should not be neglected. They should be an important aspect of our instruction. Let them be the frosting on the cake.

Before I finish I'd like to encourage you to consider the possibility of teachers' devotions. Perhaps you do have teachers' devotions at Hope and Covenant. If you do, let me encourage you to continue. If you don't, I wish to encourage you to begin. We have them every morning at Adams and I cannot think of a better way to start each day or time being spent in a better way. It has drawn us together as a staff. We pray for each other's needs. We show our concern regarding our calling as teachers. It helps us to work together as a team. We know that we are not in this business alone. Here again, it takes some work, some individual effort, but the payoff more than compensates for the effort.

Since our aim, our goal, is that the students entrusted to our care be perfect, throughly furnished unto all good works, consider using classroom devotions. They add a new and significant dimension to our instruction. Such classroom devotions do and will make a difference.

Why Can't Johney Spell or Read?

by Doug Boone

Mr. Doug Boone spent the first few years of his active teaching career as a member of the faculty of the Western Christian High School in Hull, Iowa. Since that time he has returned to school and has taken courses in helping the learning disabled. Doug is presently working at Pine Rest with special children, and is setting up the special education program for 1985-1986 at Heritage Protestant Reformed Christian School, Hudsonville, Michigan.

The term “learning disability” seems to be rather popular in the field of education lately as resource rooms and other special helps are set up to combat this new educational enemy. The problem is not new, but the names have been changed over the years to protect anyone from sounding old-fashioned by calling it dyslexia, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, developmental aphasia, dyssymbolia, or perceptual handicaps. Seriously, the term “learning disability” (LD) is used to try
to label all the ways this problem manifests itself in a child's educational development.

So what is a Learning Disability? The federally approved definition I know is as follows: "LD is a severe deficit in the acquisition and use of symbols, used in reading, writing, calculating, and thinking; which deficit is due to the interaction between developmental dysfunction and environmental conditions which make the person vulnerable to those dysfunctions." By the time we finish, I hope that such a definition will make some sense.

Let's take a look at typical, true LD students. First, what sets them apart from all other special educational students is their IQ. The LD have normal IQ or intelligence. This needs to be emphasized, repeated, and written in stone. The LD are smart or "average" students as far as intelligence is concerned. This fact alone separates them as a group from all special education students who have lower IQ ratios and are labeled according to degrees of mental retardation.

I think this is especially important from a teacher's point of view. This means I will strive to get grade level performance out of these students so they don't forever remain two to six grade levels behind their classmates in a given subject. Fortunately this also makes sense. The LD's problems are with the symbols. They may read at the 3rd grade level even though they are in 6th grade, but their speaking vocabulary and their thinking skills are at a 6th grade level. Since they have normal intelligence, I do them no favors by teaching them 3rd grade reading. Reading is not as sequential as math, so once someone knows "how" to read, we build on vocabulary and sentence structure. (But I'm getting off the track.)

The second important reason we must remember that the LD have normal intelligence is for the children's sake. They must know that they are not dumb children. They must know that they are not stupid but that they have a problem and it's not their fault. I even want to give them a nice fancy term such as "dyssymbolia." Then, when they are having problems, it is that "dyssymbolia" again that we have to work on, thus allowing the children to save face and not feel stupid.

You may ask, "If the LD have normal intelligence, how can we tell them apart from non-LD students?" There are basically two directions we go in now. We look at what we can observe—test scores, behavior—and at what we believe is going on inside neurologically.

We said that intelligence is normal; but unfortunately the LD's achievement in specific areas shows up significantly low. This is known as the discrepancy formula. The LD may also exhibit any combination
of typical behaviors, such as the following: hyperactivity, impulsivity, poor coordination, poor attention, poor organization, and others. Also, to be labeled as LD, the student’s primary problem may not be mental retardation, emotional disturbance, or physical handicaps. “Who’s left?” you ask. Estimates range from 5% to 15% of every normal classroom’s students could be labeled as LD and in need of special services.

For a closer look at what goes on neurologically and behaviorally, I must refer to the critical stage theory taught to me by Dr. Corrine Kass at Calvin College — lest anyone think I’m smart enough to figure this out on my own. She has traced the impact of learning disabilities in connection with what she calls age-related functions in the LD. I believe this theory ties in well with what is known about brain growth spurts and educational development in children, as taught by Piaget, Erikson, Kohlberg, Havinghurst, and Freud.

The first stage, Sensory Orientation, is the functional readiness to study the environment, to use the senses. This stage covers ages birth to 18 months. At this age the LD seem to have problems with visual pursuit, the ability to follow stimuli with their eyes. They also don’t seem to discriminate between sounds such as a familiar voice and a stranger’s voice. Behaviorally we say they have a problem attending. What’s worse is that they don’t grow out of this failure to attend. The problem is, rather, compounded by other deficits at later stages.

The second stage, Memory, is the ability to recall and imitate what we see and hear. This stage covers ages 18 months to eight years. The LD seem to have hyper-excitability, almost an extreme inner noise or stimulation that interferes with their ability to process what is happening around them. They also have problems with rehearsal, the ability to practice input for later recall. They don’t listen to themselves and don’t give themselves feedback. Now we say they have a problem with labeling: memorizing names, words, or math tables.

The third stage, Recognition, is the process by which the child attaches personal meaning, or understanding of concepts underlying learning tasks. A simple example would be answering a comprehension question and not just repeating the facts of a story. This stage covers ages eight to eleven years old. The LD seem to have problems in three areas. The first, haptic discrimination, is the ability to note differences in touch and muscle sensation. This deficit ties in with learning spelling by the process of writing it out. The second deficit deals with visualization — the ability to recognize whole from parts. One example would be, being able to note likenesses and differences in words or things. The third deficit deals with figure-ground discrimination, which
is the ability to sift the relevant from the irrelevant. The LD seem to see everything but they do not distinguish. They must be taught what to look for. Can you imagine the problem they have with a blackboard covered with notes, some of which they have to copy? To summarize, we can see that the LD just don't seem to understand what is being taught.

The fourth stage, Synthesis, is defined as the process by which the previous functions are unified and become automatic. This stage covers ages 12 to 14 years old. The LD have a problem with the coordination of the senses (hearing, seeing, touching) and therefore extreme difficulty in making habitual that which they have already learned. Their monitoring skills (the ability to note and correct errors when they occur) seem almost non-existent. We can see that dictation, or giving notes orally, can be very difficult for the LD because they have trouble putting it all together.

The last stage, Communication, is defined as the process by which meaning is expressed. This stage covers ages 14 and older. The ability to communicate requires more than memorized sentence formulas. The LD show deficits in reading comprehension, mathematical comprehension, and writing. These deficits are easily seen in their work.

I briefly explained these stages, not to impress, but to help you see that the learning disability affects different abilities at different ages and that it is a continuing, compounding process. What teachers seem to complain the most about is that these children don't pay attention. We can see this identifies the first stage problem of attending and how that ties in with the rest of the problem cycle: attending, labeling, understanding, integrating, and expressing. If we don't get their attention, it seems impossible that they will be able to complete higher tasks, such as understanding or expressing.

If we look at a task, say a ninth grade algebra problem, we can trace how each of the age-related functions ties in. First the child must attend and look at the problem. Next he must know the labels as numbers and signs. Then he must understand what the numbers and signs mean. Now he must integrate all the knowledge of computation and put it together automatically in order to solve the problem. Finally he must solve the problem and express or communicate the answer in the proper terms. We see how each stage is involved in the learning process and can guess how deficits in these stages can really make learning difficult.

Well, what is to be done? I think we can see that the problem is more complex than to be solved by tutoring or just helping the LD with
their homework. I'm not against extra help with work, by any means, but I believe we need more. We need remediation, teaching specifically directed at the critical-age deficits! This is more than showing how to do the assignment; it is to attack the LD's specific problem and show the children how to succeed in spite of the learning disability. This teaching has to be different from what they are used to; it has to be intense; it has to be as individualized as possible.

I don't think we can expect classroom teachers to be able to teach their lesson to the class and also to be able to give different special instruction to the LD children. It can't be done, because the teachers have more than enough work handling a class ranging from 15 to 30 or more. Putting these students in the front seats is also not the answer. I believe they need some time outside of the classroom — not much, maybe an hour a day — to receive special teaching directed specifically at the deficits we discussed, not just help with the assignment. We can't cure the learning disability, but we can teach children to work around the problem.

The last question is perhaps why, or is it worth the expense and trouble? When I think back on my school years, I remember a little science, history, government, etc. More seems to be forgotten than learned. But if I hadn't learned to read (not only how to read, but to enjoy reading) where would I be today? I don’t mean to try to minimize any of the various subjects taught in school, but imagine what you couldn't do if your reading skills were so poor that you hated reading and avoided it at all costs. We know we tend to avoid things that we do not do well. I'm not saying that these children can't read at all or never will read, because that simply isn’t true. I’m saying that they will avoid reading as much as possible. Finally, and most importantly, as Christians how do we expect these children to grow spiritually through life when reading presents such difficulties. I know I make enough excuses not to read our Christian literature; but I would hate to think that even one person didn’t read... because he was never really taught. So, in the end, I see it as our Christian responsibility to teach the learning disabled as best as we can for His sake.

The Bible in the Christian classroom is the Book by which all other books are evaluated. It is also the Book which guides Christian school educators in developing Biblical character traits in the lives of their students.

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