



Introduction

“How can I best help my students with learning differences lead satisfying and meaningful adult lives?” Trying to answer the question is the purpose of this book. The undertaking is maddeningly complex. It requires building perspectives from multiple contexts and applying them in an infinite array of individual interactions. This process may challenge attitudes, alter belief systems, and catalyze innovative approaches to teaching and learning. Teachers who aspire to prepare students with learning differences for a satisfying adulthood are those who embrace teaching as “the hardest job you’ll ever love.”

Teachers and parents need to understand the journey that takes individuals to adulthood. They need to acquire dispositions and pedagogical practices that prioritize promoting the strengths and abilities of people with learning differences as opposed to fixing weaknesses and limitations. Helping students with learning differences develop an awareness of proactive behaviors increases the likelihood of both vocational success and overall positive adaptation to the demands of adult life. Many children with learning differences grow up to be highly successful adults who often share how they managed to “turn the lemon into lemonade,” as one individual described his journey. Students who acquire specific skills that adults with learning differences have used to be successful are truly preparing for adulthood. This book is about teaching for the lifespan.

We have worked with many teachers over the years who focus on strengths rather than weaknesses. They embrace the whole student. They understand that traditional academics do not always provide a foundation for negotiating the complexities of the adult world. These teachers find innovative ways to prepare students for the rest of their lives. We believe that a broad knowledge base of learning differences, adult development theory, and perspectives on success may contribute significantly to teaching effectiveness. This book will help teachers by providing the foundation for understanding the nature of adulthood of individuals with learning differences.

We have also worked with teachers who do not welcome such a holistic approach. Many are dedicated but limit their focus to traditional academic disciplines and rigid pedagogical methods. Unfortunately, some seem not to care deeply about building positive foundations. Another goal of this book is for readers willingly to take on the roles of change agents who help others consider alternate ideas about education.

What happens to kids with learning differences when they grow up? The general public still questions whether learning differences simply go away once students have exited school. Learning disabilities (and many other learning differences) are traditionally school-based deficits, generally diagnosed in school. Even now, students with learning differences are often tempted to leave their learning differences behind. Many believe their learning differences will not have an impact in college, work, relationships, and, especially, feelings about themselves.

Learning differences do not end once students have finished school. The adult world is certainly different from the school environment. Adults with learning differences are not routinely assessed, evaluated, and judged by teachers, nor do they bear the public educational labels of their schooling. Yet the same difficulties with processing information persist, except they manifest themselves in different ways. Adults with difficulties with reading, writing, or math do not flunk tests, but these problems still affect work and personal life. Knowledge about adult outcomes for persons with learning differences presents an important perspective for teaching and parenting children.

Explicit techniques based on understanding individual learning styles can prepare students for the rest of their lives. Some of these techniques are routinely part of special education pedagogy and represent commonsense notions of good teaching. Others are innovative and ask us to think outside the box. Individualized instruction, multimodality approaches, multisensory approaches, and an intentional effort to know and understand each student should be in the repertoire of all teachers.

Part I of the book offers a multidimensional context for understanding learning differences in adulthood. Part II takes established best practices as well as current models and shows how teachers may use them to prepare their students for the lifespan. Few things feel better than seeing your students and children succeed years after they have finished school and left home. So, let's get started on successfully transitioning students with learning differences to adulthood.