the elementary school life is used to teach the children vocabulary. While in first grade, Cassi was introduced to 35-40 new vocabulary words each grading period. For second grade that number of vocabulary words remains the same. At the end of each grading period, the students complete spelling tests. What is not shown here is that while being taught language arts with her special education teacher, this person introduces five new words to Cassi each week, ending the week with a spelling test. This helps Cassi learn the overall grouping of words in smaller chunks. For this grading period, Cassi missed six words out of 35.

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