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What an incredibly difficult task! To describe my job and give my views on education without sounding pompous, cynical, sanctimonious, idealistic, or disillusioned. Not just difficult - impossible! However, I will do my best to express some of my feelings and ideas as clearly as I can.

I teach children who have failed to acquire the first tools of the academic trade: basic literacy and/or numeracy, by the age of eleven, the age they transfer to my secondary school. My pupils are described as 'children with learning difficulties' - a blanket term covering those whose progress and achievement have fallen behind those of their peer group (other children of the same age), to a significant degree. Their 'failure' may be due to retarded intellectual development, limited ability, emotional disturbance, home background, illness, absenteeism, physical disability, sensory handicap, change(s) of school, clash with a teacher during some essential learning process. I have not included dyslexia, the condition affecting children of above average intelligence who suffer a word-blindness which prevents them from learning to read and write. I am sure that this condition does exist but although I have helped otherwise academically able children to learn the techniques by which they may overcome spelling or handwriting difficulties, I have not, as yet, taught a dyslexic pupil.

My first task is to discover the reason, or reasons, why a child is experiencing problems, then to analyse the precise nature of these difficulties, identify the educational gaps and finally to design an individual learning programme. However, that is only the beginning of my work. At eleven years of age children have often become accustomed to failure, they have lost confidence in their own ability to learn and as a result they may have become withdrawn, disruptive, restless, over-helpful, excessively talkative, painfully timid or aggressive. The most important part of my work is establishing relationships and building a learning environment in which children want to, and can, succeed but can also accept failure, on occasion, without fear or giving up.

In my job I have to be a detective, social worker, counsellor, mother-substitute, psychologist, prison-warder, actor, as well as teacher. I find my work stimulating and satisfying most of the time, but it can also be frustrating and infuriating. I get too involved in that I forget that my small, rather weedy 'trees' will never form a very significant part of the academic 'wood'. I tend to overestimate their achievements, so important to them - and to me - I feel enraged when colleagues dismiss my children as 'thick' because of their lack of ability to assimilate knowledge at the same rate as their peers, instead of looking at ways in which they can make their own teaching more effective to help pupils overcome their learning problems. I resent the fact that examination results are too often correlated with personal worth as far as teachers, parents and society at large are concerned. On a personal level I get irate when some people assume that those who teach children with learning difficulties are somehow lower in the academic echelons than those taking the 'O' level groups. I hold a good degree as well as a teaching qualification, I have taught examination groups (and achieved extremely satisfactory results), I enjoyed my teaching then as now, but it was no more intellectually rigorous, in fact in many ways it was less so, than my present work.

I feel I'm getting pompous, so I will stop. I hope I have been able to provide some insight into the work carried out by the teachers in the remedial and compensatory departments of secondary schools in supporting children who need extra help. Methods, materials and systems vary from school to school but there is always one underlying concept, to identify the needs and try to fill them.