

10-1991

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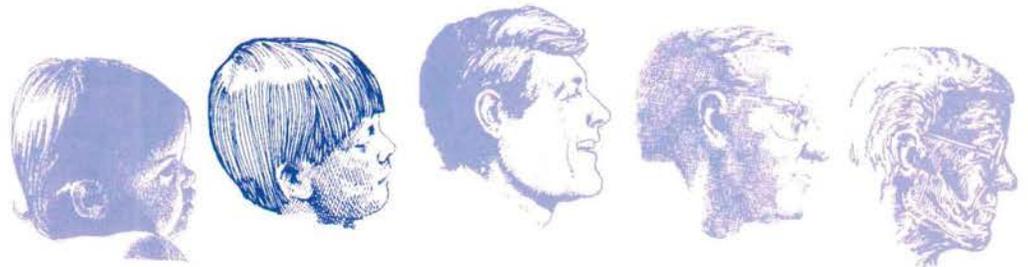
Heaton, Timothy L., "School-age Children: Nurturing Their Unique Gifts" (1991). *Education Faculty Publications*. 86.
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SCHOOL-AGE CHILDREN:

NURTURING THEIR UNIQUE GIFTS

by Tim Heaton



“If a student is failing, you are failing as a teacher until you find out the reason why.” I share this motto with all the future teachers in my classes here at Cedarville. I believe strongly that God calls each teacher to be a minister, to practice discernment, and to show a servant’s spirit in helping students find a way that they can learn best.

You see, I struggled through school. When I wrote my master’s thesis on learning styles I discovered much about my own learning difficulties in school. This perspective enabled me to better understand my students. I did some soul searching about education, God’s role in the education process, and each person’s uniqueness as a reflection of God. I suggest the following steps for anyone who helps others learn.

1. Understand the learning style of your student and ways he learns best.

I always knew there was something different about me. My parents called it creativity or said I was unique. I never felt I was “dumb” in those early years. After all, I read before I went to kindergarten and enjoyed reading immensely. By second grade, I always had my head stuck in a Hardy Boys book or even the Encyclopedia Americana we had at home. My parents would catch me staying up late, reading under my bed covers with a flashlight. At the same time, my writing was sloppy and I tended to reverse words and numbers. In the sixth grade I wrote my name “Ymmmit” (instead of Timmy) on a paper, which really gave my parents a scare.

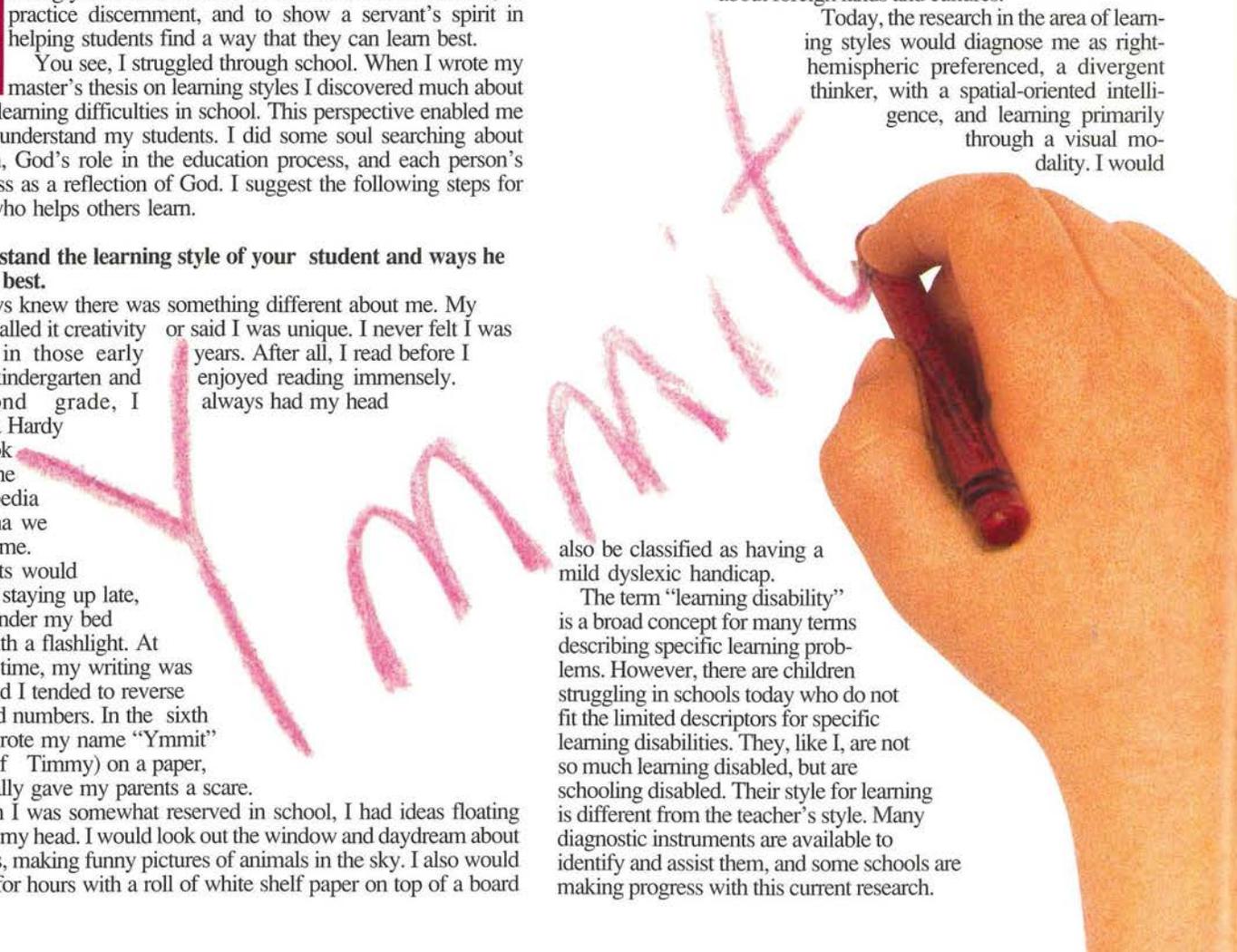
Though I was somewhat reserved in school, I had ideas floating around in my head. I would look out the window and daydream about the clouds, making funny pictures of animals in the sky. I also would sit down for hours with a roll of white shelf paper on top of a board

and draw model cities and floor plans of futuristic houses. I wanted to be an architect or a city planner, or maybe even a teacher of history. I enjoyed the way the teachers retold stories of the American pioneers and about foreign lands and cultures.

Today, the research in the area of learning styles would diagnose me as right-hemispheric preferred, a divergent thinker, with a spatial-oriented intelligence, and learning primarily through a visual modality. I would

also be classified as having a mild dyslexic handicap.

The term “learning disability” is a broad concept for many terms describing specific learning problems. However, there are children struggling in schools today who do not fit the limited descriptors for specific learning disabilities. They, like I, are not so much learning disabled, but are schooling disabled. Their style for learning is different from the teacher’s style. Many diagnostic instruments are available to identify and assist them, and some schools are making progress with this current research.



Yet, the system changes very slowly. The continued emphasis on competency testing through standardized forms ensures that these students will continue to be handicapped in revealing what they really know and can do.

2. Help your student find out how he can adapt his learning to function in the culture.

In junior high the reality of my difference in academic areas began to hit me. We had to take standardized tests and final exams. I always did well in class, but my teachers commented that my exam scores were never up to par with what I did in class. I figured out later that I read more into the questions than what was intended. (I had become masterful at reading between the lines, thanks to the Hardy Boys.)

Math was difficult for me, mainly because we were beginning the "new math." Though some of the concepts were fun, it seemed there was no connection between what I had done in school during previous years and what we were doing now. However, one math teacher made it seem relevant when she taught me how to do art projects through graphing with algebraic equations. I even took the project to the science fair.

In high school, I had two teachers who made me feel comfortable, Mrs. Ross in History and Mrs. Fowler in Spanish. Both teachers took a personal interest in me and told me I was creative and had a neat personality. Those teachers inspired me and made me want to be a teacher, too. They nurtured my gifts so I could begin to see my potential. They didn't tell me what I was doing wrong; they told me what I was doing right.

Sometimes we as teachers can do nothing about the cause of learning problems, but we can be resource people and refer parents to agencies for the proper assistance. We can also adjust the classroom curriculum to different learning styles and help students learn more efficiently. The Lord calls each teacher to be a nurturer of his or her students, helping them see the special gifts God has given them and what they might need to adapt to the present culture. I constantly have to fight the temptation of being satisfied when only a certain percentage of my students succeed. Our role is to shepherd all the sheep. When a single lamb is not going the right direction, we are to go after him and help him find his way back.

3. Help your student build a support system of like-minded Christians who can encourage him.

For several years, my grades were as low as my self-concept. I was shy and backward, and couldn't say what I felt. Although I had the ideas, I had difficulty putting them on paper. Maybe keeping a diary or journal would have been helpful, but no one suggested it. My first semester of college ended with failing marks in two out of three courses. I struggled through English courses and changed major three times.

Then came a crucial point in my life. I came to know Jesus Christ as my personal Savior. I also found a group of other Christian students who disciplined me and helped me with my self-concept. They helped me learn that I am a unique blessing from God, with special gifts and talents that are necessary to the Body of Christ. God chose me, therefore I am a valuable asset to Him in the eternal plan of this world. He makes no mistakes. Since God can overcome anything, I need only lean on Him and not on myself, and serve Him through my gifts. "Blessed is the man that trusteth in the Lord, and whose hope the Lord is" (Jeremiah 17:7).

These truths motivated me to finish my college education. I finished with a geography education degree with a history minor. My student teaching had been highly successful. I was viewed as a creative teacher and a good disciplinarian. Still, most of my lesson plans were written on little scraps of paper or done off the top of my head. I needed the Lord's strength more than ever as I moved into the professional world.

I have continued to surround myself with Christian friends who are able to build me up, exhort me in a biblical fashion, and direct me to rely on God's power and not on my own strength.

4. Nurture the special gifts and talents God has given your student.

My first teaching job was teaching remedial reading through a federally-funded program at an inner-city elementary school. As my teaching continued in a variety of school settings, I always had trouble with detail and organization. Yet I was lauded for my creativity and my ability to relate to the young people in my classes.

This praise was helpful, but comments about my writing ability or lack of detail reinforced my differences and caused me to think of myself as inferior. We can help nurture children's gifts when we see them as God does. They are an integral part of the Body of Christ and God has made them exactly as they are, blemishes and all, for a specific purpose in His plan. The proverbial admonition is to "Train up a child in the way he should go..." (Proverbs 22:6). The emphasis is not on how we think the child should go, but on finding the spiritual gifts, talents, temperaments, and unique differences God has placed in him and to assist him in developing them. In the Body of Christ, one size does not fit all. We have individually-tailored lives created by the Master Designer.

5. Encourage your student to do what he does for God, not for others' approval.

I had applied the proverbial method of gaining wisdom in a "multitude of counselors" and had built my network of friends who would edify and challenge me. Yet as much as I tried to surround myself with helpful people, I always had contact with those who did not understand or approve of me. Sometimes their opinions motivated me. In fact, I went back to school for a master's degree in educational administration to prove a point to one of my administrators. But trying to please people or prove something to people is not what pleases God.

As David wrote, "The fear of the Lord is clean, enduring for ever: the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether...Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart, be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, my strength, and my redeemer" (Psalm 19:9,14). God made us and understands us. He wants us to succeed in His service. He is the One we must please.

6. Inspire your student to be a life-long learner, a risk-taker.

Jobs were not plentiful for geography teachers with a 2.6 grade point average, so right after college I worked at a florist shop. I learned about the growth and nurturing of plants and the creative arrangement of flowers for sale. It was here that I learned my math. Having to balance the cash register every evening was the best experience I ever had in learning math computation. Some of the most valuable and practical learning takes place outside the classroom.

I am so thankful that God has taken me through the situations he has that I might help others become all God wants them to be. The Lord not only blessed me with these opportunities, but also gave me a son who is learning disabled and learns very differently. This has given me more insight into how students learn and what can be done to help them. Now I am approaching my dissertation for my Ph.D. which will center on how to adjust the curriculum for children who learn differently. I would have never thought back in junior high that one day I would be getting a doctorate. But I have learned that taking a risk to learn something new can be a constantly rewarding part of life, when you have a God in Whom you can trust.

Tim Heaton, assistant professor of education at Cedarville College, has extensive teaching and administrative experience in Christian and public schools. He often gives seminars on learning disabilities.

