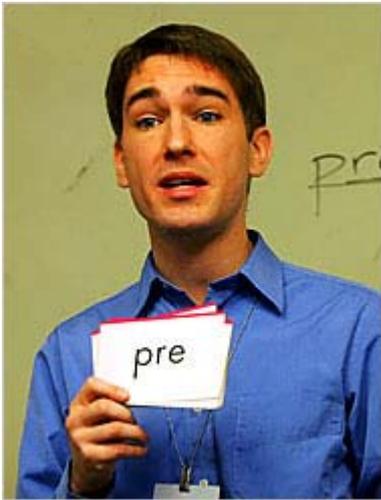


## Word by Word, the World Becomes a Little Less Mystifying for Illiterate Adults

Joseph Berger

Lisette J. and Carlos R. finished high school decades ago but are often stumped reading menus, tabloid newspapers and street signs, and humiliated when nephews and nieces ask for homework help.

"They ask you 'What's this word?' and you have to make some kind of excuse like 'I got to go to the bathroom,' " Carlos said.



Ruby Washington/The New York Times

Syllable cards are one of the tools that Jaman Welch, a teacher at Fisher Landau Center for the Treatment of Learning Disabilities in the Bronx, uses to help students.

That frustrating deficiency in their lives explains why they and four other illiterate adults were recently in a classroom at the Albert Einstein College of Medicine in the Bronx, struggling to read grade-school words like "muzzle," "station" and "formula." Their teacher, Jaman Welch, reminded them of rules like c making an s-like sound before e, i, and y. He had them break apart the words "construction" and "engineering" into syllables so they could make a stab at deciphering them. When the teacher wrote the word "margin" on the board, Carlos thought it was a substitute for butter.

"What I was supposed to learn in kindergarten, I'm learning here," was the way Carlos genially put it.

Carlos, 51, and Lisette, 41, are casualties of New York's public school system, though there are plenty of Carloses and Lisettes in every corner of the country.

The federally sponsored National Assessment of Adult Illiteracy, in its last survey in 2003, estimated that 14 percent of adults are functionally illiterate: unable to read job applications, bus schedules, labels on the drugs they take. Some are immigrants who will master English eventually. But many, like Carlos and Lisette, have learning disabilities, and though they may have received diplomas, seldom had teachers along the way who could knowledgeably help them overcome their handicaps.

Experts estimate that up to 80 percent of illiterate adults have a learning malfunction, unable to decode, assimilate or remember information, and that often the problem was either undiagnosed or improperly treated.

For adults, illiteracy is painful, often depressing. Imagine yourself as an American in Athens having to find an out-of-the-way street in an emergency — except that Greeks understand you're just a hapless tourist. Some illiterate adults say they are relieved knowing they have a disability; otherwise people might think they are stupid.

Some critics assail special education classes, in which those with learning handicaps like dyslexia constitute the largest proportion, arguing that some students may be classified as disabled not because of a specific handicap but because they are simply too much trouble to teach. But an even more harmful shortcoming is that students in the classes find it difficult to get adequate treatment because teachers are not fully trained, cannot keep order or are wedded to techniques that may not work.

Learning disabilities can be as enigmatical as back pain. Dr. Mary S. Kelly, director of Einstein's Fisher Landau Center for the Treatment of Learning Disabilities, where Carlos and Lissette — whose last names she asked to be withheld — are studying, said those in her adult program were diagnosed correctly but rarely well taught.

Carlos, for example, "cannot discover the underlying commonalities" of words, she explained. As Carlos put it: "I get nervous. Sometimes I flip the letters b and d."

Dr. Kelly said Carlos needs the kind of repetition of letter combinations and practice in breaking words apart that Mr. Welch gives him, as well as lots of rules.

For learning disabled adults, Dr. Kelly favors the phonics approach to teaching reading, which focuses on the mechanics of sounding out letter combinations. Too many learning-disabled students, she said, are exposed to teachers who play down these mechanics and believe students can pick up the techniques merely by delving into literature.

Linda Wernikoff, who runs the city's special education program, with 180,000 students, acknowledged that the program had been troubled until recent years by misclassification of children and ineffective approaches. But she said that four years ago, under Chancellor Joel I. Klein, new efforts were begun to step in as early as kindergarten with children struggling to read.

More than half of all special-education students now spend most of their day in mainstream classes, and are pulled out or assigned to work with special-education teachers who go to the classroom. Phonics programs are more often used.

"We believe you shouldn't have to classify a child to give them the instructional help they need," she said.

Some of the flaws Ms. Wernikoff pointed out were criticized years ago, but the city school system is a ship that takes ages to turn around.

PEOPLE sometimes stereotype illiterate adults as children of the boondocks who left school to help on farms. But Carlos and Lissette are children of the Bronx, and finished high school with what was then known as a certificate of attendance and is now called an Individualized Education Program diploma. They were not counted as dropouts; nationally about half of learning-disabled students drop out.

But the I.E.P. diploma is not accepted by most colleges, the military or employers seeking graduates.

Graduates of special education often join the army of illiterate adults who clean houses, stock clothes or work with their hands. Lissette, a ponytailed single woman with a wide-eyed smile, worked at a Loehmann's clothing store, though she now lives off disability payments. She believes that infant meningitis impaired her, and as a young girl she was placed in occupational training classes. "I didn't get the proper help," she said. "They had me in the wrong classes with kids who were retarded."

Carlos, a father of three grown children who has thinning hair and a goatee, works as a maintenance man at a nursing home. He started school before the federal disabilities law was passed in 1973, but eventually wound up in special education classes at DeWitt Clinton High

School. "At that time," he said, " they put all the rowdy kids and the kids who are retarded all in one class just to get them out of the way."

Until he began the Fisher Landau program five years ago, he would order foods in a restaurant "if the picture looks good." He was able to memorize enough answers to pass the written test for a driver's license, but getting around the city with its mystifying signs remains a challenge. "You know you're in Manhattan because you have to cross a bridge," Carlos said.

Adult students in Einstein's 15-year-old program begin with individual instruction before taking classes for three hours a week. Dr. Kelly said most students advance one grade in reading each year. It may not seem like much to a college graduate, but moving from a second- to a fourth-grade reading level opens up whole new worlds, and these are students who say they want to be able to read before they die.

Lisette wants to read the Bible and poems. She says she can now read well enough to figure out her horoscope, and to vote. Carlos can read some tabloid articles and handle fast-food menus.

"Now I don't have to look at the pictures," he said.

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