Places for Struggling Teens™

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"It is more important to get it right, than to get it first."

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Essays:

Education Needs Reform/ 2

Impact of a Troubled Teen/ 3

Visit Reports:

Discovery School of Virginia/ 5

New Perspectives:

Tarzana Treatment Center/ 7

Oliver-Pyatt Center/ 8

Little Hill-Alina Lodge/ 8

Padgett Consulting Services/ 9

Extended Insights:

Lindamood Techniques/ 10

Preparing Young Adults/ 12

Changing Negative Thoughts/ 13

Seen N' Heard: 13

High School Graduation As It Could Be

By Lon Woodbury



[The following are some insights into a recent graduation ceremony I attended on December 23, 2010, held at Boulder Creek Academy, which is located in Bonners Ferry, ID and situated at the base of the spectacular Cabinet Mountains.]

The other morning I had the honor and privilege of attending a graduation ceremony at Boulder Creek Academy, an Emotional Growth/Therapeutic Boarding School of about 80 students here in North Idaho. Even though none of these four graduates were my clients, these ceremonies are one of the most pleasant parts of my work as an educational consultant because positive feelings run high.

These graduation ceremonies are both a celebration of the accomplishments of the graduates during their time at the school, and are also treated as the first day of the rest of their lives. Parents, staff and all the other students were there to cheer the graduates on and celebrate with them. It becomes a real community event in the best sense of the word. Everybody associated with the school comes together to honor the graduates and give them a well-deserved focus of their attention. In an almost measurable sense, all the graduates know they are honored, respected and cared for. There couldn't be a better send off for a young person facing the challenges of adulthood.

At events like this, it always comes to mind to compare these graduations with graduations of large schools, especially public schools which are based on the concept of mass education. Most public schools have graduation classes of a hundred, five hundred, or even more than a thousand graduates. There is no way each graduate can be shown the individualized honor, respect and caring for, I just saw that morning.

In a large school, instead of each graduate having a few minutes to bask in the attention of the community, the only individual attention each one gets is the few seconds when they walk across the stage to receive their diploma (hurry up and don't take too long), or the desperate attempt by a few to stand out from the crowd by wearing something silly. Otherwise most graduates of a mass education institution are just passive spectators, with only a small handful asked to speak for the whole class, usually the valedictorian(s) and perhaps the salutatorian(s). Instead of a real celebration of their accomplishments, for most graduates it becomes something to be endured.

In contrast, what I saw this morning was a typical introduction by the head of the school, followed by a staff member who told amusing and personal stories of his experiences with each of the graduates during their time at the school. Then, each graduate comes up front to receive his diploma and a rose, a symbol of completeness, and to address the group. For teenagers, they were remarkably articulate with a decently comfortable presence, remarkable largely because just a year or so earlier ever accomplishing anything like a graduation was problematic.

Once they had received their diplomas and shared with the group their feelings of appreciation for what had been done for them and their appreciation by name of special relationships they had developed at the school, the program was completed by a PowerPoint presentation of pictures from their whole life that had been shared by their parents.

Seeing what can be done for these graduates should be an inspiration for our society to figure out how we can do the same for all our graduates. A big order, but this morning convinced me the effort would be well worth it.

Lindamood Techniques
in Boulder Creek Reading Lab

By Claude Bisson, M Ed and Martha Jones

The Boulder Creek Academy reading Lab is run by Martha Jones. Her interest in the reading process was prompted early in life as she watched one of her highly intelligent brothers struggle to learn to read and spell. She witnessed the indelible scars that struggle left; as far back as she can remember, she yearned to understand the underlying reason for reading difficulties. Her search for answers began with earning a Master's in Special Education, and then she broadened her knowledge by earning clear credentials as a Reading Specialist, Resource Specialist, Learning and Severely Handicapped and General Subject's teacher. Her search for an explanation of reading difficulties culminated with her training at the Lindamood-Bell Learning Processes Center in San Luis Obispo, California. She is deeply grateful for the influence and training provided by Pat and Phyllis Lindamood, which provided her with the knowledge and skills necessary to implement the LiPS (Lindamood Phonemic Segmentation) process for improving reading and spelling accuracy and to Nancy Bell for her research and work in writing the Visualizing/Verbalizing program for improving comprehension skills. Martha brings over thirty years of experience to Boulder Creek Academy.

When you walk into her lab, you are greeted with soft classical music at a tempo of 50 to 60 beats per minute, which is a research-based recording, designed to enhance increased focus, intellectual endurance, and concentration. Referred students enjoy a hot cup of herbal tea, and then proceed through a battery of tests to explore the students' phonemic awareness, word attack, reading, spelling, spelling of sounds in pseudo words, comprehension, fluency, and vocabulary skills. Strengths and weaknesses are identified and students who qualify for remedial support are scheduled to work with Martha twice a week.

In her search for answers, Martha learned that the most critical underlying problem for reading and spelling disorders is *incompletely developed auditory conceptual function* or, more simply put, lack of *phonemic awareness*.

A *phoneme* is the smallest unit of sound in a word and *awareness* of phonemes is the ability to identify the *number, identity,* and *sequence* of sounds in words. This is a skill you are either born with or you are not; it is just a human difference, much like color blindness. While only 4% of the population are color blind, 30% of the population lacks the ability to distinguish sounds within words from a moderate to a severe degree. This problem appears randomly in the population and is not dependent on race, socio-economic status, gender, or intelligence.

Students who cannot perceive the individual sounds in words cannot benefit from phonics instruction. They cannot judge whether *what they say* matches *what they see*, which is the reason they omit sounds saying "*steam*" for "*stream*", or reverse sounds saying "*gril*" for "*girl*", or substitute sounds saying "*litter*" for "*letter*", or add sounds saying "*equiptment*" for "*equipment*".

When the LAC Test indicates inadequate sensory input about the number, identity, and sequence of sounds within

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words, Martha leads the student through the LiPS process, teaching the student to perceive sounds through input from a different modality, the oral-tactile modality. The student is taught that each letter of the alphabet not only has its own specific sound, but it also has its own specific mouth movement. The mouth movements are labeled to reflect the way the mouth moves when the sound is produced; for example, the sounds /p/ and /b/ are labeled *Lip Poppers* because the lips come together, and then pop open. Once this sensory input registers, the student becomes *aware* of the mouth movement and can then *perceive* those particular sounds in words. Once the mouth movement is perceived, is known, then *conceptualization* is possible; the concept that each letter has its own specific mouth movement allows letters to be perceived, labeled, discussed, stored, retrieved, and practiced. For example, when given a pseudo word like /*spisp*/ the student can demonstrate his/her ability to keep track of the sounds by laying out five blocks using three colors to indicate that five distinct mouth movements were *felt* but only three sounds were perceived (i.e. the student would lay out a pattern of colored blocks like the following to represent /spisp/: red, green, blue, red, green).

Martha refers to LiPS as a *pre- phonics* program; it levels the playing field for students who, like her brother, do not receive enough feedback from the aural part of the brain to hear the individual sounds in words. Training the oral-tactile modality creates a new learning pathway in the brain, which allows the student to perceive sounds in words and finally reap the benefits of phonics training. This can dramatically accelerate reading and spelling accuracy.

When test results indicate both reading and comprehension as a problem, Martha will complete the LiPS process first, to ensure that inaccurate decoding is not the basis for poor comprehension, and then proceed with Nancy Bell's Visualizing/Verbalizing Program if comprehension training is indicated.

The lab also addresses poor spelling skills through the Stetson Spelling Program. The Stetson Spelling Test is a screening test that will identify the level for initial instruction based on spelling ability. It is a non-graded spelling program that contains the 3,000 words most frequently used in writing. These words represent 97% of the total words used in writing, so it makes sense to focus on the words most commonly written by students.

Marc Clarke is the Remedial-Tutorial lab assistant who provides tutorial support for students as needed. He has been trained in the Read Naturally Program, a program for improving oral reading fluency, as well as the Stetson Spelling Program.

About the Author: *Claude Bisson, MEd is the Director of Business Development at Boulder Creek Academy. Boulder Creek Academy is a coeducational therapeutic boarding school for young people with distinct learning, behavioral, and emotional challenges from 13 to 18 years of age, who may struggle in a traditional academic setting or face challenges from residential or acute settings. For more information, contact Claude at 877-348-0848 or Claude.bisson@uhsinc.com. www.bouldercreekacademy.net*

A family in harmony will prosper in everything. ~ Chinese Proverb



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