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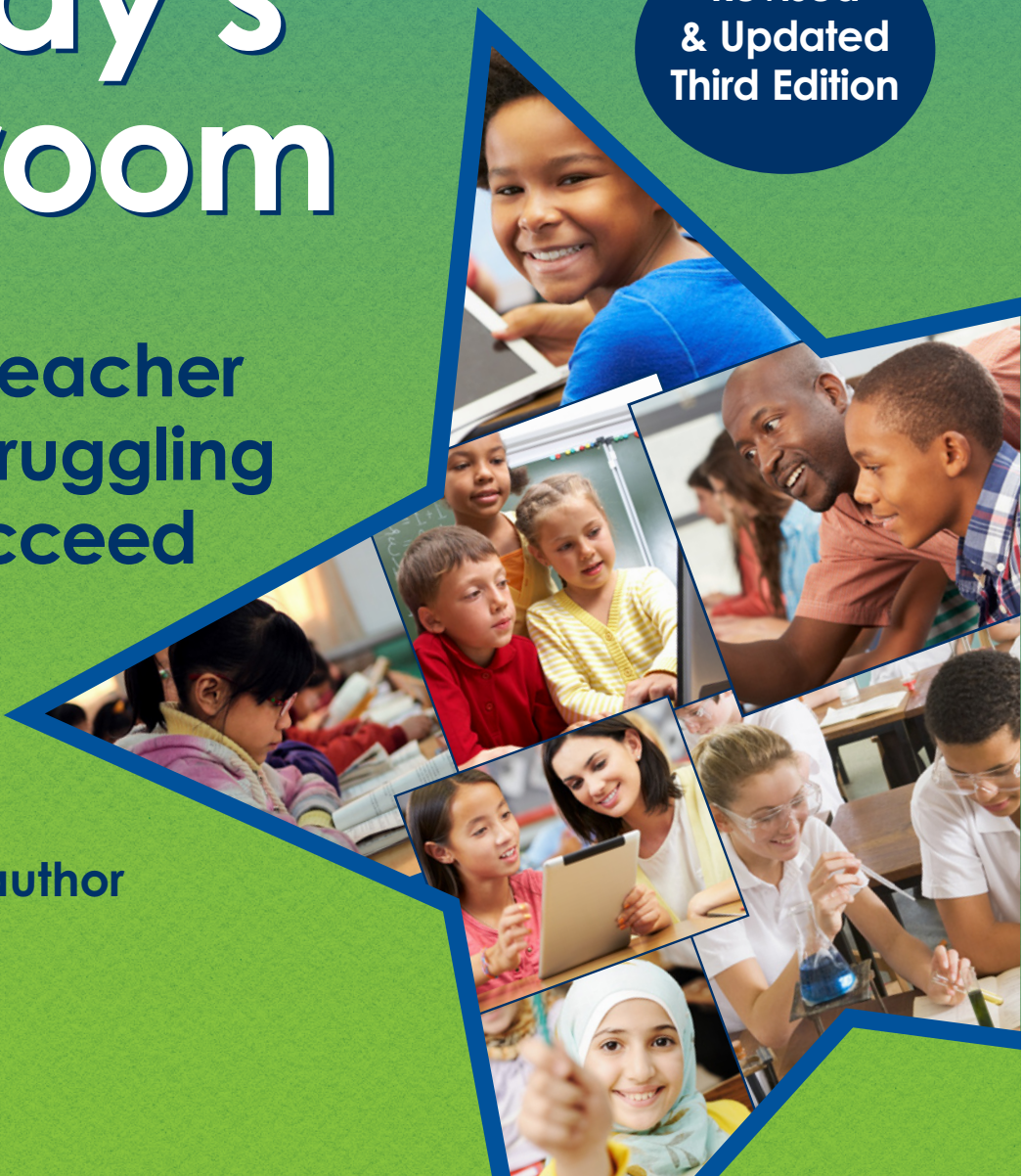
Teaching Kids with Learning Difficulties in Today's Classroom

Revised & Updated Third Edition

How Every Teacher Can Help Struggling Students Succeed



with contributing author
Lisa M. Kiss, M.Ed.

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This book is dedicated to all the teachers, parents, and grandparents who have struggled for many years, looking for ways to understand and help their children with learning difficulties experience success in their efforts to become educated.

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Foreword

by Richard D. Lavoie

Parents and teachers need to come to the profound understanding that *kids go to school for a living.* It is their job. The classroom is their workplace. Their world. In fact, "school" is their entire identity.

Consider. When you bump into an 11-year-old from your community who you have not seen for a while, what is your greeting to him? *"Hi, Jason. How's school?"* His answer to that question determines his self-esteem, self-concept, and worldview.

Now imagine being a youngster who—through no fault or choice of his own—has marked difficulty learning at the same rate and in the same way that his classmates do. When you consider all this, it is small wonder that we find that kids with learning disorders are proportionally far more likely to abuse drugs, to have low self-esteem, participate in self-destructive behaviors, withdraw, act out . . . or drop out.

When I was trained in the early 1970s, these troubled and troubling kids were shunted off to special classes in isolated rooms in distant hallways. The inclusion initiatives of the 1980s changed all of that and now they "belong" to all of us. They are no longer the exclusive wards of special education; they now have a place in *every* classroom in *every* public school in America. And bravo for that!

But with the positive and humanistic goals of inclusion also come significant challenges for teachers. How do we deal effectively and fairly with these struggling students while—simultaneously—providing their classmates with the stimulating, fast-paced curriculum that they need and deserve?

This latest edition of *Teaching Kids with Learning Difficulties in Today's Classroom* by Susan Winebrenner and Lisa Kiss goes a long, long way toward answering that question. As I consumed this readable and user-friendly text, I was struck by one recurring theme: the antidote to misbehavior, frustration, anxiety, withdrawal, lack of motivation, and passivity for the "mainstreamed" student is SUCCESS. If you were to do a word cloud on the pages of this book to find the word that the authors used most frequently, I would bet that "success" would be in the top five.

Ensuring that a child is successful in a classroom does *not* mean that you provide the student with an easy curriculum, non-fail strategies, and unearned praise. Quite the contrary. As Susan and Lisa so brilliantly demonstrate, the key to the student's *true* success is careful balance of support and challenge.

Support and *challenge* are the two cornerstones of effective special education. The teacher's job is to continually *challenge* the child by providing a demanding curriculum and, simultaneously, the *support* the student needs to meet those demands.

Support without challenge is meaningless. Challenge without support is destructive.

This balance of support and challenge is the essence of special education. Success must be a fundamental ingredient in every lesson plan. We must replace the timeworn phrase "If he only tried harder he would do better" with the more effective phrase, "If he only *did* better he would try *harder."*

This theme is embossed on every page of this extraordinary book. The authors cover all aspects of special needs, from testing to reading to behavior management to organizational skills to homework. Particularly outstanding is their innovative approach to learning styles that goes far beyond the traditional VAKT (visual, auditory, kinesthetic, tactile) approach that the reader may be familiar with.

So many curriculum guides begin with the premise that all the researchers, practitioners, and experts who preceded the author were wrong and the author has *the* solitary answer and solutions. Susan Winebrenner and Lisa Kiss take a far more enlightened view by building upon and expanding on some classic curricular approaches with a generous nod to the original authors. We all stand on the shoulders of giants.

This book will be an invaluable guide to the educator who is willing to commit the time and effort required to truly meet the unique needs of kids who struggle. This journey is not an easy one, but what important journey is?

With every good wish,

Richard D. Lavoie, M.A., M.Ed.
Author of *The Motivation Breakthrough* and *It's So Much Work to Be Your Friend*

Introduction

Has there ever been a more challenging time to be a teacher? Teachers face constant pressure to be sure all students can demonstrate they are learning at expected levels and to embrace and master ever-changing teaching models in a short period of time. Add to that the challenges that come with having a widening range of student achievement levels in any class, and you can understand how absolutely amazing teachers are!

In order to be a successful teacher for students who are struggling to learn, you need to understand that these kids are not necessarily less intelligent or less capable than the successful students. Many are simply less *lucky,* because they have rarely experienced a match between the way their brains comfortably process information and the way they have been taught. (Chapter 3 will tell you more about this hypothesis.) Although many of these kids have been labeled "learning disabled," a more accurate description is that they are "learning *strategy* disabled." Many have never been taught strategies that are compatible with the way they think and learn. Once we teach them the appropriate techniques that help them compensate for their areas of weakness, their learning problems diminish significantly, and achievement success is in their grasp.

Although many of these kids have been labeled "learning disabled," a more accurate description is that they are "learning *strategy* disabled." Once we teach them the appropriate techniques that help them compensate for their areas of weakness, their learning problems diminish significantly, and achievement success is in their grasp.

When the right methods are used, it is not necessary to water down content or repeat it endlessly. For example, for many years students who failed to learn to read with a phonics-oriented program were given remedial phonics. The assumption was that everyone had to understand phonics to be able to read. When we taught outlining, we assumed that all kids should learn it the *right* way, in a sequential process. Now that we understand more about how the human brain functions, we know that rather than remediate, we must work to make matches happen between the content to be learned and the learning styles (modalities) of our students. When the right matches are found, the message we send to struggling students is "You can be successful learners by using the learning strategies your brains find most comfortable and can more easily understand."

In addition to the obvious benefit of getting better achievement from students with learning difficulties, discovering how your students learn and teaching different kids in different ways provides other advantages. The consistent availability of differentiation opportunities shows your students that being different is just fine. It shows that you understand all kids don't learn the same way and that you happily accept all students exactly the way they are. Knowing that makes it less necessary for many students to mask their weaknesses with inappropriate behavior, so behavior may improve over time. Acts of bullying may also decrease, because it is harder to tease or ridicule people who are proud of their individuality.

Regardless of the curriculum you are teaching, the differentiation strategies described in this book will facilitate better learning success for students with learning difficulties. Meeting the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) should provide numerous opportunities for you to use many of your favorite teaching methods—with a new emphasis on providing rigorous learning experiences for all your students, not just those who are advanced. The standards include many opportunities for students to interact with activities that integrate content areas and stress higher-level thinking where appropriate. For example, math lessons might correlate to the study of a U.S. region or to the implications of worldwide population growth while the U.S. birthrate is declining. The possibilities are endless.

Never lose sight of the fact that a crucial 21st-century job survival skill is a positive attitude toward being retrained. Retraining is a lot like going back to school. All the students you teach will have to change careers numerous times before they retire. The people

who will be successful at this are the ones who enjoy their formal schooling and therefore look forward to becoming students again. So our goal as teachers should be to instill in all our students a drive to be lifelong learners.

Never lose sight of the fact that a crucial 21st-century job survival skill is a positive attitude toward being retrained.

A Positive Learning Experience Leads to a Love of Learning

To put differentiation in a positive light, we have used the following differentiation rationale for students with learning difficulties, which you might choose to share with your colleagues. If they agree with most or all of the statements, they are demonstrating readiness to do their very best to guarantee a consistently positive learning experience for all their students, including those with learning difficulties.

1. All students should experience learning at their own personal challenge level every day.
2. High self-esteem, and therefore learning productivity, comes from being successful with tasks the students perceived would be difficult.*
3. When students feel they have some control over what happens in school, they are more likely to be productive. This feeling of control comes from opportunities to make choices. Teachers can make choices available by offering several options for the type of expected task or product.
4. When learning modalities are attended to and curriculum is challenging and meaningful, students are more likely to choose appropriate behaviors.
5. The first place an educator should look to explain inappropriate behavior is the curriculum. Is it appropriately challenging? Does it incorporate students' interests wherever possible? Does the student understand why it must be learned? Does it allow access through students' learning modality strengths?
6. All students must feel they are respected and accepted for who they are and what they need in order to be successful learners.

This book presents a wide variety of teaching methods, so you can find the right match for every student in your classroom. We have collected these practical, easy-to-use strategies, techniques, and activities from a variety of sources. Actually, that is what makes this book unique. You don't have to do your own research on what works for teaching kids how to read or how to remember their math facts. We've done the research for you. This book contains the most effective methods we have found for helping students with learning problems become much more successful learners. Simply diagnose the learning weakness a particular student exhibits, find the right chapter in this book, and match the strategies to the student. Using these strategies, you can help bring learners up to the level of the content rather than lowering expectations for some students.

All the strategies in this book have been proven effective when intervening with students whose academics or behavior do not reflect expectations. You will find these methods are effective with any curriculum type you may be using. They make curriculum differentiation much easier for you and more helpful for your students.

Throughout this book, we emphasize our belief that high self-esteem can be achieved only through hard work and genuine accomplishments. As author and educator Dr. Sylvia Rimm says, "The surest path to high self-esteem is to be successful at something one perceived would be difficult." Rimm goes on to say, "Each time we steal a student's struggle, we steal the opportunity for them to build self-confidence. They must learn to do difficult things to feel good about themselves."

When we combine Rimm's work with that of Dr. Carol Dweck, we fully understand the importance of training our students to welcome, rather than resist, hard work. Both experts agree that convincing students to welcome learning challenges is the key to their developing a lifelong appreciation for the link between serious effort and desired outcomes. When we praise young people for their effort and hard work, rather than their outcomes, such as grades or class rank, students are much more likely to develop the belief that hard work is more important for success in school and in life than innate ability.

Dweck's research is described in her book *Mindset*. She has found that learners who believe they have a fixed amount of ability have a *fixed mindset* and may conclude that they can never meet their desired goals because they lack the essential ability. Her work cautions us as adults to avoid using labels to describe young people. Adults can create fixed mindsets by calling attention to a person's innate advanced abilities or to a student's persistent trouble with creating successful learning outcomes.

*Rimm, 2008.

Labeling students sends the message that they have only a certain amount of intelligence and must be careful not to use it all up. However, students who attribute their success in school to their own hard work learn that they have more control over learning outcomes than they originally thought, and they exhibit a *growth mindset.* They notice the link between their willingness to work hard and the likelihood of getting the outcomes they desire. When we emphasize this link, students are more motivated to work hard to learn, and they are more likely to stay engaged in a learning experience, believing that hard work will lead to better outcomes. When you combine Rimm's and Dweck's research with the "Goal Setting" section in this book (page 61), you will see amazing improvement in student attitudes and learning outcomes.

Nothing is quite as powerful as our ability to communicate high expectations for success to our students. Over the years, many studies have shown that we get what we expect. For example, the Pygmalion study in the 1960s demonstrated that kids could improve dramatically if their teachers were told they would do extremely well in a given year.*

No one knows for certain how many students in our past have been labeled "slow" or "remedial" whose learning outcomes might have been improved by choosing a teaching strategy that was more brain-compatible. For example, some kids face remediation due to their lack of fluency with multiplication facts year after year. However, when they are taught finger multiplication (described on page 162), many can learn the facts in just a few days.

One of the most helpful features of this book is that the strategies may be used with *any* students who are frustrated in their attempts to learn *any* academic content. Keep trying strategies until you find the right match for that particular student. Really! The strategies are generic and are presented as a menu of options for you to use as you empower *all* kids to become successful in your classroom. They are just as effective with students in poverty and with English language learners (ELLs) as they are with kids who have been diagnosed with learning difficulties.

The Common Core State Standards bring many of the guidelines formerly associated with gifted education to regular classrooms, at various levels of complexity, thus setting higher expectations for all students. Of course, differentiation will still be necessary, but as the curriculum for all students increases in rigor, students and parents will no longer complain that only the kids at the top get to do the "good stuff." With Common Core, *all* students will be engaged in learning activities they feel are stimulating and respectful ways to spend their learning time.

You have nothing to lose and everything to gain by trying some of the methods described in this book. You know that your struggling students will continue to struggle if they don't get the help they need. When you find and use strategies that work, teaching and learning become mutually successful experiences.

We promise these methods will work for you and your students. They have been used by us and by many other classroom teachers with delightful success. After all, this is the third edition of this book. It has been in constant print and has been read widely since 1996. We have received feedback from many educators telling us that they have used multiple strategies from this book with great success with many types of students. Often, teachers have told us they wish they had known about some of these strategies throughout their entire teaching careers.

This book will help you become an even better teacher than you already are. All you have to remember is this: *If students are not learning the way you are teaching them, find and use a more appropriate method, so you can teach them the way they learn.*

What's New in This Edition

If you are familiar with earlier editions of this book, you may have noticed that the title has changed slightly. The previous edition was titled *Teaching Kids with Learning Difficulties in the Regular Classroom*. The new title reflects this edition's emphasis on current teaching and learning philosophies and practice. *Teaching Kids with Learning Difficulties in Today's Classroom* is your guide to specific strategies you may use to be sure your teaching and learning practices are compatible with current thought and newly emerging curricula. Specifically, this book is updated in the following areas:

1. **Learning difficulties:** Learning difficulties are described as "disabilities" by the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition (DSM-5)*. This manual is considered the universal authority for psychiatric diagnoses. *DSM-5* describes specific categories of mental health disorders and descriptions of each. It has long been used to help professionals in the fields of education and mental health recognize the many different categories of behaviors that identify persons who need specific interventions to put them on the road to emotional or academic recovery.

One of the most significant changes in *DSM-5* is that Asperger's syndrome no longer exists as a separate condition. It is included as part of the autism spectrum

*Rosenthal, Robert, and Lenore Jacobson. *Pygmalion in the Classroom: Teacher Expectation and Pupils' Intellectual Development*. Norwalk, CT: Crown House Publishing, 2003.

disorder (ASD) category. As you probably know, the number of kids who qualify in the category of ASD has exploded. In 2014, experts estimated that 1 child in 68 births would have ASD. To address the rapid growth in ASD diagnoses and the expectation of some parents for full inclusion in regular education programs, we have included sidebars throughout called "Unlocking Autism." They are devoted to students with ASD. They describe how teaching and learning strategies impact students who are on the autism spectrum, and some other students as well. Additional in-depth information about this disorder is in Chapter 2.

2. **Common Core:** At this book's writing, the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) are the emerging national initiative. They represent the first time in U.S. history that most of the states have agreed on the essential standards that students in preK through 12th grade must learn in order to be prepared for the workplace of today and the near future. These standards have moved away from the skill-based focus of No Child Left Behind (NCLB). Although NCLB's expectation that all students make "Adequate Yearly Progress" (AYP) produced measurable benefits, many in education were frustrated that NCLB left little room for higher-level thinking or problem-based learning experiences. In contrast, CCSS focuses on teaching skills through the study of much more rigorous content and more meaningful, exciting learning experiences. Our recommendations for ways to make that happen for your students with learning difficulties are found throughout this new edition, especially in Chapters 3 through 8.

Although the CCSS are being implemented in many states, some readers will not be experiencing them as soon as others. We want to reassure you that the strategies and information in this book are timeless and will be useful regardless of the content you are teaching. You will always need differentiation for some students for various reasons. This book provides dozens of user-friendly interventions you can use with little preparation. These interventions will be highly effective with any of your students who experience frustration in keeping up with the adopted curriculum.

3. **Response to intervention:** Response to intervention (RTI) is a program that was created to help educators achieve successful learning outcomes with all students. The goal of RTI is to increase rigor in both teaching and learning and to provide the structure through which differentiation can occur. Three tiers of instruction are geared to meet all levels of students' academic needs. Whether a student has learning difficulties or is proficient at grade level, high-achieving, or gifted, RTI helps you collaborate with your colleagues to be certain all students can eventually demonstrate mastery of any required curriculum. More RTI information may be found in Chapters 2 through 8.

4. **Professional learning communities (PLCs):** You may have heard the saying *There is nothing new under the sun.* Many years ago, Susan taught in a graduate program in Illinois that prepared candidates for their master's degrees in ways that were highly interactive and relied a great deal on candidates coaching each other throughout the process. Back then, the process was called action research. Susan watched it transform her graduate students into much more professional practitioners with their students. That experience caused Susan to always integrate a peer coaching component into all the professional development work she does.

Although the CCSS are being implemented in many states, some readers will not be experiencing them as soon as others. We want to reassure you that the strategies and information in this book are timeless and will be useful regardless of the content you are teaching.

In PLCs, members use group meetings to discuss and refine their interventions with their students. That ongoing flow of ideas and suggestions between the PLCs and the classroom events greatly increases the sense of professionalism in the participants. This book is structured for ease of use in PLCs, and the digital content includes a PDF presentation to facilitate that process. In addition, we have written a PLC/Book Study Guide which can be downloaded at www.freespirit.com.

5. **Technology:** For years, most of students' interaction with computers took place outside the regular classroom, usually in a library media room or a computer lab. Current best practice requires students to use technology as an integral part of the learning process. So the Common Core has come at the exact right time, since its expectations are greatly enhanced by students' abilities to get right to the primary sources in their learning of all subjects and topics. Technology information is included in most chapters of this book, with a special in-depth section in Chapter 4. Sidebars titled "Tech Tips" appear throughout the book. These describe technologies that are very helpful for kids with learning difficulties.

6. **Behaviors of students with special needs:** In the years since the first two editions of this book were published, the emphasis on behavior has moved on to school-wide positive behavior management models. In

this edition, we focus on behavior adjustment strategies linked to RTI in a model called Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS). According to the national PBIS website (www.pbis.org), PBIS is an implementation framework designed to enhance academic and social behavior outcomes for all students by emphasizing the use of data for informing decisions about the selection, implementation, and progress monitoring of evidence-based behavioral practices. Attention is focused on creating and sustaining positive behaviors school-wide in ways that are mutually rewarding for everyone in the school community, including on school buses and playgrounds and in halls and the classrooms themselves. All the information in Chapter 10 about behavior is compatible with the PBIS Guidelines and IEP Positive Behavior Support Plans.

Here's a glimpse of the valuable information you'll find in this book:

- **Chapter 1: Creating Active Learning for All Students** contains tips for helping all students feel welcome in your classroom, since kids who feel like outsiders are candidates for misbehavior and underachievement. It presents tried-and-true ways to get all students involved in all learning activities.
- **Chapter 2: Understanding Learning Difficulties and Intervening Effectively** describes various types of learning difficulties and offers suggestions for responding to students' special learning needs.
- **Chapter 3: Using Students' Learning Styles (Modalities) to Facilitate Learning Success** helps you enhance the learning success of your struggling students by matching your teaching to their learning modalities.
- **Chapter 4: Ensuring That All Students Make At Least One Year's Academic Growth During Each School Year** presents state-of-the-art ideas on how learning happens and how teachers can create learning success for all students.
- **Chapter 5: Teaching Integrated Language Arts, Including Literature, Sounds, and Writing** provides numerous concrete strategies to use with students whose reading fluency and comprehension need improvement in an integrated language arts approach.
- **Chapter 6: Reading and Learning with Informational Text** offers strategies for students who face many challenges in figuring out the important information and the meaning of content in informational texts such as in science, social studies, and so on.
- **Chapter 7: All Students Can Be Successful in Math** is full of easy-to-learn strategies for students who are working behind their grade-level peers in math.
- **Chapter 8: Using Assessments to Support Student Learning** contains strategies for both formative and summative assessments.
- **Chapter 9: Improving Students' Executive Functioning Skills** contains many practical strategies to help students become better organized and use effective study skills.
- **Chapter 10: Helping Students Choose Appropriate Behaviors** offers ideas for successful behavior management by involving students in monitoring their own behavior.
- **Chapter 11: Helping Parents Become Partners in Their Children's Learning** offers suggestions for involving parents as part of the learning team. It describes several ways to reach out to parents—including those who don't seem interested—and make them welcome at school.

Each chapter also includes a "Questions and Answers" section with responses to the questions we hear most often from educators. The book concludes with a "References and Resources" section that points you toward additional sources of information and materials. These are the best books, articles, videos, organizations, associations, programs, and resources we have found, and we encourage you to seek them out.

Finally, all the reproducible forms in the book are provided as digital content available to you online; you may customize many of the forms for your classroom and students. Also included in the digital file are additional content organization charts from our work in the field and a PDF presentation useful for introducing and exploring the book in study groups, PLCs, and other professional development settings. You may download the content and print the documents when you need them. See page xii for information on how to access the digital content.

Teacher Effectiveness Leads to Student Success

Evidence shows that certain programs and practices have been successful in the last decade in significantly improving achievement scores for students who were previously unsuccessful in school. Dr. Martin Haberman, author of the book *Star Teachers of Children in Poverty*, has documented the importance of teachers