

Coaching Students with Learning Disabilities to Think Actively

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3.4 million Canadians have Learning Disabilities (LDs; Burke, 2010). This means that 25 times more people have LDs than Autism Spectrum Disorder, 64 times more people have LDs than prostate cancer, and 27 times more people have LDs than breast cancer (Burke, 2010). Given the high prevalence rate of LDs in Canada, it becomes increasingly important for teachers to know how to effectively teach students with LDs in an inclusive classroom setting alongside their typical peers (Mastropieri et. al., 1996).

Often, academic material presented in the classroom is meaningfully related. In other words, new concepts are related and build on concepts that have already been learned by the student. As well, academic material can be explained logically given prior knowledge and reasoning skills (i.e., retrieving information from long-term memory and identifying how the new information is similar or different to information stored in long-term memory). However, students with LDs may have difficulty with storing new information. To compensate for this difficulty, students with LDs have been provided with accommodations and elaborative strategies (e.g., mnemonics, visual imagery, and spatial organization) to promote recall of new academic information (Mastropieri et. al., 1996). Elaborative strategies are effective for increasing recall of academic information, but do not emphasize the logical explanations underlying the information being presented (Mastropieri et. al., 1996). In other words, students with LDs may be able to recall specific facts but not understand why those facts are true. For example, students create visual images to remember that insects have six legs and spiders have eight legs (Sullivan, Mastropieri, & Scruggs, 1995). The student is able to recall the difference between insects and spiders but does not know why this difference exists (Sullivan, Mastropieri, & Scruggs, 1995).

Given that academic information is usually meaningfully related and can be explained logically with the use of prior knowledge and reasoning skills, students with LDs would benefit from strategies that promote the use of prior knowledge and reasoning skills (Sullivan, Mastropieri, & Scruggs, 1995). Many studies have been conducted that show positive results for coaching and thinking activities, which promote recall, understanding, and appropriate explanations of academic information for students with LDs (Mastropieri, Scruggs, & Butcher, 1997; Sullivan, Mastropieri, & Scruggs, 1995). For instance, coaching students with LDs to draw inferences regarding explanations for science facts has resulted in higher levels of recall and comprehension than providing them directly with the same information (Mastropieri, Scruggs, & Butcher, 1997). Clearly, coaching and thinking activities are useful tools for increasing the success of students with LDs in the school classroom. One such coaching technique is described below that utilizes questions to facilitate the student in retrieving the prior knowledge needed to logically explain the answer:

Teacher (T): Today we are going to learn about surprising animal facts. Anteaters have long claws on their front feet. Why does this make sense?

Student (S): I don't know

T: Well, let's think. What do you know about anteaters? For example, what do they eat?

S: Anteaters eat ants.

T: Good. And where do ants live?

S: They live in holes in the ground.

T: Now, if anteaters eat ants, and ants live in holes in the ground, why do you think that anteaters have long claws on their feet?

S: To dig for ants.

T: Good. To dig for ants.

(taken from Mastropieri, 1995, pp. 122-123)

Moreover, the above coaching technique has proven to be more beneficial than simply providing the student with the direct information that anteaters have long claws to dig for their food (Mastropieri, 1995).

Coaching and thinking activities are strategies that need to be used in an inclusive classroom to effectively teach students with LDs alongside their typically achieving peers. These strategies ensure that students with LDs are reaching their potential in learning the school-relevant information being presented to them on a daily basis. Students with LDs can succeed in an inclusive classroom with effective instruction.

Michelle is a Cognitive Coaching Specialist, providing coaching services to individuals with developmental disabilities, social, and/or behavioural challenges, and their families. She also provides cognitive training programs (including PACE) to those with Learning Disabilities and/or AD/HD.

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