



Tapping the Potential of Students with Learning Disabilities

Mary Jo Puglisi

✉ mjpuglisi@mountdesales.org

in LinkedIn: Mary Jo Puglisi

🐦 Twitter: mompugz

Student underperformance frequently causes stress for classroom teachers.

One of the most underperforming populations is students with learning disabilities (LDs). Often, these students spend years observing that their best effort falls short of mediocre efforts on the part of their peers. At some point, they stop giving their best effort in an attempt to preserve their fragile egos. “I only studied for a minute, so of course I got a D,” is much easier than “I studied for hours over the course of the past week and only got a C, when my best buddy studied in the locker room for 15 minutes and got an A.” What can we in the classroom do to help students give us their very best? Teaching students with learning disabilities *in Catholic schools* requires a firm belief that every student is gifted by God, wonderfully made, and it is our responsibility to find and utilize those gifts for the greater glory.

Getting to know your students with LDs is imperative to their success. Just because the label on the chart says dyslexia, doesn't

mean that you can make an assumption about what this student can and cannot do. Ask him specific questions:

- What has helped you in the past?
- How can you tell that a teacher “gets you?”
- What kind of tasks are the most difficult for you?
- What academic tasks are your favorites?

The more that a teacher can understand what it is like to live inside the student’s head, the better equipped the teacher is to push her. I work in an all-girl Catholic high school, with students who achieve at a very high level. I asked them what I should include in this article and they told me to be sure teachers know that they are smart. If you give them time, patience, and understanding, they will do well. They also told me that they can be manipulative, playing dumb whenever they think you might over-help and do the work for them. All of these ideas encourage us, as educators, to know the students—strengths, weaknesses, patterns of behavior, and how hard you can push. These pieces of information will be critical in moving forward.

Students with learning disabilities generally lack confidence. They compare themselves to their peers in the classroom (or on the athletic field, in the art room, even in social situations) and believe they cannot compete. In order to build confidence, you must believe in them wholeheartedly. Despite their academic struggles, students with LDs have extra-large antennae for disingenuousness. You cannot fake believing in them, or they will know it and start to sink. Instead, find ways to support them so that you can insure their success. Scaffold the work, read the material out loud to increase comprehension, set short (and non-negotiable) deadlines to hold them to task. Once you do that, you can genuinely believe in them along the way. Find ways to build small successes on material that is comparable to what their peers are doing. They want to do what their friends are doing, even if it is hard. Find a way to make it manageable. Make them an expert on something if the opportunity presents itself. All of these small successes breed

greater self-confidence. Without confidence, our students will go nowhere.

Once you have gotten to know the student and assisted her in gaining some confidence, it is time to help her find her voice. Students with learning disabilities must be articulate regarding their disability and what they need for success. Being able to tell a teacher that he does better sitting away from the window because of his ADHD will assist him in high school and college. Knowing that he should sit away from the window will help him in life. Help them gain comfort with the words that relate to their LDs—dyslexia, dysgraphia, executive function, or scatter. My girls also want you to know that each student is more than the diagnosis. They are artists, athletes, friends, sons/daughters, employees, aunts/uncles. In many of those places, they are superstars. Allow them to articulate that, as well. If a student needs assistance talking with a teacher, there are some baby steps to assist them in becoming independent:

- Talk about what he wants to say and assist him with finding the correct words. Role play.
- Moderate the meeting with the teacher, helping the student as needed. As you work with a particular student, expect more independence at each meeting.
- Eventually, set them free. Role play before, if necessary, and get feedback after.
- All throughout, reinforce the progress the student is making; help her see incremental progress along the way.

I am a fervent believer that students with learning disabilities can do just about anything as long as they are given the appropriate support. Far too many teachers assume that a student can’t. Because of this, students get into the habit of giving up quickly. If you truly know and understand a student, you should be able to put the necessary supports in place to ensure their success on any task. There are plenty of resources to gather ideas when nothing seems to be working. I personally am a big fan of *The Pre-Referral Intervention Manual (PRIM)* by Hawthorne Educational Services, which has strategies for nearly any situation a teacher might encounter. Building your bag of tricks, having a wide repertoire of interventions, will allow you to push students beyond their expectations and likely beyond yours.

If you remember nothing else from this article, remember these things when working with students with learning disabilities:

- Love them.
- Believe in them.
- Know that they are more than their label.
- Expect their very best and accept no less.

For over 35 years, **Mary Jo Puglisi** has worked with students with special needs in academic and residential settings. Mary Jo is now the director of the Sacred Heart Program at Mount de Sales Academy. Her approach to student support is practical, finding ways to support students in the classroom within the teacher’s established routines.

