

LEARNING DISABILITIES

BY CANDICE CAROL HAAS HOLLINGSEAD

No educational therapist, no teacher, not even a psychiatrist can know how it feels to have a child with learning problems.—A mother of a child with learning disabilities.¹

Professionals and laypersons have struggled for many years to understand why some children have social and academic problems, even though they appear to have normal intelligence. Parents of these children have sought help from a variety of sources, including psychologists, neurologists, pediatricians, speech/language specialists, ophthalmologists, and physical

therapists. As a result, many labels have been used to describe such children—hyperactive, dyslexic, brain-injured, perceptually handicapped, and neurologically impaired. This has caused confusion for specialists, teachers, parents, and the general public.²

This article will examine the following issues:

*What are learning disabilities? How common are they?
What are Seventh-day Adventist institutions of higher education doing to meet the needs of students with learning disabilities? What does a successful postsec-*

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ondary student intervention model look like? What challenges do Seventh-day Adventist education institutions face in this area?

What are learning disabilities? How common are they?

The study of learning disabilities is a dynamic and expanding field. Simply defining the concept has caused considerable debate, since it has been heavily influenced by medical, psychological, and education specialists, with at least 11 definitions having achieved official status.³ However, five points are often used to diagnose learning disability:

- Significant discrepancy between expected and actual achievement;
- Difficulty in academic/learning tasks;
- Uneven pattern of learning growth;
- Central nervous system dysfunction; and
- Learning problems not caused by mental retardation, emotional disturbance, physical disabilities, environmental disadvantage, or sensory handicaps.⁴

Even though there are disagreements over definitions and methods of assessment, we must not lose sight of the essential point. Learning disabilities are real. What is most important is discovering how to help our students with these types of problems.⁵ Classification is valuable, but the pragmatic task of service delivery is crucial.

Several terms are used to describe specific learning problems in the academic arena. These include:

- Dyscalculia—the inability to perform mathematical calculations;
- Dysgraphia—the inability to remember how to write alphabet or arithmetic symbols; and
- Dyslexia—the inability to read (associated with brain-based abnormalities).⁶

Most educators agree that there are great variations within each category of learning disabilities. Individuals affected by learning disabilities often have social and emotional difficulties such as low self-concept, hyperactivity, learned helplessness, disruptive behavior, poor social skills, and distractibility. Other difficulties include problems with giving attention, perception, problem solving, and

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motor functions.⁷ Research on subtypes of learning disabilities is divided into three basic categories: (1) visual deficit, (2) language deficit, and (3) behavioral impairment.⁸

The number of U.S. children and youth with diagnosed learning disabilities continues to increase. The U.S. Department of Education reports that in the 1992-1993 school year, 4.09 percent (2,369,385) children and youth ages 6 to 21, not including students in private schools, were identified as having a learning disability. State percentages varied from 2.34 percent to 6.24 percent because of variations in identification criteria. Individuals with learning disabilities come in all ages, ethnic groups, and socioeconomic levels.

Learning disabilities is the largest category within special education, accounting for 51.1 percent of the total. Between the 1991-1992 and 1992-1993 school years, the number of U.S. students ages 6 through 21 with learning disabilities increased by more than 122,000.⁹

The increasing prevalence of special-needs students, plus a national reassessment of “least restrictive environment” as required by federal law, are factors influencing Seventh-day Adventist educational institutions to examine their services to this population. Today, most students with learning disabilities attend regular classes. For this reason, considerable research and attention focuses on successful accommodations and intervention models in general education.¹⁰

What are SDA institutions of higher education doing to meet the needs of students with learning disabilities?

In January 1997, a questionnaire was sent to North American Division senior colleges and universities. It requested the following information about each school: (1) student services for individuals with learning disabilities, and (2) teacher training to assist individuals with learning disabilities.

Table 1 shows which student services are offered by the reporting institutions.

Teacher training programs in these institutions are varied. Eight reporting institutions offer undergraduate course work in special education—Pacific Union College (Angwin, California), Atlantic Union College (South Lancaster, Massachusetts), Columbia Union College (Takoma Park, Maryland, which includes a partnership with a public university), Oakwood College (Huntsville, Alabama), Home Study International (Silver Spring, Maryland), Southern Adventist University (Collegedale, Tennessee) and Walla Walla College (College Place, Washington). Pacific Union College has a course in Issues of Inclusion, and Walla Walla College is adding a course on Disability Laws and Education to their summer sequence.

Only three campuses offer graduate degrees in special education. La Sierra University (Riverside, California) offers a Master of Arts in special education (learning handicapped, 1-12), Southern Adventist University has a graduate degree in inclusive education, and Walla Walla bestows Master of Education and Master of Arts degrees in special education.

Graduate degree programs in reading are available from Pacific Union College and Andrews University. Graduate degrees in related fields are offered at Andrews University (Berrien Springs, Michigan, also postgraduate), Columbia Union College, La Sierra University, and Walla Walla College. Atlantic Union College provides some graduate course work in special education.

What does a successful postsecondary intervention model look like?

Let's look at one program on an SDA campus. (As can be seen in Table 1,

Table 1 Services for students identified with learning disabilities

| Academic Support | | Resources | | | | Proactive Intervention Courses | | Other |
|--|---------------------------------------|---|--------------------------------------|--|---|---|--|-------|
| Identification Assessment | Advising | Service Centers | Testing Accommodations | Tutors | Technology Support | Proactive Intervention Courses | Other | |
| Andrews University Early alert system Counseling Testing Center for assessment and learning | Advising services Academic support | Reading Math Writing Learning | Testing modifications | Tutors | Reading computer programs | | Notetakers Recorders for books on tapes | |
| Atlantic Union College Assessment center Diagnostic testing | Faculty personal services Advocacy | Center for academic success Reading center | Alternative examination arrangements | | Assistive technology | Reading techniques and enhancement Skills for College Reading aerobics College seminar | Books on tape | |
| Canadian Union College Student assessment | Counseling services | Career and learning center | | General tutoring | Computer programs Videos | | Writing lab assistance | |
| Columbia Union College Placement assessment in reading, English, and math | Monitors “at-risk” | Teaching/learning center | Extended time | Math tutors | Computers Scanners | Reading comprehension Writing courses Study skills Remediation courses | Notetakers Books on tape Math/writing labs | |
| Home Study International Limited assessment | | | Testing modifications | Teacher advisor/tutor via telephone or on-line | | Study skills Remediation courses | Self-paced materials Curriculum individualization | |
| La Sierra University Diagnostic testing | Advocacy | Learning center | Testing modifications | Tutors | Computer lab Software Reading computer programs | Writing workshops Study skills | Assignment modifications | |
| Loma Linda University Referrals Nelson-Denny testing LASSI testing Woodcock-Johnson testing | Advocacy Counseling | Teaching/learning center | Testing modifications | One-on-one tutoring | Computers Scanners | Reading courses Memory skills Analytical skills Test-taking skills Writing courses | Student support group Editing assistance Board preparation | |

| | Identification Assessment | Advising | Service Centers | Testing Accommodations | Tutors | Technology Support | Proactive Intervention Courses | Other |
|--|------------------------------|--|---|--|--|--|--|---|
| Oakwood College | | Academic psychological counseling | Center for academic advancement | Testing modifications | Tutors | Limited computer access | Math skills Reading skills Writing skills Time management Scholarship skills | Notetakers Academic labs |
| Pacific Union College | Counseling center Assessment | Case manager Available accommodations | Learning resource centers | Extended time Isolated setting Alternative response and admin. options | Trained in content area 4 hours free for each class | Computers Software CD-ROM Multimedia | Study skills Writing skills Test-taking skills | Notetakers Books on tape Math/writing labs Peer mentoring Student support group |
| Southern Adventist University | Testing | Advocacy Counseling center | Center for learning success (in progress) | Testing modifications | Tutoring | 21st century classroom Remedial software Directed study software Videos | Remediation courses Test-taking skills Study skills Note-taking skills Reading improvement | |
| Southwestern Adventist University | | Counseling center Reading specialist staff | | | Tutoring | | | |
| Union College | | Diagnostic consultation Career counseling | Teaching/learning center | Testing modifications | Academic tutoring | Assistive technology | Remediation courses Developmental training Study skills | Student support group Study aids Notetakers Books on tape |
| Walla Walla College | Assessment screening | Career counseling Disability services ADA office Special services support Transdisciplinary coordination Section 504 services | Teaching/learning center | Testing modifications | Free group tutoring to all students One-on-one tutoring | Computers Scanners Brailier | Reading courses Writing courses Study skills | Notetakers Books on tape Sign language support |

other SDA schools have designed a variety of successful programs to meet the requirements of students with special needs.)

Loma Linda University (Loma Linda, California) has a highly successful teaching/learning center. The program, begun in 1993, helps students with a diagnosed learning disability, those “at-risk” for failure, and others striving to achieve their potential by facilitating individualized learning for each student. Here are some comments from those who have taken the courses:

“This is powerful! No exaggeration. This class is the most practical, common-sense packaged course I’ve attended. The impact on learning is phenomenal.”—Faculty member, School of Nursing, PUC.

“I can’t begin to describe how glad I am, I took this course. The tools and skills that I’ve learned will be invaluable and they’ve helped to relieve much of the anxiety that I had.”—First-year allied health student.

“I was amazed at how much faster I could read. I feel ready to begin the rigors of medical school. Every medical student should take this course.”—First-year medical student.

The teaching/learning center offers proactive intervention courses rather than remedial work, which is “catch-up” methodology. Course work is available to any student to meet a variety of needs.

Reading courses, ABLE I, II, III, and Faculty ABLE III, maximize cognitive functioning in the areas of speed, organization, retention, and retrieval. Astounding improvements have been achieved. Table 2 shows pre- and post-Nelson-Denny Reading Efficiency (speed and comprehension) scores for 1993-1996.

Pre- and post-efficiency test scores among students with learning disabilities also indicate significant reading improvement for 1993-1995 (see Table 3).

Writing courses began in 1995-1996 and continue this year. The sequence involves two classes, WRITE I and II, which teach language structures, foundation skills, organization ideas, and categorical experiences.

One of the special services provided by the teaching/learning center is preparatory courses for the LLU schools

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of medicine and dentistry. Test results for students completing the ABLE course prior to medical school indicate higher scores than the class averages in Biochemistry, Anatomy, and Histology (see Table 4).

What challenges do Seventh-day Adventist educational institutions face in helping students with special needs?

1. Overall decreasing enrollment and declining financial resources;

2. Increasing prevalence of individuals with learning disabilities;
3. Commitment to educating students with mild to moderate learning disabilities in a Christian environment; and
4. Federal requirements.

Several of these are beyond the scope of this article. We will address two areas: legal requirements and possible solutions. In the U.S., two federal laws dictate to some extent the educational services schools must provide for students with disabilities. Educational institutions, if they accept federal funds, are subject to these laws. The first is IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act), which requires schools to provide a free and appropriate education to all students up to age 21, or until they earn a high school diploma (whichever comes first). Students covered under special education IDEA must meet categorical federal eligibility criteria (current federal

Table 2
Improvement of Reading Efficiency Scores
Nelson-Denny Pre- and Post-Tests (1993-1996)

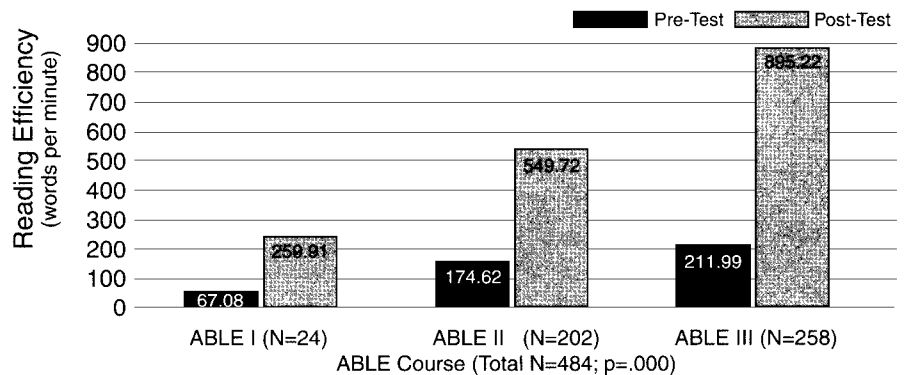
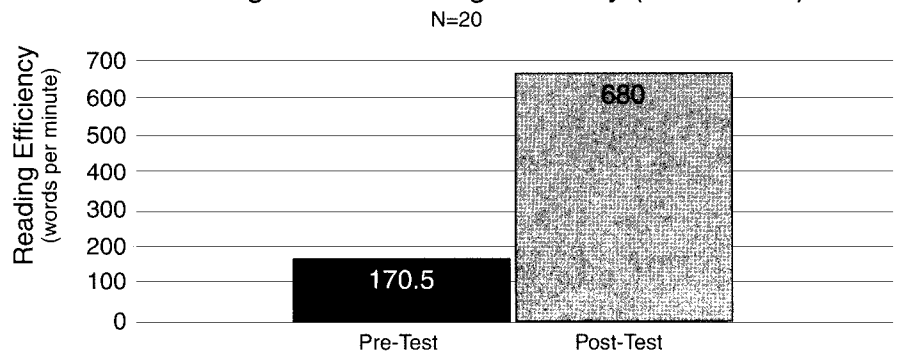


Table 3
Improvement in Reading Efficiency Among Students
with a Diagnosed Learning Disability (1993-1996)



reauthorization of IDEA may change this requirement). Evaluation for labeling must be provided free of charge.

The second law is Section 504 of the Federal Rehabilitation Act. A student who does not meet the criteria for IDEA eligibility may qualify for specialized educational services under Section 504. Services under 504 do not have an age or academic level cut-off point. An individual is classified as disabled if he or she has, or has had, a record of having a physical or mental impairment that significantly interferes with normal activities. These activities are defined as manual tasks, walking, seeing, hearing, speaking, breathing, *learning*, and working. The criteria for determining eligibility under Section 504 is broader and more inclusive than IDEA. Analysts predict that because of these laws, admissions and expulsion decisions by private schools are likely to face an increasing number of legal challenges.¹¹

Possible Solutions

1. Develop unified North American Division Higher Education IDEA and Section 504 policies.
2. Make a unified commitment to providing educational services to students with mild to moderate learning disabilities.
3. Model teaching and learning center services after programs that are proactive, inclusive, and provide proof of success, based on credible data.
4. Unify our higher education

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strengths in a comprehensive, long-range strategic plan to expand services and training offerings.

When I was a little girl in the 1960s, I lived in North Dakota, where my father pastored a rural district. One of his church members, Stanley Johnson, was a giant in stature and character. Winter was coming; the hay for the cattle was stacked in the farmyard. Fire struck, consuming Stanley's hay supply. Without additional hay cut and stacked prior to the impending snow, the cattle would die. It was only through the combined efforts of the community (Adventist and non-Adventist) that enough hay was harvested to eliminate the threat. As a little girl, it was a revelation to me to see what

teamwork and God's love could accomplish.

We as Seventh-day Adventists have a severe winter ahead of us. If we are to survive, we must collaborate using our strengths. Rivalry and isolation must be rejected, and each institution must contribute its strengths for all to be more successful.

As a mother of a student with learning disabilities; an elementary, middle, and secondary special-education teacher; and a special-education professor, I challenge each Seventh-day Adventist educator to ask, *Am I doing everything possible to ensure the best Christian education to students with disabilities?* God reaches out to help us regardless of where we are—should we do anything less for our students? ☞

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