
Introduction

My learning-disabled students really taught me how to teach reading. I still remember each and every one of them—Adam, Jeffrey, Doreen, Tommy, Larry, Georgette, Suzanne—all of them. They renewed my faith in the tenacity of the human spirit, and I am filled with respect and admiration for those children every time I think about them. And I think about them often, for they are all with me every time I write about teaching, every time I work with teachers, and whenever I visit our model schools. Those students taught me more than how to teach reading; they taught me to believe in myself as a teacher, to persevere, and not to accept theories that hurt children.

My own great lessons began thirty years ago with the first twenty learning-disabled students on my caseload. They were basically sweet, good children who just couldn't read. The first- and second-graders in this group couldn't read at all, and the older students were struggling and stumbling on first- and second-grade levels. There they were in their regular classrooms, trying desperately to look as if they knew what was going on. How could they? They couldn't read most of the words in their rooms, their textbooks—much of anything. My heart went out to them, but they needed more than that. They needed me to teach them to read.

My awakening to what these children needed didn't happen overnight, I can tell you. I worked and worked with each of them, trying to figure out the best ways of reaching them. Then it came to me: their strengths! The best way to reach these frustrated children was the way in which all children learn best: through their strengths. My teaching was never the same from that moment on. That powerful realization caused me to look at all students and all classrooms in a new and different light.

Take the class with which I had just begun to work as my first example. Who were these kids, really? What could they do? And what did they have trouble doing? I realized then that these children were dropouts from the strong phonics program used in my district. They couldn't learn phonics because they had auditory dyslexia—extreme auditory deficiencies that made them incapable of learning much, if any, phonics. So, all of them failed

phonics in the early grades, and didn't learn to read. But their problems with schools—and with reading—didn't end in the early grades. Throughout the grades, they were given remedial phonics. It never stopped, until we worked together. They were, as we would all learn together, very capable of learning to read.

Please understand: The issue wasn't phonics. The issue was, and is, creating the right match between students' strengths and the best way of teaching them. Phonics isn't a goal; it's one method of teaching children to read. The overarching goal—the reason we teach any child to read—is to create a person who loves reading, who reads to learn, and who will be a lifelong reader and learner. That's our business. Phonics is simply one way of reaching that enormously important goal. There are many, many other methods. The key is matching the method with the student and his or her strengths.

Unfortunately, that way of thinking was counter to the prevailing wisdom thirty years ago, when I began teaching learning-disabled children. I had to become a maverick if my heart and integrity were to survive. So I did. I soon discovered, however, that I was a maverick with lots of company. In my doctoral coursework, I encountered the field of learning styles and was able to put my work with reading into a larger (and very well-researched) context. Later, the field of brain-based learning solved another piece of the reading puzzle.

In the meantime, my students learned to read. And I learned the power of doing the obvious—which is always to look first at students' strengths and at their style of learning.

For instance, when I realized Georgette's major problem was a memory deficit (she was repeating second grade and could only read her name), I created a simple method of tape recording words and stories for her. She learned 31 words in the first month we worked together.

Since all of my students couldn't learn with phonics, I taught them to write stories using a word-tracing technique. They liked it and it helped them. I knew that the children were still struggling a lot when they read, and they hated the low-level reading materials they had to read, so I devised a method of recording slowly, and I recorded just small amounts so they could re-listen enough to learn the material. That method enabled me to stretch them into higher and more interesting materials.

One of the grandest days of all was when Tommy—a sixth-grader who read on a first-grade level—read a portion of *Charlotte's Web* that I had recorded with this method. His reading was fluent and smooth. I watched Tommy change before my eyes. For the first time, I felt the hope he had in his heart that he would learn to read. He knew I felt it. It was a glorious moment for both of us, just glorious. Tommy gained 1.3 years in reading in just three months, all of it while working with the recordings that I had made for him of *Charlotte's Web*.

They are all here with me as I finish this introduction, for they are always with me in my heart. I hope that this book helps you all to put your children first always, teach them through their strengths, experiment with the strategies in this book, and, first and foremost, never lose faith that your students can learn to read. It doesn't have to be step-by-step. They can and will make great leaps forward. Listen to their interests, honor their strengths, and you and they will accomplish what seem like miracles. You can do it. I know you can.