

The 15% Solution: Literacy and Learning Disabilities

By Audrey J. Gorman

SPECIAL TECHNIQUES FOR PEOPLE WITH LD CAN BREAK DOWN FORMIDABLE BARRIERS TO READING

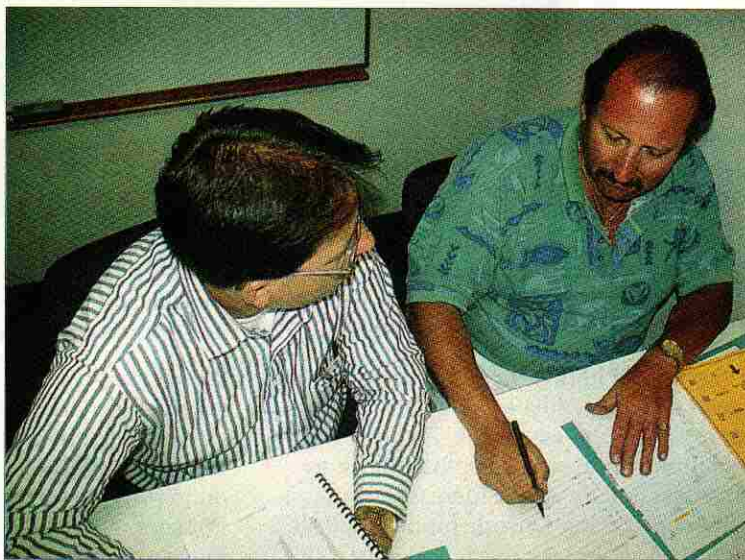
When we walk into a room and turn on the switch, the light goes on. When Andy flicks the same switch, the furnace goes on. Somehow his wiring works differently. Andy has a reading disability, and despite years of hard effort, his reading did not improve. But he reads now, thanks to the Lake County Literacy Program at the Waukegan (Ill.) Public Library. How many Andys live in your service area?

Of the 39 million Americans (15% of the population) with learning disabilities (LD), 60–80% have serious reading disabilities. Many adults, even those in literacy programs, avoid or bluff their way through daily situations involving reading. Their self-esteem is constantly assaulted. In ways subtle and not so subtle, they are told that they are dumb, that they cannot learn. But they are not dumb, and they still want to learn.

Unlike others in adult literacy programs, people with reading disabilities often had adequate opportunities to learn to read. They may have had good teachers or even studied phonics. Their parents likely witnessed their struggle, but didn't know what to do. They have drive and desire. And yet they're failing to learn how to read, even in literacy programs.

What can we do to help people with learning disabilities? The answers aren't simple, but some libraries are already succeeding. They offer screening for phonological awareness and skills. They provide tutor training in proven approaches such as the Orton-Gillingham method—a structured, systematic, multisensory, program focused on developing the ability to hear phonemes, the building blocks of language.

AUDREY J. GORMAN is director of the Roads to Learning project at ALA. Contact her c/o ALSC, 800-545-2433, ext. 4027; fax 312-944-8085; e-mail agorman@ala.org.



Tutors and students work in pairs at Chula Vista. Here, tutor Brian Denison coaches Gabriel E. Salazar.

In Andy's program, Carol Morris and her literacy team serve 375 ethnically diverse students annually. They work with 350 tutors, about 10% of whom have training in tutoring people with learning disabilities. Morris estimates that 25% of their students have LD. The Lake County Literacy Program, established in 1984, has a service population of 600,000.

Early on, the Waukegan team noticed some students making limited or no progress. "Something had to be wrong, we figured, since others were progressing," Morris recalled. So they sought answers. They connected with an LD consultant who recommended using the Orton-Gillingham method. A companion *Language Tool Kit*, a series of cards and a manual, based on the work of doctors Samuel Orton and Anna Gillingham, is used for short drill and practice sessions in lessons for adults with dyslexia. It was introduced for students who needed work with phonemes, and tutors soon discovered how effective this method is.

If tutoring isn't going well, however, a staff person or the tutor can ask a reading specialist for help. Morris calls them "the first line of defense" for identifying strategies. "If progress is still limited, then it's on to the LD consultant, who's made available through local United Way funds," Morris explained. "The staff person or tutor discusses strategies used thus far, along with consistent problems. The consultant determines if a full-scale evaluation is needed. In some cases, the LD consultant works directly with the client. More often, she and the tutor work together to fashion an approach."

Sometimes computer software is part of the solution. One student enthused, "Having this...software is like having her [the tutor] every night of the week." Books on tape from the National Library Service for the Blind and Physically Handicapped also work for some, particularly those with dyslexia, Morris says. Andy "became a voracious reader this way, and does two or three books a week. This is a great way for libraries to be more proactive....Books on tape are wonderful tools."

They need a different approach

In California, at the Chula Vista Public Library's Literacy Team Center, director Meg Schofield has helped people with learning disabilities since 1993. The Literacy Team Center covers a multicultural service area with a population of 153,200, and has up to 220 adult learners and 170 tutors annually. "I wanted program accountability," Schofield remembered. "A great many people were not making significant progress. I knew they could learn. They just needed a different approach, and at the time we didn't have it."

Impressed by what she had heard about the Wilson Reading System (WRS), a multisensory phonology system, Schofield received certified training in Massachusetts in 1993. Initially, she thought the program would suit a small percentage of learners—maybe 20%. Soon "it became clear that far more learners would benefit from the system." Today, 65% of her learners exhibit telltale LD characteristics. "It was a matter of learning how to look," she said.

Schofield and her staff overhauled the entire Chula Vista literacy program. They now screen all incoming students for phonological awareness and internalization of "the sound/symbol code of the language." Schofield says "it's relatively easy." They don't diagnose or label students as dyslexic. Some students are placed in the general literacy program; the majority are tutored by WRS-trained volunteers. "In certain cases, we also use the Lindamood Auditory Discrimination In Depth program," she explained. It's a discovery-based program that uses pictures, letters, and colored blocks to represent sound changes. It develops phonemic awareness critical to reading in people who don't naturally have it. It also merges phoneme awareness with spelling and reading.

Sound dexterity

Chula Vista screens tutors before training them in WRS techniques "to be sure that they have a certain dexterity

with language sounds." This is usually not done, especially with volunteers, but it increases tutor and student success.

Training is the key. "The Wilson Reading System has been successful because we offer an apprenticeship program to tutors," says Schofield. "Once they start to work with learners, their on-the-job training begins. We sit in on lessons, model, give them feedback, coach. This happens over a period of months." And support is ongoing.

Recently, Chula Vista has added a family phonics program. It's a new twist on family literacy. "Just reading to children and promoting the enjoyment of print is...not enough," asserts Schofield. This is especially true since learning disabilities tend to run in families. "The children are school-aged, 2nd to 5th grade, and they should be reading at grade level. But they've already fallen far behind."



Chula Vista program director Meg Schofield (center) helps tutor Bob Ferris use the multisensory Wilson Reading System with students David Solano and Donna Colson.

The class, which is taught by an experienced Lindamood teacher, enlists parents as coaches.

Among the challenges the program faces, Schofield said, "number one is raising money. The groundbreaking and restructuring we've done was largely thanks to LSCA Title VI literacy grants, a funding source that no longer exists. We're also trying to spread the word about alternative approaches required by learners who have reading disabilities. Not everyone wants to hear about systemic change. We're not talking about just a little tweaking."

Schofield asserts that success speaks for itself. Her program's learner retention rate has tripled in the past three years. Over 75% of students are still active in the program more than a year after they start. "They have life crises, but they come back," she said. "After absences that sometimes exceed a year, they pick up where they left off!"

Learning disabilities such as dysgraphia and dyscalculia can also be part of a learner's profile. This article cannot address them all. It's clear from the numbers that a lot of people need disability-specific help. Fortunately, there are proven methods to consider.

As Darlene Silva, a student in the Chula Vista program, put it, "We stumble year after year, trying to put pieces together, not knowing why they don't work out. But yet, here we are fighting.... And each time we put the pieces of words together, there is a difference.... We have a chance." ♦