Battling the 'invisible disability'

Schools work to detect and help students with reading, writing troubles

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Staff Writer

Josh could not understand why he just didn't get it.

By the time he reached the end of Grade 2 he was still struggling to read.

Most of his peers had been reading for more than a year and Josh began to realize he had trouble even sounding out words, words his classmates and friends had mastered easily.

And because he couldn't read, no matter how hard he tried he couldn't write, either.

That's when he began to get frustrated. He stopped trying. He acted out in school and at home and became overly-sensitive, so much so that his parents and friends dreaded bringing the subject up. Homework became a power struggle that often ended with tears or tantrums.

Finally, Josh's teacher suggested he undergo an assessment. The results indicated he had a learning disability.

"Now we can work on helping him through it, helping him learn to deal with it," said his mom, Lisa, almost with relief. "We know what the problem is now. He doesn't have to think he's just dumb."

While the names in this story are fictional, the experience is not. In fact, it's one an increasing number of children and their parents are facing as early detection and in-school support improves in both York Region school systems.

"Many children with learning disabilities are intelligent. They can express ideas and they understand content," explained Lee Wilson, superintendent of student services for the York Catholic District School Board. "But when you ask them to write down their thoughts, they can't do it."

Or, they can read and write, but can't seem to master the concept of addition or subtraction. A small number of children are non-verbal.

They sometimes have a behavioral component as well— they don't pick up on visual or social cues and spend valuable study time just trying to fit in.

"We call it the invisible disability — it doesn't have a wheelchair attached," said Catholic student services coordinator Tina D'Acunto.

Both boards, while struggling to meet the needs of their special education students on a shrinking budget, offer support for students with learning disabilities. At the elementary level, one of those programs is the Intensive Support Assessment Centre.

"It runs up to two years with a maximum of 12 children to one teacher," said Wilson. "The student stays in that classroom 50 per cent or more of the day, but subjects like gym and religion are with the child's regular class.

Toward the end of the two years, the student is integrated back into his classroom."

Those two years are likely the most significant in the child's entire education. Students are taught coping skills — strategies to manage their disability in what will become a life-long struggle to learn what comes easily to others.

These disabilities don't just go away, Wilson pointed out. Children carry that burden for life and a critical component of their elementary education is learning about their disability.

"It's crucial for their self esteem. We teach them how to advocate for themselves, how to communicate with their teachers and eventually their employers, about what their needs are," Wilson said.

"We help them learn how to meet their own needs — for example if they struggle with writing, we find ways they can do the work that's expected.

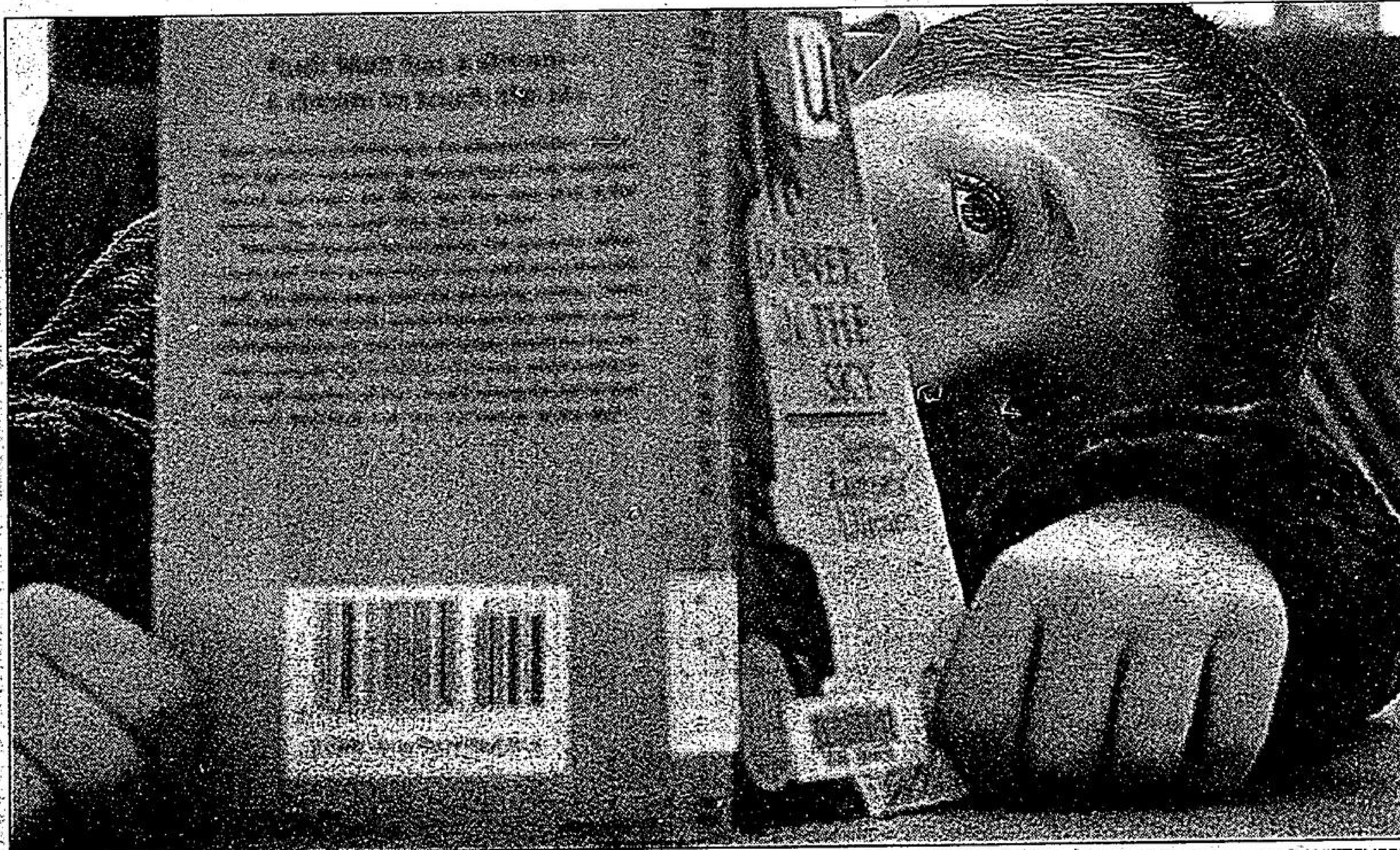
It might be teaching them how to take notes in point-form, or underlining important points in a notebook. It could be teaching keyboarding skills or how to operate a tape recorder. We look at the child, their needs and their learning style and design a strategy based on their strengths."

That process is continued through high school with a credit course called Learning Strategies, designed specifically for learning-disabled students.

"We support career planning, what is best suited for the student's learning style," D'Acunto said. "We give them a greater understanding of their rights and the fact they are expected to participate as adults. The biggest thrust is self-advocacy — developing it early, so they can go on to university or college or a job. Not only will they know what they need, they'll be able to articulate it."

For Josh, those skills will mean the difference between success and failure — not only in school but for the rest of his life.

"By the time he reaches high school, he'll know what works for him and what doesn't," said mom Lisa. "It still won't be easy, but those skills are going to save him grief."



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Young students do their best to read, but it requires all their concentration (top). And sometimes (above) even that's not enough. Reading and writing difficulties can lead to misbehaviour.

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