Teaching "Life Success" to Students with LD:
Lessons Learned From a 20-Year Study

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Children with learning disabilities (LD) grow up, and although some find the road to successful, satisfying, and rewarding lives, others continue to struggle and "fail" into and through adulthood. Research has indicated that successful individuals with LD possess a set of "success attributes" (personal characteristics, behaviors, attitudes, and conditions) that lead them to positive life outcomes. This article presents a conceptual framework for fostering success attributes in students with LD and provides suggestions for classroom activities.

I will always think of myself as a child with a learning disability. I don't think it has ever really changed . . . it is a part of my life forever.

—33-year-old adult

Children with learning disabilities (LD) do grow up, but many of the difficulties they faced during childhood persist into and through adulthood (Johnson & Blalock, 1987; Kavale, 1988; Raskind, Goldberg, Higgins, & Her-

man, 1999; Reiff, Gerber, & Ginsberg, 1997). Some children with LD follow a life path that leads them to "success," while others find little more than continued "failure." Now take a moment and think about the students with LD in your classroom. Think about their individual strengths, weaknesses, interests, experiences, and living environments. Try to picture them 20 years from now. Are you able to imagine how they will turn out? Will they have good jobs, go to college, be happy, or have positive relationships with family and friends? Are

you able to predict who will become "successful" and who might not? Although you may be able to make some good guesses about the outcome of a number of your students, the accuracy of these predictions is questionable, at best. Of course, we never really know how someone will turn out in life. However, wouldn't it be helpful in developing your teaching strategies and curriculum to have a more reliable way to predict how your students might end up or, more important, to know what you could do with your students that would help to promote positive life outcomes for them?

At the Frostig Center in Pasadena, California, we believed that making such determinations or "predictions" would be of tremendous value in helping students with LD reach their full potential and lead satisfying and rewarding lives. We needed to understand, despite similar backgrounds and learning difficulties, why some of our students ended up as happy, satisfied, and productive members of society, whereas others were barely able to keep their heads above water emotionally, socially, and financially. We wanted to know why one former student was currently president of a software company, while his former classmate was living out his days in a state penitentiary. In an effort to gain such an understanding, we initiated a 20-year follow-up study designed to identify various factors in the lives of our students that led some to "success" and others to "failure." (Please see Raskind et al., 1999, for a complete description of the study.) Results of the study revealed that a set of personal characteristics, attitudes, and behaviors were predictive of success. These "success attributes" included

- self-awareness,
- proactivity,
- perseverance,
- goal-setting,
- the presence and use of effective support systems, and
- emotional stability.

These characteristics were more powerful predictors of success than numerous other variables, including IQ, academic achievement, life stressors, age, gender, socioeconomic status, and ethnicity.

Understanding the Success Attributes

What exactly were these success attributes, and how did they manifest themselves in successful individuals? We answer this question below for each attribute. Dialogue from successful study participants are used to elucidate each attribute and to provide a first-hand account of how these attributes were expressed. However, not every successful individual displayed every success attribute, and some attributes were evident to greater or lesser degrees.

Similarly, there were unsuccessful participants who showed some of the success attributes, again to lesser or greater degrees. Still, successful individuals displayed these attributes to a greater extent (at a statistically significant level) than the unsuccessful participants.

Self-Awareness

The successful individuals often referred to themselves as "learning disabled." They were very open about their difficulties and described life events in terms of their LD. One individual stated,

As I said, I have dyslexia. I have never not had dyslexia. So it has always, and always will, affect my life. I don't know what it's like not to have dyslexia. I don't know that I want to do life over again without it. It's part of me. It will hinder me, as it has, and it will push me into places where I never would have gone.

Successful individuals were not, however, overly defined by their difficulties. These individuals were able to compartmentalize their disabilities—seeing their difficulties as only one aspect of themselves. They also accepted their LD and utilized appropriate services to overcome difficulties whenever possible. Many of the "successfuls" had a clear picture of their individual strengths and weaknesses, recognizing and accepting their talents along with their limitations. These ideas were expressed by one participant who stressed, "At this point I just accept it, that this is the way it is, and it isn't going to get any better. . . . We all learn differently, we all have strengths and weaknesses." Similarly another informant shared,

I think I've pretty much gotten over it. It's still there, and I compensate . . . I think the problems that I had were no different than anybody else who is conscious of their weaknesses, and then some of their strengths. Some people are not conscious at all.

Still another adult stated,

You know, everybody comes with a package. And yeah, there are things that I am good at and things that I am not so good at. Some of my limitations are reading and writing. But boy, when it comes to putting things together and understanding how things go together; reading plans, I'm really good at reading plans. I'm really good at chasing down problems. I'm a good diagnoser . . . so those are some talents, some skills that I was born with. . . . I carved a different path, and my whole life has been that way.

Proactivity

Successful individuals with LD were actively engaged in the world around them. They tended to socialize, participate in community activities, and take an active role in their families, neighborhoods, and friendship groups. They

believed they had the power to control their own destinies and affect the outcome of their lives. The ability to make decisions and act on those decisions to control their lives was also evident.

According to one study participant,

I actually didn't take classes as much as I took professors. The way I got through college was I looked at the classes I was interested in and I was over taking the professor's office times just telling them my story and this is what I need. I'm going to need extra time, give me the ability to take the written exam, and take it back and there are a bunch of exceptions and I just listed them out for these people.

In talking about how his shyness interfered with initiating a social contact, another individual shared the following:

I looked at that lesson and said, "OK, you blew it that time. What are you going to do? How are you going to overcome that situation?" So I systematically started working in getting over my shyness . . .

Commenting on his career, the same individual expressed the need to take action, "Anything I'm going to do, I'm going to give it my all. Otherwise I'm not going to touch it."

Furthermore, these individuals displayed an internal locus of control. After making decisions and acting on them, they faced the consequences—taking responsibility for both positive and negative outcomes. For example, one former student commenting on his success stated, "*I feel responsible for my success, number one, myself.*"

"I don't know what it's like not to have dyslexia. I don't know that I want to do life over again without it."

Perseverance

Successful individuals kept pursuing their goals despite adversity. They maintained the attitude that difficult situations were necessary learning experiences, and that in the end, their struggles would help them improve their character and, ultimately, reach their goals. Many described themselves in perseverant terms such as, "I am not a quitter," and "I never give up." This sense of not giving up and learning from hardship can be heard in the following words of one of the study participants: "I have failed many times, but I am not a failure. I have learned to succeed from my failures." Another adult stressed, "Only the strong survive. I've been through [so] much crap, and I still kept on going." Similarly, in talking about personal accomplishments, one participant stated,

I am most proud of my ability to keep going. I have learned to keep going no matter what people said. No

matter if it was inspired by anger or revenge or whatever, still it's ability to keep plodding along.

Goal Setting

Adults in the successful group made reference to past and current goals in their lives. Regarding current goals, one participant stated,

We'd like to have children before my wife is 30. So we've got 2 years left there. I'd also like to see a change in my career soon. I'm not exactly sure what I want to do. I have a plan if I want to become a teacher. I have a plan if I want to be an engineer.

Many individuals indicated that goals had been identified early on and had provided direction and meaning to their lives. They also showed evidence and awareness of the step-by-step process to reach their goals. In terms of this process and a career in filmmaking, another adult emphasized,

I always look at every move, like this particular move doing the video as a stepping stone for the next project. That's how I'm looking at it. As I said, the area I really want to move into is, I want to direct.

Additionally, goals set by these individuals appeared realistic and attainable.

Presence and Use of Effective Support Systems

Persons in the successful group frequently spoke about the support, guidance, and encouragement they received from "significant others," such as friends, mentors, teachers, therapists, coworkers, or family members. Individuals in this group actively sought support and were able to attract or draw support to them. Furthermore, they were willing to accept support when offered. One former student shared the following college experience:

It was midterms. I wasn't getting Cs, I was getting Ds and Fs. It looked like I was going to have to drop out. If I was going to drop out, that . . . would have been the end of the world for me. That was a real difficult year. I made a recovery. Systematically, I talked to my teachers, I talked to friends, and they helped me through that very difficult situation.

Another participant stated the following:

Whenever I have to write something, it's been this way since day one, when you write something for work, very professional, you have to make sure you don't make any spelling errors, look good, you can't ramble on, you can't write a stream of consciousness, which is what I tend to do. And no matter what I write, I take it to someone like my

girlfriend or my mother, and they can always clean it up and make it look loads better. It's always been that way.

In many instances, these individuals actively maintained contact with significant others over the course of their lives. Also of note is the finding that these significant others appeared to hold clear and realistic expectations for the individual.

Emotional Stability

Successful participants did not often report being diagnosed with identifiable psychological difficulties. This is not to suggest that they had not been diagnosed with nor had never experienced psychological distress but rather that they appeared to have developed effective means of coping with stress, frustration, and ambiguity. In dealing with marital stress, one participant shared,

> *The first year or two of our marriage was really tough . . . but people in a relationship have to learn to get along. We didn't have a real good guide on that. To cope with the stress . . . I sometimes take a walk. I don't go out drinking. Sometimes we won't talk to each other until it blows over. You know, that's reasonably civil.*

Mechanisms for coping with marital difficulties were also discussed by another adult in the study. He commented, "I think I [learned] more objectively how to deal with it . . . to be a man and say, 'Listen, I'm having problems.'"

In discussing difficulty with parental relationships, another individual stated, "[I've learned to] say what I mean and . . . not hold in. [I] say what I feel and not worry about it." Strategies for dealing with the stress of finding employment were recounted by one participant: "[During the week] I would do whatever I could . . . send out resumes . . . do . . . footwork. Then, on the weekends, I would just relax . . . I would consider that a job in itself . . . do whatever I want, go out with friends, or just lay around."

Additionally, individuals in this group were able to maintain a positive, optimistic, and hopeful outlook in the face of difficulties. For example, one successful participant emphasized, "If you want [your life] to go in one direction, then life throws you a curve . . . It turns out the curve is not so bad. At first, it's scary to be at the crossroads. But once you're on the road, it's not so bad." They were also able to maintain positive peer relationships and draw on social support systems in times of need.

Fostering Success Attributes

Traditionally, the field of learning disabilities has focused its intervention strategies on the improvement of academic skills. However, noting that results of this study indicate that such attributes as self-awareness, proactivity, perseverance, goal setting, the presence and use of effective support systems, and emotional stability were more predictive of success than were academic skills, one might question the utility of approaches that focus *exclusively* on remediation of academic deficits. This is not to suggest that efforts to enhance the academic abilities of individuals with LD should cease but rather that the relative emphasis of each approach should be re-evaluated. It would appear that the development of success attributes in persons with LD should be given *at least* as much attention as efforts to improve academic skills.

It is important to emphasize that it has not been determined to what extent attributes such as self-awareness, proactivity, perseverance, goal setting, the use of effective support systems, and emotional stability can be taught to and learned by persons with LD. In fact, the question arises as to whether these success attributes are just factors with which an individual is born. There is limited research, however, (e.g., Boersma, 1995; Dohrn & Bryan, 1994; Omizo, 1986; Thomas & Pashley, 1982; Tollefson, 1984) to suggest that children with LD can develop skills related to the success attributes described in our study (i.e., self-awareness, locus of control, goal setting, persistence/perseverance). Until further research on the efficacy of teaching these success attributes is completed, perhaps a more prudent approach would be to offer a framework for creating a learning environment that facilitates and encourages the development and use of the success attributes—attributes that would help to promote successful life outcomes.

The following section presents a conceptual framework for organizing an intervention approach that addresses the development of success attributes in students with LD. The framework is based on data collected during the 20-year study and is a direct outgrowth of the struggles and triumphs shared with us by the participants; particular emphasis is placed on the in-depth interviews. Although each attribute is presented independently, keep in mind that a dynamic interplay and interdependence exists among them.

Hopefully, this framework can provide a basis from which to develop a curriculum—with specific activities—for fostering success attributes in children with LD. In an effort to help operationalize this framework, a few suggestions for general activities are provided at the end of each section. Note that the development of specific activities is dependent on the age, abilities, experience, and interests of the student, as well as the instructional setting. In an effort to translate the reported research into practice, the Frostig Center has implemented an experimental classroom curriculum aimed at fostering the success attributes. This curriculum will be reported in a subsequent article.

Self-Awareness

Although some educational programs address self-awareness, they are often limited to cognition and acad-

> **General Activities for Fostering Self-Awareness**
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> ✔ Work with students to develop and discuss lists of their individual strengths, weaknesses, and special talents.
> ✔ Have students choose potential careers that best match their abilities and discuss their choices.
> ✔ Bring adults with LD into your classroom to talk about their experiences—both struggles and triumphs.

> **General Activities for Fostering Proactivity**
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> ✔ Present students with case examples of people facing problems in various contexts, and have them discuss or role play action-oriented strategies for resolving these conflicts.
> ✔ Have students write down important decisions they made, the strategies they used to make the decisions, the outcomes, and evaluations of the decisions.
> ✔ Present students with examples of people's actions and consequent outcomes, and discuss the extent to which the individual had control over the situation.
> ✔ Present students with a number of "risky" scenarios, and discuss the possible consequences of specific actions.

emics. In addition to these two areas, our research suggests that it is also critical to gain an in-depth understanding of one's self

1. psychologically/emotionally,
2. physically,
3. socially,
4. communicatively, and
5. philosophically (world view, personal values, ethics).

It is necessary that an individual understands his or her strengths, weaknesses, special talents, needs, fears, wants, desires, and beliefs in these areas in order to gain the highest level of self-awareness and acceptance possible.

A number of components or elements in the development of self-awareness provide specific focal points for intervention strategies in fostering self-awareness. Attention should be given to helping students in the following areas:

GENERAL SELF-AWARENESS

1. define/understand what self-awareness is and its importance;
2. develop awareness of strengths, weaknesses, and talents in various contexts (not only school);
3. gain awareness of their feelings, opinions, and personal values and how they relate to those of other individuals;

4. gain awareness of their world view and their sense of the meaning of life;
5. define and understand their view of "success";
6. develop niche picking skills (match their abilities to specific settings);

LEARNING DISABILITY AWARENESS

7. develop an understanding of LD;
8. develop a comprehensive awareness of how LD impacts life;
9. develop awareness of successful coping strategies to compensate for LD;
10. enhance general self-acceptance as well as acceptance of LD;
11. develop the capacity to compartmentalize their LD.

Proactivity

There is life beyond school for children with LD. Although learning to be proactive with regard to education is important, persons with LD also need to develop the attribute of proactivity for

- social,
- employment,
- interpersonal,
- familial, and
- recreational contexts.

With regard to each of these settings, children with LD need to learn to

1. understand proactivity, its importance and benefits;
2. make decisions and act on those decisions while understanding the advantages/disadvantages of making certain decisions;
3. recognize when a decision needs to be made, and develop strategies for evaluating decisions;
4. understand the importance of taking responsibility for one's actions;
5. develop an internal locus of control;
6. act as self-advocates and be assertive;
7. develop strategies for engaging in the world;
8. build self-confidence; and
9. understand and take responsibility for risk taking.

Perseverance

Once again, this success attribute, like the others, needs to be developed in a number of areas beyond educational/academic and cognitive. Attention also has to be given to fostering perseverance in the following areas:

- physical,
- psychological,
- employment/career,

- social/interpersonal,
- recreational/leisure, and
- religious/spiritual.

Relative to each of these areas, children with LD should learn to

1. understand the meaning of perseverance,
2. understand the benefits of perseverance and the consequences of not persevering,
3. understand perseverance as it relates to goal setting,
4. develop strategies for dealing with obstacles/setbacks and adjust to change, and
5. recognize that *passion* and *desire* keep one moving in the face of adversity.

Goal Setting

Although many teachers and administrators do a great job to help students develop academic/educational goals, it is critical to help students develop goal-setting abilities in other areas. In an effort to help students achieve "life success" (not only school success), our research suggests that students with LD also need to develop goal-setting skills in the following areas:

- social/interpersonal,
- employment/career,
- familial,
- physical,
- psychological,
- recreational/leisure,
- financial/independent living, and
- religious/spiritual.

Specific focus should be placed on assisting students to accomplish the following:

1. define a goal (What is a goal?);
2. understand the benefits of goal setting and the consequences of not setting goals;
3. understand goal setting as it relates to proactivity;
4. develop strategies for goal setting and prioritizing goals;
5. develop strategies for evaluating whether a goal is realistic/attainable;
6. develop action plans/steps for reaching goals, and understand the relationship between short- and long-term goals;
7. develop strategies for predicting and overcoming obstacles;
8. periodically re-evaluate and adjust goals as needed; and
9. understand the need for working with others to reach goals.

General Activities for Fostering Perseverance

✔ Share inspirational stories (e.g., tell, have students read, watch movies) of people who have persevered in the face of adversity.

✔ Have students share their own stories (e.g., tell, write, draw) about times when they have or have not persevered and the consequent outcomes.

✔ Have students keep journals focusing on experiences requiring perseverance.

✔ Have students self-monitor their behavior and attitude when playing games (e.g., physical, table-top) that require perseverance.

General Activities for Developing Goal-Setting Abilities

✔ Have students write down a short-term academic goal and discuss the step-by-step process necessary to get them there.

✔ Have students set a long-term career goal and discuss the step-by-step process necessary to reach the goal.

✔ Study/discuss successful individuals, and determine the experiences, backgrounds, opportunities, and critical events that led these individuals to their ultimate positions.

✔ Present fictional case examples of individuals with specific aspirations, and based on their strengths, weaknesses, and special talents, discuss whether their goals appear realistic.

Presence and Use of Effective Support Systems

It was clear from our research that study participants needed support in a number of areas, including education, employment, social/interpersonal relationships, psychological health, financial/independent living, family relationships, and recreational activities. It is imperative that they are aware of and know how to access and utilize support services in each of these areas. Particular attention should be directed to help children with LD

1. understand the benefits of using support systems;
2. develop strategies for finding, accessing, utilizing, and maintaining support systems;
3. recognize "triggers" for when help is needed;
4. learn to accept help, give help, and develop trust in others;
5. understand laws that mandate support/assistance for persons with disabilities;

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**General Activities for
Developing and Using Support Systems**

✔ Have students research and report on federal laws related to individuals with learning disabilities in educational and employment settings.

✔ Share stories (e.g., tell, read, movies) about individuals that needed help from others, how they got it, and the value of having received it.

✔ Present case examples of individuals in need of help, and discuss possible sources and means of accessing support/assistance, and possible outcomes with and without support.

✔ Have students research technology that will be helpful in compensating for their difficulties.

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**General Activities for
Fostering Emotional Stability**

✔ Have students discuss/write about the circumstances that create the greatest stress in their lives.

✔ Have students make a list of how their bodies feel when they begin to feel stressed.

✔ Have students discuss "warning signs" of stress and how to employ coping strategies or access help if it reaches a critical point.

✔ Teach students basic relaxation/stress reduction techniques (e.g., deep breathing, muscle relaxation).

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6. gain awareness of LD organizations and advocacy groups; and
7. learn to use technological support.

Emotional Stability

It is evident from the interviews with our participants that the successful individuals had developed an awareness of their emotional/psychological states and had developed coping strategies for dealing with stress, frustration, and adversity. To assist persons with LD in developing coping strategies, we suggest that an effort be made to help individuals

1. understand the various factors that affect psychological health;
2. develop an awareness of their various emotional reactions and how these reactions impact their behavior;
3. learn to recognize stress "triggers";
4. develop strategies for avoiding stress (as is possible);
5. develop strategies for reducing stress;
6. develop a repertoire of coping strategies; and
7. learn to recognize when outside support/help is needed.

Summary

Research has shown that a number of attributes, beyond mere cognitive/academic abilities, have a significant effect on life outcomes of persons with LD. Unfortunately, we often pay little attention to the development of these attributes in persons with LD, rather concentrating our efforts in cognitive and academic areas. Noting the importance of these attributes in promoting positive life outcomes, it appears reasonable for us to direct greater efforts toward fostering their development, at least to an equal degree as the efforts put forth toward improving cognitive and academic skills. Of course, this assumes that we are not only concerned with school success but also life success. However, if we remind ourselves that learning disabilities persist into adulthood (Raskind et al., 1999; Reiff et al., 1997) and that children with LD must ultimately function in settings beyond school, the significance of enhancing these attributes becomes more apparent. This shift in focus is not intended to undermine the importance of developing (to the extent we can) cognitive and academic abilities in children with LD. Rather, the intention is to suggest a re-evaluation of the relative emphasis we currently place on the development of success attributes, which in many cases is very little.

Although the extent to which these attributes can be taught to or learned by students with LD is not completely clear, the framework presented here is a starting point from which to begin investigating the utility of such an intervention. Of course, only further research will prove whether it is possible to develop these attributes. Nonetheless, this exploration is both a challenge and responsibility in our continued efforts to help students with LD reach their full potential and live satisfying, rewarding, and productive lives.

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