

An Educator's Guide to Helping Students with LD, Part Two

Lauren 00:06

Welcome to the LDA podcast, a series by The Learning Disabilities Association of America. Our podcast is dedicated to exploring topics of interest to educators, individuals with learning disabilities, parents and professionals to work towards our goal of creating a more equitable world.

Lauren 00:23

Welcome to the LDA podcast everyone. Thank you for joining us today. We have Gregg French, he's a special education teacher and the president of LDA Connecticut. Gregg, thank you so much for being here.

Gregg French 00:32

Thank you for having me.

Lauren 00:34

All right. Well, to dive right in, would you be able to give us a bit of background about yourself?

Gregg French 00:37

Sure, absolutely. I'm currently a full time special education teacher in the state of Connecticut. I work for the Connecticut technical education and career system. So within one of the tech schools in the state of Connecticut, I work at Bullard Havens Technical High School in Bridgeport, Connecticut. This is my second year as a full time special education teacher. Prior to that, I was a history teacher at another technical high school in Stamford, Connecticut. So it was a recent transition to special education, one that occurred during COVID, which was interesting enough with a lot of transitions we all went through during COVID. Prior to being a full time special education teacher and a history teacher, I've worked in multiple classrooms and in different schools in lower Fairfield County in Connecticut, within special education, I worked at a few vocational summer camps in upstate Connecticut for children and adults with disabilities. So I kind of had this passion to really dedicate a lot of my public service to supporting individuals with disabilities. And when LDA of America came around, I became a member. And realizing I'm from Connecticut, and that they didn't have a Learning Disability Association of Connecticut organization yet, they asked if I would start a nonprofit in Connecticut, and I did with a few other educators, we kind of organized the establishment of Learning Disabilities Association of Connecticut. So I'm glad to announce that we are officially up on our feet. And, you know, working with a lot of agencies, a lot of state based programs, other nonprofits, to really support individuals with learning disabilities within our state.

Lauren 02:32

Absolutely. That's really exciting. Are there any misconceptions about LD that you think that educators should be aware of, whether they're special educators or general educators?

Gregg French 02:40

I do. And you know, learning disabilities is one of the disabilities that you can't look at a person and determine if they have a learning disability or not, it's one of those hidden disabilities, that does not have any physical traits or characteristics. And oftentimes, I'll even hear in conversations with general education teachers, you know, 'this student is really reading very below grade level, they must have a learning disability,' or 'they're performing way behind their peers in math, and that that means they must have a math disability.' And so trying to break that misconception that a reading difficulty or math difficulty is not a reading or math specific disability. I think that's why more schools are looking to implement multi-tiered support systems to kind of begin a process of identifying those students who are at risk that may have a learning difficulty, and really focusing in on what their difficulties are in determining whether or not they should be moved to an evaluation for a specific disability. So oftentimes, I do hear teachers can talk about LD as even having a mild difficulty in a subject area, which is not the case. I think that comes with training educators across all content areas more about learning disability awareness, because it is one of the growing and largest populations for students who receive special education services nationwide who have a specific learning disability in either math, writing, reading, dyslexia. We're finding more students with ADD, ADHD, OHI, with multiple disabilities classified with LD. So I think more awareness, more training of teachers is important in really focusing on the difference between a difficulty in a subject area and a disability.

Lauren 04:49

Absolutely. So if a student is diagnosed with a learning disability, what sorts of common accommodations for students with LD can be used in a general education classroom?

Gregg French 04:59

That's a good question. And it's something that I really look closely at. As I become as I work as I was a general education teacher, and now moving into a special education teacher, I kind of see both sides to how to support students with diverse learning needs. And I spent a lot of my teaching career focusing on differentiation of instruction, and how beneficial that is to not only students with IEPs, and 504s, but students who are below grade level or at risk for students that are primarily, non-English language speakers, and so differentiating of instruction is beneficial for many different types of students that we encounter in our classrooms. And so when I look at a student with a learning disability, whether it's reading, math, writing, a lot of those accommodations that we look for in implementing the IEP can be beneficial for students who are not receiving special education services. I always say being a visual learner is something that I think each person kind of enjoys. So using graphic organizers to break down large reading or writing tasks or assignments can be helpful for even a student who's learning English for the first time when it comes to vocabulary, or students that just need that visual support. Highlighting vocabulary terms and pre-teaching content specific vocabulary can be beneficial to many diverse learners, not just specific to LD. And so I kind of make the point to tell teachers, that an accommodation you might see in an IEP, and you might have a classroom that has more than one student with an IEP, and you might finally have this the same accommodation, it's okay to make that a class wide accommodation if you feel it benefits all of your students, because I think that's just part of good teaching. And that comes with really building relationships with your students and understanding your students' learning preferences, really explicitly teaching different strategies in your classroom. So those

would be you some of the accommodations that I find are kind of what I would consider universal, they kind of have a wide impact on all learners in the classroom.

Lauren 07:34

And I think that's huge that it's not necessarily just for students with learning disabilities or disabilities, it could benefit the entire classroom. Well, and something I wanted to ask, you brought up differential instruction, would you be able to give a quick definition of what that would be?

Gregg French 07:49

So differentiation of instruction is a teaching kind of model that looks at explicitly teaching content in different ways. When I first learned about differentiation of instruction, I thought it was something that you had to use with all students. It can definitely be individualized, especially if you're in a smaller class setting, you know students' learning needs, you can do small group work. I know a lot of teachers in my school differentiate without really even knowing they differentiate, they just have great rapport with the students, and are very open to try new strategies with students. One of the strategies that I find very much used in my school is the gradual release of responsibility. So I see a lot of teachers modeling first new concepts and skills, and then teachers provide guided practice where students, once a teacher feels that they've modeled enough, have the students walk the teacher through how to complete a task, or do an assignment. And then based on the guided practice working together, talking it out, the teacher can get a sense of, 'okay, I feel that this group of students can do it independently, go for it. Maybe this group of students need to be a little bit more supported with more guided practice or with modeling.' I've seen teachers do rotating stations where there's a specific task at each station for a time, an allotted time. And it might have a vocabulary visual station, a hands-on station, and a conference with the teacher, so you're kind of using a wide variety of different approaches to delivery of instruction, teaching and learning. A lot of teachers I know use project-based learning. And for the civics and the English and the science classes, giving students choice, how they want to create a project, which I think is great, using choice boards, really using students' strengths to demonstrate and apply a specific skill. I've seen teachers who use a lot of assistive technology, speech to text, audio books. I've worked with students in looking at different software to create projects, virtually and digitally. I think COVID with virtual learning kind of allowed teachers to experiment with more digital programs and software that can be beneficial to students with LD or without a disability. So it's something that kind of focuses on a student's strengths and using it to teach a concept or skill.

Lauren 10:41

Thank you for that. A lot of students with LD will spend most of their time in a general education classroom. So do you have any tips for how general education teachers and special education teachers can work together to benefit the student?

Gregg French 10:54

That's a good question. And I really think that is one of the most crucial pieces to supporting any student with a disability is the collaboration between the special education teacher and the general education teacher, because there may be a point where co-teaching needs to be embedded in the delivery of instruction, and so making sure that teachers have the opportunity to collaborate, and co-plan, co-teach and co-assess, coming up with a model that fits the classroom. Working on building

positive relationships between both teachers, I think, is very crucial. And so that line of communication needs to be consistent and clear. And both need to understand the roles in supporting the student it shouldn't be me versus them, it should be, us working together to support the needs of the student. And so in the classroom, whenever I push in, I always let the teacher lead the classroom. With the delivery of instruction, I will float around and support all students. And I think that's really key. Students who have IEPs and primarily a learning disability don't want to be picked out in the crowd and have an adult individual hovering over them. And so I kind of see my role in the classroom is supporting all the students. So I build relationships with all the students. I'll spend time working with students that aren't on my caseload, because they know that kids on my caseload are working independently and are perfectly fine. So the classroom kind of sees me as a co-teacher that's there for everyone. I don't hover over a particular student. And so that classroom climate and environment is positive. They see myself and the general education teacher as partners, also a resource to ask for help, so I never say I would turn away a student asking for help. So I think that's also important, too, is the way that the co-teachers use common language, and are on the same page of knowing that, 'yes, I have five or six students in your classroom that have IEPs that are on my caseload that I'm supporting, but I'm also supporting the entire class. To support all students.

Lauren 13:20

So if a teacher has a student with LD, whether they're a special educator or a general education teacher, and they feel that the student's needs aren't being met, is there a route that they can necessarily take to advocate, or are their hands sort of tied by their position?

Gregg French 13:33

So I wouldn't say that their hands are tied, I think that kind of goes back to the collaboration piece in the communication. When a special education teacher is not present in a classroom with a group of students who maybe have a learning disability, and the general education teacher may be struggling with reaching those students or teaching a specific lesson or unit, that's where the collaboration and communication need to come into play. And so having that open line of communication, the general education teacher being comfortable to say, 'Hey, did this lesson today, it didn't work out for the students, what can I do differently next time?' Or, 'Can you come in and maybe I'll reteach those students and you work with the other group of students and then we'll kind of do a split classroom.' No teacher should feel that their hands are tied. And again, I think that goes to the building positive relationships, the communication, collaboration, and making sure that the special education teacher is also there to support the teacher. Because ultimately, they spend the most time with their students. Even though those students are on my caseload, they spend more time with them. So I always make it a point to say, 'What do you need I see you have this this big reading and writing assignment coming up, I know these students may struggle with it, what do you need from me? I'm more than happy to put together a graphic organizer, perfectly comfortable with doing a small group activity with them, or checking in with those students later in the day or reading the article with them. So that line of communication, I think, is crucial there.

Lauren 15:26

Definitely. Well, moving forward into IEP meetings, how can educators prepare for an IEP meeting? Especially if it's one of their first ones?

Gregg French 15:35

Great. That's a great question. You know, IEP meetings, and in Connecticut, we call them PPT meetings, planning and placement team meetings. And those are, for a first time teacher, whether they're special education teachers or general education teachers, can be very stressful. There's a lot of planning that goes into the before, the during, and the after. And this is where a lot of the legal guidelines come into play with developing the IEP with the annual meetings, and the trainings that happen every three years for determining if a student continues to be eligible for receiving special education services. So one of the things I learned early on in my training to becoming a special education teacher, is whenever you go into an IEP meeting, always use a checklist. And I had a great professor that really, really ingrained in me the importance of being so organized when it came to these meetings, and she gave us a template of a checklist of every step of what to do for an IEP meeting. And I would tailor that checklist depending on what type of meeting it was. But it allowed me to kind of go through and say, 'Okay, before the meeting takes place, here's what I need to go through and be prepared for.' And then that checklist allowed me to go through and check off as I went through the meeting, 'okay, this was addressed, this was discussed, there was agreement here,' because then afterwards, that creates my meeting minutes in the IEP, which is really just cut and paste. And so for special education teachers I would say communicate with all stakeholders who are invited to the PPT or the IEP meeting, and I say that because I've been in many IEP meetings where the team comes in with decisions already made. But not every stakeholder was involved in that decision making. Oftentimes, it's to the parent, 'okay, the team discussed this, the team wants to do this, the team does this, do we have your approval?' And as a parent, sitting in the parents seat, that can be a very overwhelming encounter, and sometimes threatening because you weren't prepared for what the team is delivering. So I always say, when you're developing an IEP, prior to an IEP meeting, or preparing for an IEP meeting, make sure that you have an agenda, and a checklist to go through. Everyone can see that agenda before the meeting, and be prepared for it, and have open line of communications for all stakeholders invited. I know for general education teachers, oftentimes, I will get a question like, 'What should I bring to the meeting? Or how should I prepare for this meeting?' And for those teachers I invite, I always say, any type of assessments that show student progress. If you use any online reading or math programs, if you can do a printout of of the month in their progress and using the program, any work samples that relates to the goals and objectives in the IEP, if they have a graphic organizer and they did really well using it, showing a strength, really preparing the general education teacher with the reports that will be beneficial for them to speak to.

Lauren 19:02

And then what is the general educators' role during the IEP meeting, besides showing all the things that they've collected?

Gregg French 19:09

That's a good question. I always say to a general education teacher, you're the main eyes in the classroom, you spend the most time with the students, you're assessing their work and grading it, and you're familiar with it. So that role is important, you have the most observations on the student, you can identify the strengths and the areas of difficulty. When we look at the present level of performance, you can give a good report on what changes have occurred based on the previous IEP in what should be

changed. And I always say to the general education teachers, it's okay to talk privately with an individual student with their IEP to ask the student what they think/ Oftentimes the teachers are implementing the accommodations and modifications in their classroom and I always ask when it comes to the annual review, 'okay, general education teacher, do you think the student has any accommodation in IEP that you feel they haven't used? Or don't meet anymore? Or do you think there's something that should be added?' And a lot of times the teachers are good about saying, 'Well, I noticed the student is provided with preferential seating up close to the board. Recently, they've been sitting more in the center of the room, and they seem to be more on task. So I think that's an accommodation that I think can be removed from the IEP.' Or if the student has access to graphic organizers and the English teacher finds that, 'Well, I think they've actually done pretty well writing without a graphic organizer, maybe that student doesn't need one any more.' Or vice versa. So, the teachers, I think, have a lot more to say about specific parts of the IEP than they even know they do, in having that conversation with teachers. And I'll even say to have a conversation with the students, and see what they think. Because you have a relationship with the student that is different from my relationship. And it provides both you and the student time to reflect on the IEP, which I also think is very important.

Lauren 21:26

So we want to make sure that we're using research-based practices in the classroom, things that will work. So how can educators ensure that the practices that they're using are scientific and research-based?

Gregg French 21:37

That's another good question, one that I get asked quite a bit when it comes to delivery of instruction or specific strategies. I understand as a classroom teacher, when you're looking at the lesson plan and plan units, you go to Google and look up different strategies that are content specific. And so I always tell teachers there's a lot of reports and studies out there and different teaching models that I can share. And again, that's where the collaboration comes into play. For my school, I'm currently working on setting up a shared Google Drive that has diverse strategies, templates of graphic organizers, that are from specific studies and from organizations like LDA, the American Psychological Association. There's a lot of other nonprofits that have resources available that are scientifically effective, and are scientifically based, and so I always tell teachers if you're unsure of a resource, you can definitely ask, and we can point you in the right direction. And sometimes I can be proactive, and just share with teachers, 'this is what I saw, or this is what I've used in the past, it's been effective.' For example, the Frayer model for vocabulary, having students use a graphic organizer to break down the definition and meaning of a word. And so there's many studies on that. And so I share articles with teachers, sometimes I'll see a teacher doing a strategy that they learned from me, and I'd like to share that out. Because I think that's important too, that teachers aren't always aware of the ways they're teaching and that it is following those guidelines to be explicit strategies. And so a lot of times, I'll be like, 'Oh, did you realize you're doing the gradual release of responsibility? You're doing great with modeling, and using guiding practice,' and they're looking at me like, 'Well what is that?' And so it's always interesting that I even learned about resources that other teachers have used. And I also think I want to go back to professional development. That is a great opportunity to showcase a lot of the resources out there to teachers that are being used by professionals in the field of education, new strategies, new means of

assistive technology that have been vetted. So using professional development workshops, to keep teachers up to speed with the current trends and research I think is also important.

Lauren 24:26

Absolutely. And then speaking of different methods and different forms of instruction, would you be able to touch on what RTI is and what teachers should know about it?

Gregg French 24:35

Yeah, so RTI is Response to Intervention and it has a tiered approach in which the school looks at for tier one using a universal screener. And that will occur in the fall, winter, spring, so you can look at growth over time and determine the group of students who are more at risk or might need more intensive interventions. So everyone goes through tier one screening. And for students that don't meet the benchmark for the universal screener, they might need more tier two intervention at the same time they're receiving tier one intervention. So that might mean using more differentiation of instruction, collaborating more with reading specialists, English Language Learner instructors you might want to work with, speech and language providers, or service providers to support small groups, and you're still using those universal screeners for those students. And that will determine whether or not the level of intervention being put in place is appropriate. And you might determine that a student might need more intensive interventions. They're not meeting tier one or tier two, so we need to bump it up to tier three into a small group within the general education classroom with a co-teacher. It might come to a point where you're really noticing a lot of difficulties in a specific area, and that might warrant a referral to special education to see if an evaluation is needed. And students move, up and down on the tiers depending on how well they respond to the intervention. And if a student is not responding to intervention in a timely manner, then a data team needs to look at what can we do for the student more intensively. Or, they are meeting their intervention in their level at where they are at. So teams are important to progress monitoring those students and their levels of supports. I know in the LD community, there's a lot of new research that is questioning whether RTI is really effective in identifying students with a learning disability. And I've been following up on that research, and so looking at where the studies are going in terms of RTI as an effective identification model. But I do think that a multi-tiered support system, MTSS, is valuable in a lot of schools. Unfortunately, in the location I'm in, in Bridgeport, Connecticut, a lot of students aren't picked up in identifying disabilities until we're noticing middle and even high school levels. So those late emerging disabilities that we're finding and diagnosing these students with, we're pretty time crunched in supporting those students before they graduate and go into the real world of post secondary education or the workforce. So a multi-tiered system of support at the elementary school level can be very beneficial for providing early supports and interventions for students, and really set them up for success moving into their later secondary education years. But that's not to say that MTSS cannot be implemented at the high school level. I think each level should have its own tiered approach to supporting their students based on their individual needs. And so I do see value in RTI and MTSS, my school, we just started an MTSS system that looks at their reading and math skills. And I'm working very closely with the reading specialist in our school to kind of structure this MTSS system to support our student needs. And we're finding that students that move tier one, tier two, tier three, we're looking at the data and what the data says about the interventions that we're putting in place. And that's giving us an idea, 'Okay., they weren't responding to tier three for the past three weeks, should we be looking at referring them for special

education? And we've been kind of looking at that as a way to use different reading screeners, different math assessments, diagnostics, assessments, to give us that data to support, either yes, an evaluation needed or maybe just more tier three intervention for the time being as needed until we have some more data.

Lauren 29:24

Well I have one more question here. And this one, you've already given us some great advice, especially between special education teacher communication and general education teacher communication. If there was any advice that you can give to general education teachers who have students with LD in their classroom, what would it be?

Gregg French 29:40

You know, I would say for teachers that find they have a large group of students primarily with LD, the number one thing to really think about is, reflect on your teaching practices. Because oftentimes, a lot of students with LD need things taught in a specific way that's really broken down, kind of through scaffolding or chunking and usually need a lot of visual supports. So if you really implement differentiation of instruction, you build strong relationships with those students, you refer to those IEPs, and you're an active collaborative member of the PPT team. But also the partnership between a general education teacher and a special education teacher, you're pretty much meeting all the needs and the requirements of effectively teaching students with a learning disability. And also understand that a learning disability should not be the focus, we want to focus more on the abilities and the strengths of the students. Oftentimes teachers will say, 'well, they have a reading disability, I'm never going to catch them up to reading at grade level.' Well, maybe that's not the goal, maybe the goal is to focus on what their strengths are, and using those to teach those areas of difficulty. And so it's kind of flipping the equation, in not so much focusing on the dyslexia, the LD, the ADD, ADHD, but focusing on what the student is capable of. Because that kind of goes back to the IEP meeting where I think teachers want to focus a lot on what the student can't do to support them, and they kind of suppress what the student can do. And that's something that can have a negative impact during those meetings, not only on the parents, but the student themselves, who's present. And as a member of those IEP meetings-and so every student who has LD has strengths. And I think that's something to speak to on a personal level. I was diagnosed with a reading comprehension, disability, as well as a math disability in the fourth grade. And I received special education services throughout elementary school, throughout middle school, and up until junior year, and in junior year in high school. And I remember what it was like, being a student who receives services and had a co-teacher in the classroom, and feeling the stigma, of having an IEP, having someone follow you and try to help you. And so my other word of advice would be it's okay to let the students be independent, because in the end, special education shouldn't be a life sentence. And that's something I always try to tell parents too. And I don't think it is talked about enough, but special education is there to support the student as much as is needed and appropriately. But if a student does find strategies that are effective and compensating for those areas of difficulty, they're doing well academically, socially, students can be exited from special education. And I think that's something that is important that students with a learning disability, just like a student with a disability, can be exited from special education. A student with a learning disability will have it their whole life, but can find strategies to really address the difficulties that they're having academically in school, and we shouldn't

look at them any differently than any other student. And so I think really understanding where the student is and where they're coming from and building that relationship, is crucial.

Lauren 33:47

Absolutely. So thank you so much, Gregg, for sharing your expertise and all of your experiences.

Gregg French 33:53

Thank you.

Lauren 34:00

Thank you for listening to the LDA podcast. To learn more about LDA and to get valuable resources and support, visit lda-america.org