



Foundations of Special Education

By Dr. Kathleen VanTol

Chapter 5: Learning Disabilities

Discussion Questions

1. The chapter describes learning disabilities as differences in how students learn rather than how much they are capable of learning. Why is this distinction important? How might it influence the expectations teachers have for their students?
2. Our understanding of learning disabilities has changed considerably over the past sixty years. Why do you think it took so long for educators to recognize that a student could have average or above-average intelligence while also experiencing significant academic difficulties?
3. The chapter describes learning disabilities as information-processing disorders. How does understanding the role of attention, memory, organization, metacognition, and processing speed change the way teachers should think about students who struggle academically?
4. IDEA excludes students whose learning difficulties are primarily the result of visual, hearing, motor, or intellectual disabilities, emotional disturbance, or environmental disadvantage. Why is it important to distinguish learning disabilities from these other causes of academic difficulty?

5. Many students with learning disabilities are not identified until they have experienced repeated academic failure. How does the Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) improve the identification process, and what role should general education teachers play within this framework?
6. Learning disabilities are often mistaken for poor motivation, laziness, or attention problems. Why do these misconceptions persist? What can educators do to help families, colleagues, and classmates better understand learning disabilities?
7. Most students with learning disabilities spend the majority of their school day in general education classrooms. What factors contribute to successful inclusion for these students? What responsibilities do general and special educators share in making inclusion successful?
8. The chapter recommends using multisensory methods, direct instruction, metacognitive strategy instruction, and explicit teaching of learning strategies. Which of these approaches do you believe would have the greatest impact on student learning? Explain your reasoning.
9. The chapter emphasizes helping students become independent learners. Why is it important to teach metacognitive and learning strategies in addition to academic content? How do these strategies prepare students for lifelong learning?
10. The chapter states that practice does not make perfect; practice makes permanent. What does this statement mean? How should it influence the way teachers provide instruction, feedback, and opportunities for practice?

11. Accommodations are intended to remove barriers without lowering learning expectations. How can teachers provide appropriate accommodations while continuing to maintain high expectations for student achievement?
12. Kristen's story illustrates both the challenges and the successes that can accompany a learning disability. Which parts of her story stood out to you most? What does her experience teach us about the importance of perseverance, appropriate supports, and educator expectations?
13. Imagine you are a general education teacher who notices that a student consistently struggles with reading, spelling, and written expression despite targeted classroom interventions. Based on this chapter, what would your next steps be? What information would you gather before referring the student for a special education evaluation?
14. Orlando Bloom is quoted at the beginning of the chapter as saying, *"Dyslexia is not due to a lack of intelligence; it's a lack of access."* What do you think he means by this statement? How does it reflect the major ideas presented throughout the chapter?
15. After reading this chapter, what do you believe are the three most important things every teacher should understand about students with learning disabilities? Explain why you selected each one.

About the Author

Dr. Kathleen VanTol has over 35 years of experience working in the field of education. She holds a doctorate in special education from Western Michigan University and is a professor of special education at Dordt University. She is also a Board Certified Behavior Analyst and a Board Certified Advocate in Special Education.

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