

Support for the LD/ADHD Student: Achieving Success Through a School Team Approach

By Elizabeth Shoiry

Just recently, a young 22 year old female student was referred to me. She had been diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder-Inattentive subtype. A learning disability was also suspected, hence the reason for the referral. She arrived for her appointment rather apprehensive and anxious. As standard procedure, an intake developmental, family, educational and health history was taken. T

The young woman indicated that this was to be her fifth year in CEGEP, and she was not yet sure if the CEGEP she attended would allow her to complete her studies. You see, in the four years of studies, she only passed four or five subjects, although for the most part she was a full-time student. With tears flowing down her cheek, she confided that she had had a “nervous breakdown” and was under psychiatric care only a year or so ago for depression and anxiety. Sense of shame and embarrassment was evident, as she reported years of difficulty in school, both academic and social.

During our conversation, I noted that certain words were not pronounced correctly. She seemed to have difficulty with certain sounds, both expressively and receptively. Her parents had sought out professional help during her elementary years and the solution to her problem was to have her repeat a grade level, which she did.

The young lady reported that she managed to graduate from a rather challenging private school, despite her difficulties. But now, regardless of her efforts and determination, she was failing. If this were an isolated case, it would not be cause to worry.

When the Learning Disabilities Association of Quebec approached me to give a talk on achieving student success, I jumped on the opportunity. You see, working extensively with families, I have found that parents too often do not know what steps to take if their exceptional child is failing to achieve success in a *regular classroom*.

According to the Quebec Education Act the principle of *integration* or *inclusion for all students* is promoted. Regular classrooms are generally the norm for all students, including those with handicaps, social maladjustments or learning disabilities.

Roger Slee, Dean of McGill University’s Faculty of Education, an expert in special education, including years of experience dealing with issues of inclusion and integration in the classroom, defines *inclusion* as a combination of three essential factors: access (getting students into the classrooms); engagement and success.

Generally, all parents want their children to receive the best possible education and service. This may include close monitoring and follow up with their child in order to ensure that their child is attaining grade level objectives. Teachers, on the other hand are concerned about individualizing their instructions while meeting the needs of ALL.

STUDENTS in their classrooms. Too often teachers feel unprepared and lack the necessary resources for dealing with the range and number of exceptional students. Given the reality of the school environment, inclusion may not be as successful as one would expect.

So what can parents do to ensure that their child will achieve success? The solution is not by repeating a grade level, as was the case with the 22 year old young lady. The issue with LD and/or ADHD students is not that the student has trouble learning, but rather the student has trouble learning in an environment that is not designed with his/her needs in mind. While there may be individual students or situations whereby grade retention is a positive intervention, the research to date is clear, in that, grade retention almost always has a negative impact, particularly for students with special needs.

So, how do we design a learning environment created with the student's unique strengths and weaknesses in mind? Typically, when a student is struggling at the school level, whether it is an academic, behavioural or social challenge, the first step is usually obtaining a psycho educational evaluation. An accurate diagnosis of the challenge is fundamental to the development of any intervention plan.

A good evaluation will provide an understanding of the challenges, strengths and weaknesses, with an emphasis on providing the student, teacher, and parents with a clearer understanding of the situation and how the challenge is impeding on the student's learning ability. Measures of cognitive ability, achievement levels and recommendations that are clear and easily implemented in the school setting should be included in the report. Definitions for psychological terms and descriptions of how the student's challenges might present themselves in the learning environment are important as well. Although the psychological terms and professional jargon may be intimidating, it is important that parents and students ask questions that will facilitate their understanding of the results. Do not hesitate to ask for clarifications and explanations.

Once the evaluation is in hand, and a clearer understanding of the issues is available it is important to share this information with the student's teachers. Best practices promote the establishment of a partnership with the school. This is accomplished through a school team intervention approach.

The school team approach is a cooperative and collaborative effort whereby all individuals who are responsible for and interested in addressing the needs of the student, share information, and develop a common understanding of the student's learning style, strengths and needs. School success is generally better achieved through the active participation and partnership of all parties involved with the student. Essentially the team members are problem solvers and active learners. They are learning how to better support the student, accommodate and modify the learning objectives so that the student is successful in his/her learning. Often the end result of this collaborative effort is a written, working document that describes programs and services needed, based on the assessment of the student's strengths and weaknesses and the availability of resources and support. This document is referred to as an individual intervention plan or IEP. The goal is to engage the student in his/her learning while achieving success.

The role of the parents and students in this process cannot be underestimated. They know their children the best. The school environment differs from the home setting; teachers'

and parents' perspectives are often different. It is advisable for parents to share relevant and pertinent information that with the school team, such as their own observations and concerns, reality of the home environment, what supports and resources are or are not available at home, traumatic circumstances such as death or illness of family member, etc. Anything that might shed more light on the child's reality may be valid and useful information for the team to know when discussing the student's needs.

The student, if considered old enough, must be included as an integral part of the team, as well. All students have the primary responsibility for their own success. The student is at the center of this process and should be consulted. Having the student actively participate will ensure a stronger partnership and commitment towards learning.

More importantly, listening to the student and involving parents further ensures that the focus remains on the student and helps build the gap between home and school. Keep in mind that that student success is what breeds drive and motivation to continue along his/her unique learning.

What types of intervention strategies can be incorporated into the intervention plan? Based on the student's unique and exceptional profile, the following recommendations may be incorporated into the plan:

The information gathered in the school team meeting may serve to determine that in order for the student to progress in his/her learning, a modification to the curriculum is necessary. A modification is an adjustment that is made to grade level expectations in a subject or course. In other words, if it is determined that the student is unable to successfully perform at his/her current grade level in a particular subject area, a modification is implemented. For example, in the case of a student with a reading disability who is currently in cycle 3, year 2, but is reading at a cycle 1, year 2 level, the plan would stipulate that the reading material be adjusted to the student's current ability level, (cycle 1 year 2 level), and that reading remediation be provided. Requiring the student to read material beyond his ability level will only serve to frustrate and demotivate the student.

Another possible recommendation that can be incorporated is known as accommodations, which are special teaching and assessment strategies, supports and/or equipment that typically differs from what is normally provided within the classroom setting. An accommodation can be an environmental, instructional and assessment type. For example, repeating instructions, providing more time to process information, and providing visual cues are typical of instructional accommodations that are generally used with students who may have auditory impairments. Providing the student with headphones, reduced lighting, strategic seating, etc. are examples of accommodations involving environmental adjustments, while assessment accommodations include such things as providing more time to complete tests, reducing the number of tasks responsible for, etc.

Recommendations or suggestions not typically included in the regular teaching curriculum are described as alternative learning expectations. Recommendations such as speech and language remediation, occupational therapy, social skills training, personal hygiene support, etc. are examples of alternative learning expectations.

Often parents and students are at a loss as to what can be done and what is possible within the educational system, as was the case of the 22 year old student and her family. Parents must be committed to developing a partnership with their child's school and more importantly must be informed as to the process. Active participation and open communication with the student's teachers and school administrators are essential in achieving success.

Despite the lifelong challenges and difficulties the 22 year old young lady experienced she now has a clearer understanding of her learning needs, what resources are available to her, even at the university level and what she needs to do in order to succeed. Although she rightfully expresses anger over what she endured, she now has hope for a brighter future.

Elizabeth Shoiry is a licensed psychologist and guidance counsellor, currently in private practice and employed as a school psychologist at the Sir Wilfrid Laurier School Board. She has Bachelor of Science degrees in Neurobiology and Comparative Physiology; Psychology and a M.Ed. Degree in Counselling Psychology. She has extensive experience in clinical and school settings, working with children, adolescents, families, educators, administrators, professionals and physicians. Elizabeth has developed an expertise in psychological testing, as well as working with families and educators in order to support the student achieve their true potential.