

## THE HIDDEN HANDICAP IN THE HIGH SCHOOL CLASSROOM

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Even though the door was closed, the words were as plain as they could be. "I don't give a damn, I'm not going to let that old bitch keep me from graduating. It wasn't my idea to take that class anyway. I should have stayed in basic English, except for that smart-ass counselor who keeps telling me I'm too smart for the dummy class."

It was not the kind of situation that one enjoys walking into the middle of, but I had been called out of class and asked to come to the office. The student was a senior who had a WISC verbal IQ of 96 and a performance score of 123. He was no discipline problem, but recently had changed from a passive I'll-sit-in-the-back-of-the-room-and-won't-rock-the-boat attitude. He was irritable and he seemed to be developing a large chip on his shoulder. His English grades were "D's" and his social studies grades were mostly "D's" with a few "C's". Industrial Arts, math, and work experience grades were "B's" and a few "C's".

It seems that he had not turned in any written work, not participated in class discussion, and that day he had refused to do oral reading. When the teacher reminded him of his past performance in class work and suggested that he reconsider his position of refusing to read, and added that she would have no alternative but to flunk him, she received an outburst that she hadn't ever encountered in her six years of teaching. She directed him to the office so that they could discuss it later. On his way out the door he muttered, "Anything to get out of this \_\_\_ing class."

The principal, the counselor, the work coordinator, the student, and I sat down to discuss the situation that had brought about such a high level conference. In a very quiet tone we began to put together pieces and unravel contradictions, and finally the question was asked, "Can you read?"

"Yeah," he replied, "I'm not that dumb."

"Can you put ideas on paper?"

"When I want to."

"Are you a good speller?"

"No."

"When you are in class do you understand what the discussion is all about?"

"Yes, most of the time."

"Could you do a better job of telling the teacher about the reports than writing about them?"

"Sure."

"Did you know that between 8% and 10% of the students in this school who have normal intelligence cannot read, write, and spell on a level that their intelligence says they can?"

"No."

"Mike, I'd like to spend forty minutes of your time looking closely at your reading, writing, and spelling. Then, when we are done, I will go back over these tests with you and let you know what I think about them and get your opinion before we do anything more about Shakespeare or your outburst."

"Are you a shrink?"

"No, just an English teacher, but we'll talk about that tomorrow, 3rd hour, in the guidance office."

My part of the conference was done. Mike went home for the rest of the day and he was willing to see me the next morning.

Mike read at the middle fourth grade level. He possessed virtually no word attack skills or even a good sight vocabulary. He did not know a "b" from a "d". His oral vocabulary was at the 10th grade level, but when he had read the test, his vocabulary was at the 5th grade level. His sentences were short. He only wrote words that he knew that he could spell. Gradually, as we were going over the tests, he began to unfold his ways of keeping his poor written language skills a secret. He listened in class. He did not contribute to discussion so that if he was wrong it wouldn't come back at him. He would rather be called lazy than stupid. He used his girl-friend to help him rewrite his brother's and friends' reports. He avoided all confrontations and hoped that when it came to grading time, the teacher would give him the benefit of the doubt.....that is, until she came along and unilaterally decided that she was going to teach him something!

"Funny thing," he said, "She is the only one who pushed me and tried to get close to me."

Seven and a half months wasn't an awful lot of time to make up for ten years of school failure and frustration, but we got to work.

Since Mike understood what was going on in his social studies class, but was not able to read adequately the tests,

or answer short answer or an occasional essay question, the social studies teacher readily agreed to letting me read the tests to him. In a very short time it became obvious to the social studies teacher that up to this time Mike's grades were based upon his reading ability, not his knowledge of subject matter. All that was done, then, was to ignore his inability to read, write and spell as a criterion for a grade. Short answer and essay questions were easily handled. I wrote down what Mike said. He ended up with a final grade of "B".

As far as reading, writing, and spelling were concerned, Mike began to learn and learned very rapidly through a multi-sensory approach based upon the principles of Dr. Samuel T. Orton and Miss Anna Gillingham. For the first time since fourth grade, Mike began to feel that he was learning again. Many things began to happen. First this attitude about himself and the twelve others in the same SLD English Class began to change. Then his classroom behavior changed and he took part in discussions. Then his reading began to improve and so did his writing. His parents reported that he read the newspaper and left them notes. He had done neither of these before. Last of all, his spelling improved, not a great deal, but it improved.

How many Mikes are hidden away in our English classes? How many Mikes are so fearful of being discovered that they are willing to be kicked out of school instead? How many Mikes are convinced that because they can't read, write, or spell, they are stupid? How many times do we try to get close to a student and get kicked in the teeth? How many of us protect ourselves by teaching the curriculum and not the student? How many of us feel genuinely frustrated when we have students who, despite good teaching, have not learned the basic written language skills? How many of us retreat into the comfort of excusing ourselves for not teaching him something because it was supposed to have been taught before he ever reached our class?

Traditional remedial reading methods will not help this type of youngster. He had had all of the traditional instruction that the school system could offer, including tutoring, but it did not help him. Mike is one of the many students with the hidden handicap -- a serious language disability -- that needs the best that the whole English Department can offer. It is not just his reading, but his writing and spelling that need to be remediated.

Remediation would be easier if it had started for him in elementary school, but it still can be done at a later stage through the proper application of systematic language instruction through a multi-sensory approach. This can be done in the less expensive group setting, rather than the one-to-one tutoring.

For those who like happy endings, Mike completed two years of junior college and is now employed as a psychiatric aide in a Wisconsin mental hospital. He still is a bad speller, but his wife proof-reads his reports. He is now glad that his Shakespeare teacher pushed him into the proverbial corner. Mike also said, "If my kids have the same reading problems I did, I'm gonna tear the place down until the school does something about it. I'm not going to let my children go through the same hell that I went through."

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