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Do Learning Disabilities Have a Place In the Gradebook?

To deal with students suffering from learning disabilities, schools and educators often cut those students slack when grading them, rather than going the more complex route of altering teaching practices to match these student’s strengths. Teachers and administrators often relax the grading scale for learning disabled, or L.D. students, awarding higher grades for less or poorer quality work. This allows students, who are capable of learning the material, to slip by with passing grades even though they may not actually grasp what they have been taught. Factoring learning disabilities into grading lowers expectations of both students’ academic performance, as well as their overall potential in life.

As an L.D. student, I learned firsthand how frustrating it was to realize that having passed a class due to lax grading policies, and not by showing mastery of the material, did not prepare me to progress to the next stage of my education. At a young age I was diagnosed with the learning disability Dysgraphia, which impairs the ability to form words on a page. I was told that I would never be able to write well because of my disability and, as a result of being told that, I did not try hard in school and dreaded writing assignments to the point of not even attempting them.

Due to low expectations of myself, I did not try as hard as I should have to overcome my challenges and improve my handwriting skills. Some may argue that making good grades easier to obtain for L.D. students may encourage them to keep trying. However, while it can encourage some, it also removes the incentive to work hard to overcome one’s disability or find ways around it. Being told that I had a writing disability and that I would never write well really discouraged me from really working to overcome my disability. Lowering grading standards for students lowers teachers’ expectations of those students, and does not encourage teachers to push these students to excel. Likewise, parents also are made to believe that their child is somehow defective and unable to perform as well as a non-disabled student and they may not push their child to maximize their potential in life.

When grading standards are relaxed for L.D. students in an effort to accommodate their disabilities, the quality of their education can suffer. With relaxed grading standards, students who may otherwise have failed for not sufficiently mastering the material get passed along to the next grade, even though they may not be prepared educationally for the next level of course work. It can be argued that adjusting grading scales in an effort to accommodate learning disabled students may be the cheapest and easiest method of dealing with the challenges those students pose to educators. However, this “accommodation” does absolutely nothing to address the learning challenges these students face, all it does is make it possible for educators to claim that they have a system in place for dealing with L.D. students, and pass those students along to be the next guy’s problem. Those students who get passed along due solely to relaxed grading standards may find themselves over their head when they reach complex material in later grades or classes that they never learned to basics of in earlier courses. This can lead to students believing that they simply are not smart enough to succeed, even though their problem is not lack of intelligence, but simply having been passed along without having mastered the prerequisite material.

Rather than adjusting grading standards to try to cope with learning disabled students, schools should adjust the way these students are taught. Though some may argue that learning disabled students may be unable to handle coursework as well as their non L.D. peers, they miss the fact that an L.D. student is not stupid, they simply have a deficiency in one particular area of learning. They don’t realize that these deficiencies can be overcome in many cases by altering either the way the student is taught, or the way in which the student’s progress is assessed. Presenting a writing disabled student, like myself, with a pen and paper and telling me to write out a series of sentences would not give an adequate measure of my academic performance. If, however you were to give me computer and a keyboard, it would be very easy for me to quickly type out those same sentences. Those sentences could then be graded to the same rubric as everyone else’s to obtain an accurate measure of my performance. When teaching methods are adjusted to compensate or mitigate a student’s learning disability their work can then be graded on the same scale as everybody else and have their level of mastery of course material assessed accurately.

As a student with a learning disability, I have witnessed firsthand the effects of cutting a student slack in grading because of their disability. After I graduated from high school (barely), and moved on to college, I learned that passing me along all through high school was not the right thing for me. I had been allowed use my disability as a crutch and I was never able to rise above it while in that mindset. Now, I have moved on to college and had a chance to realize the effects of being passed without actually earning those grades. I have come to the conclusion that instead of having cut me slack in the grading department, my teachers should have adjusted the way I was taught and assessed. If they had done so, they might have realized what I knew and what I didn’t.