

The Impact of Private LD Schools on American Education

by Kathleen Burke-Fabrikant, Ed.D

"I got very good at being invisible."

That is what happens to bright children who cannot learn successfully with conventional teaching. They are the children for whom typical inclusion doesn't work. They are the children who retreat and don't take risks, either socially or intellectually. They are simply not engaged. Maureen Brenner is the Head of Riverview School in E. Sandwich, MA, and these are scenarios she sees on a daily basis. "The Riverview School serves children who have complex language and learning disabilities and gives them a small class setting with unique forms of systematic instruction. We restore students' self-esteem and confidence while developing their academic skills. We combat learned helplessness," says Mrs. Brenner.

Private LD schools, built on the principle of designing instruction to meet the individual needs of students with learning differences, have pioneered, tested and proven the effectiveness of alternative classroom instructional methods for many decades. They have developed or refined and supported with their own research many instructional models and methods designed specifically for learning disabled students.

The success of the LD schools' methods in solving the academic and social learning problems of nontraditional learners has had a significant ripple effect in the broader educational environment. As the new methods were proven successful in their classrooms, the private LD schools began impressive programs of community outreach to spread the word. The outreach efforts typically trained parents to be effective advocates for their children's needs in the public schools and provided teacher training seminars and classes for both public and private school teachers. The scope of this paper does not allow acknowledging by name the specific contributions of even a fraction of the multitude of LD schools which have mounted successful curriculum development and outreach programs across the nation. Each of these schools has become expert at meeting the needs of its population and in creating effective instructional methods to meet the formidable challenges faced by learning disabled children. This has been accomplished in nearly as many ways as there are schools. Thus, to illuminate the methods by which the collective efforts of all of these schools have dramatically changed the landscape of education in this country, I have elected to cite as representative examples a few schools and centers whose work in these areas is well known to me.

And while the purpose of this article is to examine the influence of independent LD schools, the important contributions of other nonprofit educational organizations which have worked in parallel with the schools deserve mention also. Training clinics such as those at Mass. General Hospital in Boston and Scottish Rite Hospital in Dallas; professional development efforts like Mel Levine's Schools Attuned program and the Neuhaus Center in Houston; and professional organizations such as the International Dyslexia Association itself have all been important influences. These organizations have trained and cultivated leaders, developed programs, published curricula, conducted teacher training, provided diagnostic and tutorial service, supported research, led advocacy campaigns, and worked to promote change in the public school programs across the country. Without question, they have served as important allies of the LD schools in changing the educational landscape.

LD Schools' Role in Developing and Promoting More Effective Teaching Methods

The histories of LD schools are often a reflection of the personal histories of their founders. Many were begun by parents seeking the more effective instruction so desperately needed by their children. Royce Learning Center in Savannah, GA, is one such example. It was founded in 1970 by Harriet Royce, who pioneered the teaching of children with learning disabilities in the Savannah area using Orton-Gillingham methods. Although it is a small institution in terms of numbers, Royce now maintains a day school, Chatham Academy, enrolling 105, a large tutoring program, and an adult literacy program which reached over 450 adults last year. Royce serves the southeastern region of Georgia and, like so many other small centers, employs teaching methods that respond to a broad range of learning needs. This center is typical of hundreds of LD schools and centers trying to meet the needs for specialized, individualized education in their regions.

Historically, independent LD schools have been distinguished from public school programs primarily by the teaching methods they have employed. The methods they used were largely the product of the work of pioneers like Samuel Orton and Anna Gillingham and their associates in the early 30's, 40's and 50's. The early geographical spread of the new methods was largely attributable to the efforts of individuals who trained under the pioneers and then established diagnostic, tutorial and training clinics, private practices, or summer school programs in other parts of the country. When the numbers of independent schools for LD children really began to grow in the 70's and 80's,

it was the knowledge and training sustained in these programs that served as the wellspring of information on methods for the new schools.

But the role of the LD schools was not confined merely to copying the methods of intensive, systematic, multi-sensory reading instruction they inherited from the pioneers. Several forces impelled them to actively adapt, refine and extend the techniques. In many small schools, the economics of staffing compelled them to develop effective ways to adapt what had originally been one to one tutorial techniques to small group instruction. Many of the schools also invested significant effort over the past two decades to refine their methods by incorporating key findings from the rapidly growing body of scientific reading research into their instructional designs. Also, as full day programs, LD schools confronted the challenge of helping children overcome the effects of their learning differences in areas other than written language. This has led schools to extend the key principles which underlie successful structured, multisensory reading instruction to improve teaching in such disparate areas as math and social skills. Over time, pursuing these goals has created in many LD schools an ongoing commitment to the development of innovative methods for addressing a broad array of the issues faced by LD students. Finally, most successful LD schools have come to recognize that remediating their students' academic skill deficits is not their sole purpose. They realize that helping students discover and develop their talents, or "affinities" as Mel Levine calls them, is just as important. Consequently, LD schools have been leaders in developing ways of integrating effective skills teaching methods with other components of the curriculum such as the arts. Thumbnail profiles of four such schools follow with examples of their contributions to instructional design.

The Carroll School in Lincoln, MA, was not only one of the first day schools to offer Orton-Gillingham language instruction methods in New England, it was also one of the earliest to integrate Outward Bound style outdoor challenge education along with manual arts and fine arts into its programs. Through its extensive outreach and training initiatives, Carroll School has been instrumental in spreading effective teaching methods to both public and private schools throughout the region.

Sally Smith's Lab School in Washington, D.C., is world famous for its methods of integrating the arts and experiential learning in teaching academic skills to learning disabled students. It emphasizes state of the art work with computers, storytelling, art and project based learning. Lab School also sponsors a remarkable array of informational, advocacy and training outreach activities including the acclaimed website, www.ldonLine.org.

The June Shelton School in Dallas is the nation's largest private school for students with learning differences. The school has pioneered early intervention beginning at age 3 and is working to expand that to infants and toddlers who display important developmental delays. Founded by speech-language pathologist June Shelton, the school still places a strong emphasis on its language, speech and hearing clinic. The school is working to extend the development of its teaching methods through a "Montessori applied to at-risk children" curriculum, using a multisensory language method. Shelton has published its own programs and offers training in them to teachers for college credit. The school also conducts extensive outreach, hosting conferences, conducting training, and offering a multitude of resources for parents and educators.

The Riverview School in Massachusetts is one of a number of LD schools which don't stop at high school in helping students with their learning. They have created a post secondary program, GROW (Getting Ready for the Outside World) which includes academic instruction, vocational skills, job coaching, and independent living in residential apartments and housing on and off-campus. The school is initiating a "Jobs of the Future" venture which will look not only at the future needs of their students but also at employment trends in the changing economy. The program addresses such questions as: What kinds of careers should we be preparing our students for when they graduate? And what happens to our graduates 10 or 20 years from now? Where do they get the support they need to adapt to changes in the marketplace?

The Impact of LD Schools' Teaching Methods

The ripple effect caused by LD schools in the broader educational environment to which I alluded can be seen in several ways. First, as growing numbers of parents saw evidence that the new methods enabled their children to find academic success, they became increasingly active in advocating for the adoption of such methods in their local public schools. In a number of states, the success of parents in obtaining public funding for placement of their children in private LD schools exerted economic pressure on the public schools to employ more effective methods in their LD programs. And finally, as outreach efforts empowered more parents with information, parent advocacy efforts in some areas became more broad-based and played a role in producing legislative changes at the state and federal level. Many believe that it is unlikely that these changes would have occurred without the widespread presence of the private LD schools.

Most independent LD schools established credibility for their methods with the general public by succeeding dramatically with students with whom the public schools had previously failed. As parents saw evidence that their children could learn academic skills when the teaching methods matched their learning needs, they felt justified in asking for those methods to be offered in their public school classrooms. When they became impatient with the pace of change produced through local advocacy, some parents and professionals formed larger advocacy groups and took their cases to the legislatures. In 1974, Massachusetts passed "Chapter 766," one of the first state special education laws. Not long after that, Congress passed public law 94-142, the Education of All Handicapped Children Act, which was modeled after Chapter 766 and provided similar protections at the federal level.

One of the provisions of the new laws empowered parents to seek compensation for the cost of tuition in a private LD school if they could demonstrate in a hearing that their child could not access the teaching methods that would work for them in the public school. In a number of states like Massachusetts, New York, and New Jersey, it was not uncommon for parents to obtain public funding for private school tuition through this mechanism. The costly placement of numerous public school students in private schools created a very significant economic incentive for the public districts to adopt more effective methods so they could legitimately serve and retain those students and avoid the high costs of outplacement in many areas. The response of the public schools was to seek to incorporate within their programs some of the methods which had proven to be successful for the children placed in the private schools. Often, the public schools have looked to the private LD schools not only for proven models of effective instruction, but in some cases they have even obtained teacher training through the LD schools' outreach programs.

More recently, advocacy groups of parents and professionals have organized political campaigns that succeeded in passing "dyslexia laws" which legislatively require the diagnosis and appropriate educational treatment of dyslexic students."In fact, it was the effects of good instruction for dyslexics and of professional training for teachers in private LD schools and in clinics in states like Texas, Louisiana and California that led to statewide changes in the laws governing the public schools' response to dyslexia," suggests Chris Harris, Headmaster of The Janus School in Mount Joy, PA.

In 1988, the State Board of Education in Texas revised the guidelines for serving dyslexic readers. The Texas Education Code (38.003) Screen and Treatment for Dyslexia and Related Disorders, states:

- (a) Students enrolling in public schools in this state shall be assessed for dyslexia and related disorders at appropriate times in accordance with a program approved by the State Board of Educations;
- (b) In accordance with the program approved by the State Board of Education, the board of trustees of each school district shall provide for the treatment of any student determined to have dyslexia or a related disorder

The laws go on to define dyslexia and to spell out instructional procedures for school districts to follow. (www/hsutx.edulacademics/education/mltc.texaslaw.htm)

California and Louisiana are also states where action by concerned parents of special education children forced legislation to cover the gaps and/or inadequacies in Federal mandates. California maintains a website of information for parents, students and educators to access the latest state laws and what they mean (keyword: California Dyslexia Laws). State by state information can be located by typing in keywords: *state name* dyslexia laws. These laws go beyond the requirements of federal laws to protect the rights of those students who learn differently.

Today, even the private LD schools and clinics themselves have banded together in advocacy coalitions such as The National Association of Private Special Education Centers (NAPSEC). Headed by Executive Director Sherry Kolbe, NAPSEC is headquartered on Capitol Hill. With members throughout the nation, it concentrates much effort on affecting federal legislation relating to special education laws like IDEA.

The Impact of LD Schools' Outreach Training Programs

A great many of the independent LD schools impact the broader educational environment by providing high quality professional training to their own teachers, to teachers in area public and private schools, and to parents through their community outreach programs. Workshops and seminars are commonly offered throughout the school year. Intensive training programs in instructional methods such as Orton-Gillingham lasting four to six weeks are

typically scheduled for the summer, and they are often led or supervised by nationally recognized experts. Many of the programs are approved by national accrediting bodies such as IMSLEC(International Multisensory Structured Language Education Council), or they are designed to prepare participants for certification by AOGPE (Academy of Orton-Gillingham Practitioners and Educators) or ALTA (Academic Language Therapy Association).

Over a period of years, the training offered by the outreach programs of even relatively small schools can have a major impact on their communities. Marburn Academy, a private LD school of 110 students in Columbus, OH, has provided training through workshops and seminars to over 1,500 individuals annually in each of the last ten years. In addition, its Orton-Gillingham Language Training Institute has supplied the community with over 150 formally trained O-G tutors, a huge step forward for a community which previously had only two.

Founded in 1926, The Gow School in western New York is the nation's oldest boarding school for dyslexic boys, and it has long supported outreach. Gow offers outreach presentations for three distinct audiences. Their summer program combines fun and learning for children who have experienced academic difficulties. Their Teacher Training Institute provides professional instruction for both public and independent school teachers to better identify and understand how to teach dyslexic students. Recent course offerings include Multisensory Structured Language Instruction, Foundations in Vocabulary Development and Reconstructive Language Training.

"Most schools offer knowledge and help to public schools, if they want it," commented Joyce Pickering, Executive Director of The June Shelton School. Her observation is shared by her colleagues throughout the world of private LD schools. Her school has pioneered early intervention methods and developed conferences, teacher training workshops and a Language, Speech and Hearing Clinic to serve its population and any others who need their expert help.

Outreach Through Publications

Numerous examples exist of LD schools or similar organizations impacting the broader educational environment through publication of the programs or materials they have developed. Rick Lavoie, while Head of Riverview School, developed a famous line of videos seen in most parent education groups and in university courses required for special education teachers. Among them are "FAT City: How Difficult Can This Be?," and "When the Chips Are Down." Rick is justifiably famous for the simulations he conducts in which he places ordinary people from many walks of life into the shoes of someone with a learning disability with eye opening results.

The Howard School in Atlanta and the Churchill School in St. Louis are examples of private schools which conduct outreach through their publications. Howard has developed and publishes materials based on Gardener's Multiple Intelligences research, while Churchill has published materials it developed for use in its "demystification" curriculum.

Conclusion

Best estimates place the total number of independent LD schools in the US at less than three hundred fifty. Thus, with 90,000 public and 29,000 private schools nationwide, private LD schools represent less than one fourth of one percent of the schools serving pre-K to 12 students. Of the fifty-six million school age children, private LD schools probably serve less than 75,000, or about one seventh of one percent. It is, then, an extraordinary testament both to the dedication of those who have devoted their lives to building LD schools, and to the power of the ideas they have advocated regarding the education of children with learning differences, that their impact on the landscape of American education has been so profound.

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