

The importance of a peer preparation programme education essay

[Education](#), [Importance of Education](#)



Actually, students with a profile of Specific Learning Difficulties may experience various attitudes and reactions from their educators and society in general. These students, besides having a profile of specific learning difficulties are persons first, having different characters, inspirations and willpower. According to IDEA (2004), specific learning disability means a "disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, which disorder may manifest itself in an imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, write, spell, or do mathematical calculations" (as cited in Schwab Foundation, 2006). In fact, learning difficulties can be considered as learning disabilities because these are intrinsic conditions that can impinge on a student's life as intensely as most types of physical disabilities. Learning disabilities are a life-long condition affecting not only the academic performance but also various facets of life, such as the social, emotional and daily aspects (Johnson and Myklebust, 1967). Learning disabilities are held to originate in dysfunction of the central nervous system which often runs in families. They are not due to environment, inadequate or inappropriate instruction, socio-economic issues or lack of motivation, although these factors may compound the impact of learning disabilities (The Learning Disability Association of Canada, 2002). People at any level of intellectual functioning may have a profile of learning disabilities (Hall & Moats, 1998, p. 270). "Although these impairments cause academic difficulties, a person with strong intellectual and linguistic abilities, motivation, and perseverance can appear to compensate for many of the debilitating aspects." (Mather & Gregg, 2006, p. 100)" Individuals with learning disabilities typically present an uneven profile of abilities,

demonstrating difficulties with some types of learning but ease with other areas of performance" (Mather & Gregg, 2006, p. 99). They may demonstrate significant difference between their potential and actual achievement (British Dyslexia Society, 1990). Reflections and Strategies According to Giangreco (2002), it is imperative that skills are assessed in the natural environments so as to have a clearer outcome of what the student can perform. For the last three months, I have been observing Martin[1] within his school and home environment. Martin is a seven year old boy and is presently in Year 3. He had only been admitted to this present school two years ago as he had previously attended a private school. Martin is well-mannered student of average intelligent. He is a hands-on child and loves 'fixing' things. I observed Martin during different activities, both in academic and non academic subjects. I noticed that Martin works well in sports activities but has poor skills in music when performing rhythmic activities. He has difficulty following instructions and organizing his work. In fact, Martin has difficulty staying still and finds it hard to be attentive and to remain focused on tasks. I observed him struggling to read both in English and Maltese. Martin reads slowly with rehearsals, hesitations and refusals. Analysing him reading, I realised that Martin is showing symptoms of both Orthographic (Surface Dyslexia) and Phonological dyslexia. According to Roberts and Mather (1997: 237), orthographic dyslexia is " a problem with the acquisition of decoding or encoding skills that is caused by difficulty with rapid and accurate formation of word images in memory" (as cited in O'Brien, 2009). On the other hand, according to Snowling (1981: 225) an individual who has a profile of phonological dyslexia

is unable to produce new words due to poor grapheme-phoneme knowledge (as cited in O'Brien, 2009). I noticed that Martin shows "poor performance on phonological awareness tasks and deficits in verbal working memory" (O'Brien, 2009) and is unable to segment words into individual sounds. Moreover, I observed that Martin has a profile of dysgraphia. He tries to avoid drawing and copying. Whenever he writes, the words run into each other, having inconsistent spacing between letters and words. He writes in different font sizes and outside the lines. Martin gets confused when to use capital letters. Sometimes he writes the lower case letters as big as the capitals. I also observed him writing the words from right to left and upside down. He finds it awkward to hold the pencil and he tends to exert a lot of pressure when writing. Furthermore, Martin takes a long time to write and keeps spelling the words as he writes (Books, 2012). So far, Martin has not been sitting for examinations as he is still in year 3. Thus no access arrangements are yet determined. Two months ago it was recommended that Martin would benefit from shared support for particular lessons and/or during particular times. However, so far there is no LSA in class and the class teacher is expected to provide the necessary support indicated in the psychological and occupational reports. This makes it quite challenging to her, especially when one bears in mind that the class is a mixed-ability one and that there are more students with other needs. Martin attends complimentary sessions every Monday during school hours, thus missing on classwork and lessons. According to Giangreco (2000) this pull-out method can also be disruptive to other students and the teacher. What is more, learning disabilities cannot just be regarded as an academic difficulty only.

Students with learning difficulties have been found to be more prone than other students to be depressed and have a low self-esteem (Clever, Bear & Juvonen, 1992; Heath, 1995; Humphrey, 2002; Leondari, 1993; Morrison & Cosden, 1997; WrightStrawderman & Watson, 1992 as cited in Banks & Woolfson, 2008). Whilst observing Martin, I could easily see that Martin feels the need to belong and be part of the class. It was quite usual for Martin to go round his classmates asking them whether they would like to share his stationery, such as a rubber, ruler and pencil; and this when he only has enough for himself. Kunc (1992) argues that: it is not uncommon for educators to work from the premise that achievement and mastery rather than belonging are the primary if not the sole precursors for self-esteem..... and inverted Maslow's hierarchy of needs so that belonging has been transformed from an unconditional need and right of all people into something that must be earned, something that can be achieved only by the " best" of us. (As cited in The need to belong: Rediscovering Maslow's hierarchy of needs, 1992)I agree with the above statement and in fact students with learning disabilities perceive themselves less favourably than their peers in the academic field, have a low self-esteem and look upon themselves as failures. Erickson's psychosocial stages of development place children at this age in the industry versus inferiority stage. At this period the child needs to master academic competencies demanded by society or else he will build a sense of inferiority (as cited in Bee & Boyd, 2010). It is therefore imperative that educators give tasks which students with learning disabilities can do. Repeated lack of success and continuous disappointments might result in behavioural problems and/or learned

helplessness. The student will stop believing in himself, thinking that there is nothing he can do to ameliorate his academic performance, thus adapting an external locus of control (Horowitz, 2012). Indeed in one of my observations during an English lesson, Martin was showing signs of sleepiness and tiredness. He even stated in a loud voice that he is not getting enough sleep at night. In reality this was not the case as his mother informed me that he sleeps at half past eight in the evening and wakes up at seven in the morning. Moreover, exactly following this lesson the students had their break time and I could witness Martin running in the yard, playing happily with his peers. Vygotsky (1978) argues that "instruction should aim to place the child into situations just beyond what he can already achieve alone but no higher than what he can reasonably achieve with support of others" (as cited in Mason & McCall, 2012, p. 337). Otherwise, a student will be discouraged, frustrated and despaired. Students are to build new knowledge in relation to previously learned material and not rushed through a number of new concepts. In reality, I have observed that during various academic lessons, mainly Maltese and English, the teacher carries on with the explanation, fully aware that Marin is not catching up with all the new material. She does try to re-explain but eventually has to give up so as not to let the rest of the class wait for her. In such instances, I think that Martin would not be bothered to even try to follow, let alone participate in the lesson. As a matter of fact I observed that Martin either fidgets about or just leans on his desk and rests. However, a crucial aspect for educators to keep in mind is that students with learning disabilities have a right to be included in the school community. Consequently educators need to focus on the abilities rather than the

disabilities of their students. The educational system should not remain a one system fits all. It is therefore crucial that educators use Universal Design for Learning (UDL). UDL is a framework which eliminates barriers and makes curriculum accessible for all students as it provides: Multiple means of representations of information to students. Multiple means of expression by students to express what they know. Multiple means of engagement to stimulate learner's interest and motivation. Lessons are to be structured in a way that addresses the various intelligences mentioned by Dr. Gardner. Thus students with learning disabilities may use their specific strength at a particular time during the lesson (Bender, 2004). A very effective strategy which could be used in class is cooperative learning, where students of different abilities are arranged in small groups to achieve group and individual tasks. Thus each and every student in the group is not only accountable for his own learning but also for the learning of the other members of his group. Moreover, cooperative learning avoids labelling. Furthermore, educators need to teach and support student-directed learning strategies whereby every student will be an active participant in the learning process. Students using the self-determined learning model of instruction proposed by Wehmeyer et al. (2000) are shown how to set a goal, take action and re-evaluate goal if progress is insufficient. Thus students will be responsible for their learning. " Promoting self-determination can also promote student access to and progress in the general education curriculum" (Wehmeyer, Agran, & Hughes, 2000 as cited in Wehmeyer, 2007, p. 14) Behavioural reinforcements are beneficial to students with learning disabilities. Indeed many " handwriting problems are manageable

with increased behavioural reinforcement for correct writing skill" (Bender, 2004, p. 202). Blandford and Lloyd (1987), emphasise the effectiveness of self-instructional procedures in improving writing errors (as cited in Bender, 2004). Handouts, the elimination of unnecessary writing and the use of different colour for each line when writing on the whiteboard are all strategies from which all the class would benefit. Another strategy which the teacher may use is peer tutoring. Research has shown that " the tutees improve in their academic achievement more when tutors are used than in traditional forms of instruction (Carlson et al., 1985; Mortweet et al., 1999; Scruggs & Richter, 1985)" (as cited in Bender, 2004, p. 290). The students speak the same language and quite often the tutors can explain concepts in a more simplified way. Bender (2004) states that peer tutoring improve the tutee's self-concept and social skills and enhance inclusion. Indeed, I could easily notice in the various observations that I have made, that the students enjoy working together and they look forward to helping each other. The tutors, on their part, not only feel useful with their new role of ' teachers' but their academic performance improves (Bender, 2004). Another benefit of peer tutoring which I noted is that, the tutors do not disrupt the class whilst waiting for all their peers to finish a particular task. However, it is crucial that both tutee and the tutor are comfortable working together. The teacher needs to monitor the process and be on the lookout for any bullying which might occur. The educator needs to perform the sociometric testing developed by Moreno. This measures " the attractions and repulsions which take place between the individuals within a group" (as cited in Maheshwari, 2011). Sociometric testing will thus " facilitate group task effectiveness

and satisfaction of participants" (Maheshwari, 2011). Also, quite often, Martin copied the behaviour of his peers. Martin tends to be very fidgety and distracted during lessons and he has a low attention span. This resulted in instances when Martin was not aware that all his peers have started working a particular task. In other lessons, Martin, due to memory difficulties, just remembered the last thing that the teacher had instructed the class to do. Martin was able to start and complete what was required of him through observing his classmates. Bandura's social learning theory states that people learn from one another; through observation and then imitating and modelling the behaviour. Bandura (1977) states that:

Learning would be exceedingly laborious, not to mention hazardous, if people had to rely solely on the effects of their own actions to inform them what to do. Fortunately, most human behavior is learned observationally through modeling: from observing others one forms an idea of how new behaviors are performed, and on later occasions this coded information serves as a guide for action. (As cited in Social Learning Theory: An Overview of Bandura's Social Learning Theory, 2012)

I think that all the students should be aware of the different abilities and strengths that they all have. They need to be taught that they are all unique and that different students may have different learning styles. For this reason, whilst I was doing a home observation, I took the opportunity to discuss this issue with Martin's grandmother[2]. I believe that we are a team and therefore the need that all " members work together to achieve a common goal and reciprocally share their expertise and perceptions with

others" (Salend, 1994, p. 117). The mother, the class teacher and I agreed on the importance of a peer preparation programme. " Children with disability with no peer preparation programme are more rejected and less accepted than the average child in the class." (Tanti Burlo, Soresi, Nightingale, 1996) Consequently, a peer preparation programme was implemented in class. Now, all the class appreciates diversity. They are conscious that although they are all different, they may all contribute to the class in various ways. Martin is aware of the fact that he learns differently than most of his peers do and that he has nothing to be ashamed of. Instructions have to be tailored in a way to his unique learning style. On one of my visits at home I had the opportunity to observe Martin during a reading session. Martin just did not want to read a story book which his grandmother had brought to him. The reason was that Martin was disheartened when he saw a whole page of print. In fact, when I covered most of the page, Martin was willing to read. Another thing that I noticed was that Martin was finding it difficult to read certain letters, such as ' l'. On close scrutiny I realised that the font of this book was ' Arial' and thus ' l' was written ' l'. I discussed with his grandmother of what to look for when choosing/buying books appropriate for Martin. I suggested to her that a way to encourage Martin to read is by using modern technology, namely the computer. She needs to present reading as a fun and entertaining activity which they may do together. The reading session need not be long so as not to annoy Martin. One way to do this is by assisting him in finding read along stories and songs whereby Martin will enjoy listening and watching these amusing, animated stories. They may then read or sing along with them whilst seeing the words being

read highlighted. To motivate him even further, they might even role play the story later on in the evening during playtime. Thus Martin will not associate reading with another boring task he has to do after a long day at school. Back at school, Martin's class teacher and I discussed ways on how we can support Martin in comprehending an English reading passage as it was evident, during my observations that Martin does not understand what is being read. A strategy which could be adapted and would benefit all students in class is the use of visual imagery. The students would be asked to close their eyes, think of the story that have been read, identify its main aspects and then visualise a picture that includes all these aspects (Bender, 2004). Another tactic that could be used is story maps. Polloway (2007) cites Gajria et al. and states that students with learning disabilities can access material found difficult to understand through the use of graphic organizers. " Story maps activate prior knowledge before reading, help student monitor comprehension during reading and summarize key ideas after reading" (Polloway, 2007, p. 6). Polloway (2007) cites Keel, Dangel & Owens (1999) when he says that story maps aid students in joining prior knowledge with existing knowledge. Undoubtedly, graphic organizers aid students with learning disabilities in their short-term memory challenges. Another strategy that can be used in class in assisting memory is the use of mnemonics, such as acrostics and acronyms. Mnemonics can assist in detaining information for later retrieval as they help students form a pattern. Humour is another effective strategy with regard to memory as the brains do remember unusual or silly things (Richards, 2008)." Memory deficits among students with learning disabilities are quite well documented, and many researchers and

practitioners suggest that these memory problems play a role in math achievement deficits among students with learning disabilities" (Geller & Smith, 2002; Jitendra, 2002 as cited in Bender, 2004, p. 216). Observing Martin during Maths lessons I could detect deficits in premath objectives namely understanding numeration and understanding sequencing. Martin shows symptoms of a sequencing disability. It was quite common for him to copy a numerical wrongly; for example, he would have 16 on the board but he copies it and pronounces it as 61. He finds it difficult to tell what comes after a particular number without having to go through the whole sequence. The use of visuals and manipulatives is of utmost importance in supporting students with such difficulties (Bender, 2004). Conclusion Throughout my observations it was evident that Martin is really struggling at school and he is bored with school life. Outside the school premises, Martin is just another ordinary boy. It is imperative that school does not destroy this boy and that Martin is really and truly included in education. Inclusion does not mean all students attend mainstream school. Salend (2001) sustains that " effective inclusion involves sensitivity to and acceptance of individual needs and differences. All students in inclusive schools are valued as individuals capable of contributing to society and are taught to appreciate diversity" (p. 7).