

With righteous anger, a learning disabilities specialist with long experience in investigative reporting warns that the academically handicapped child is the one most hurt by the present political, sociological, and legal conflicts in and about special education. She describes several of the effects and suggests ways to resolve the situation.

The Learning Handicapped Child:

with 'friends' like these, . . .

By Sarah M. Sanderson



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Today's academically handicapped child has become the helpless pawn of politicians, special interest groups, educators, sociologists, physicians, psychologists, psychiatrists, and research scientists. Each has reasons and solutions for the other disciplines and groups to implement.

In turn, the educational system has become the scapegoat of each of these groups. Although they cannot agree among themselves as to the cause or the remediation of handicapped children's problems, or even if remediation is possible, the demand on the school is: Do something.

Nationwide lip service is given to uniqueness of the individual, yet no one seems willing to accept the fact that universal education produces differences, not sameness, or that equal exposure to learning experiences and facilities does not produce equal learning and education.

In recent years many youngsters with learning and/or behavior problems have been identified as perceptually impaired, neurologically impaired, emotionally disturbed, learning disabled, mentally retarded (in varying and hotly disputed degrees), or culturally deprived. Identifications, diagnoses, diagnostic labels, with regard to the "educationally disabled" are as varied and variable as the theoretical bents of the communities, school systems, sociologists, psychologists, physicians, special interest groups, and politicians expressing interest in such children.

Our culture puts a high value on perfection. We tend to deny the existence of a disability or handicap. Note the tendency by many persons to deny a hearing loss or a need for glasses. Yet, conversely, as a nation we tend to accept a visible deviation from the **physical** norm. Hence for many years school systems and society in general increasingly have provided programs for children who are halt, lame, blind, and/or deaf. Society, parents, and families have accepted these children with feelings varying from self pity to cheerful dedication. Parents and friends have banded together to share common experiences and problem solutions, and to obtain public and educational help, all of which make life more comfortable, happier, meaningful, "normal" for both the handicapped and his family. Physicians, scientists, technologists have combined their skills to aid them.

Tragically, we cannot seem to accept with the same grace and sympathy any deviation from the **mental** norm. We loudly proclaim that each individual is different and that we all can't be mathematicians, television stars, or astronauts. We just as loudly insist that every one is mentally alike. We accept that Johnny inherits father's nose and grandfather's walk, but never could he inherit anything from Uncle Joe who

never did learn to read a book but was the best darn mechanic in town. We too often retreat to guilt, and in turn project it onto others in the face of the unknown, the non-visual mind, brain, mentality.

The various disciplines, special interest groups, and politicians cannot agree that there is, or is not, a normal mental potential. A normal blood pressure, blood sugar, size, or weight—these are accepted. We have high or low blood pressure. We are tall or short, large or small for our age. We are over- or under-weight. We are brilliant, gifted, and have a high I.Q. But we cannot seem to accept that there can be a normal I.Q. or a low I.Q.

Same Basic Needs

A mentally retarded child is considered educationally handicapped. But of course retard means to slow down, not stop. Certainly, except in the case of the seriously handicapped, our mentally retarded children show few physiological differences to the uninitiated. Their retardation spans as wide a degree of personality variation as the normal child's. All have the same basic needs for food, clothing, love, recognition by significant others, to be needed, and to have companionship. They laugh, cry, play, work, dance, and sing. They become frustrated, and angry, and their feelings can be hurt. They have the same life experiences, values, and cultures, and the same social, vocational, and life expectancies.

If they are so much alike, then how are they different? They aren't. It is those around them, too often, who refuse to recognize or accept the disabilities, who refuse to help learning disabled children establish realistic goals and to help them towards those goals.

Nevertheless, there has been progress. In recent years meaningful educational programs geared not only to the learning pace of the academically slower moving student, but also to his social, emotional, and vocational needs, have been developed in many school districts. Increasingly, educators and school boards are realizing that mental potential knows no geographic, municipal, social, economic, ethnic, or cultural boundaries.

Free, public school education is an integral part of the American culture. Our public school systems have long been viewed as the keystone of our form of government, social knowledge, and social change. Now, however, school systems across the nation are beleaguered by class action court suits demanding special programs and facilities for equal educational opportunities for handicapped children.

In response to these suits and to the repeated reminders that all children should have the right to an equal education, many school systems in recent years established special learning units or classes. Colleges developed programs to train new teachers, while thousands of experienced teachers returned to the college classroom to learn how to meet the specialized needs of these children. Legislators wrote bills and appropriated special funds to help underwrite the astronomical cost. Help had arrived.

Help was met, however, by disagreements and interdisciplinary theoretical arguments—still going on—concerning etiology, diagnosis, terminology, remediation,

and test validity. Ironically, many who campaigned the longest and loudest for special programs, special teachers, special classes, special legislation, and special funds now cry out against labeling, stigmatizing, segregating, and discriminating. The child, with all his special needs and helps, again is the helpless pawn.

There is increasing indication (e.g., through articles, letters to newspapers, statements by parents, legislators, professionals) that all these demands, claims, counter-claims, and criticisms are confusing and hindering efforts to help the educationally handicapped children in this country. The media are saturated with appeals to help the handicapped, hire the handicapped, contribute to the handicapped. Predictions of the number of handicapped children born appear frequently. Every segment of the population, it seems, condemns the school system for graduating high school students who "can't read past the third grade." Yet the same school system too often also is condemned for stigmatizing the handicapped child by identifying him or establishing special needs programs for him.

Tragically, a child with a learning disability problem is as hard for some parents, some groups to accept as is the concept of limited intellectual potential. For some, identification of the learning problem of some intellectually intact children was "proof" of the educators' fallibility. For certain special interest groups, it "proved" that their children were victims of discrimination, segregation, stigmatizing, and labeling.

Semantic 'Cop-Outs'

Pressures for immediate action of some not-always-identified kind have had interesting, though not necessarily effective, results. For example, some educational systems, some psychological evaluators, swayed by the pressures, or perhaps by their own theoretical persuasions, have ignored the criteria of average or high intellectual potential, to find "depressed intellectual potential." Youngsters with limited intellectual potential suddenly became "learning disabled." It was a short step to lumping them all together as "educationally handicapped." (As one result, in recent years the term "educationally handicapped" has become as encompassing an umbrella as "culturally deprived." Both are semantic "cop-outs" devised by those who refuse to accept differences, identify them, and get on with the job of meeting specific needs.)

The current pressure to integrate the educationally handicapped student in a regular class and then send him to an instructional materials center for individual teaching for periods ranging from 50 to 90 percent of his school day accents the negative rather than the positive. It placates the parent or special interest group rather than aiding the student, the author has been forced to conclude. This pressure, coming largely from certain special interest groups which insist that such integrated or non-graded placement with chronological-age peers will be more beneficial for both his academic and social welfare, unfortunately tends to be based on inference or what is viewed as negative results in special class settings rather than on positive results in integrated classrooms. Rather than providing equal

educational opportunity, particularly at the pre-vocational training level, such integration insures a collision course with his chronological-age, but cognitively different peers. They both become increasingly aware of the ever widening academic gap, and many of the students with higher mental potential react negatively to what they consider the unfairness of receiving the same promotions, advancements, and diplomas for different academic achievement and cognitive skills. When this happens, school authorities are usually held responsible, and not so much because they attempted to avoid stigma by requiring similar learning experiences for chronological-age peers as, apparently, for not persuading all the students that all their educational rewards had equal meaning.

On the one hand, the child's disability is denied and on the other, blame for the existence of that disability is projected upon the educational system. Thus many of the demands of the special interest groups are contradictory in view of the needs of the handicapped child to be met.

Legal Considerations

Courts and legislatures also provide arenas for advocacies. Special interest group plaintiffs argue that special programs do not meet the learning needs of children who are "first handicapped by their inherited or acquired mental, physical, behavioral or emotional handicap and secondly by arbitrary and capricious processes by which the defendants (schools) identify, label and place them . . ." (Michigan).¹ Minority group children are "inappropriately classified as educable mentally retarded" . . . a "stigma" which carries "a life sentence of illiteracy . . ." They should be placed in a "regular classroom with children of comparable age and provided with intensive and supplemental individual training . . ." (California).² There is also failure ". . . to advise retarded children of a right to a fair and impartial hearing . . . with respect to the decision classifying them as 'mentally retarded' . . ." (Louisiana).³

And in New York, where for several years the state had provided \$2,000 annually toward the education of each mentally retarded child, the legislature in 1972 acquiesced to the cries of special interest groups which argued that the term "mental retardation" stigmatizes a child. By legislative fiat, the term "mental retardation" disappeared and was replaced by "educationally handicapped," which raised a whole new question about state financial aid toward education for these newly labelled youngsters.

Interpretations of legislation affect federal aid, too. For example, large numbers of sociologists, psychologists, and special interest groups loudly insist that a multitude of educational handicaps are rooted in cultural deprivation. Yet special needs children in urban areas, where an inordinately high percentage of them are concentrated, are often barred from federally funded programs supposedly designed to help them. Millions of dollars are poured into city school systems. But if a school system receives financial aid toward the cost of special programs (as in New Jersey under the Beadleston Act), federal guidelines decree that those same children are ineligible for participation in the federally financed programs. Hence a handicapped child is often banned from

programs in which his own, more educationally able brothers and sisters can participate. An outstanding example is the federal Title I program* supposedly designed to aid the culturally deprived child, particularly in urban areas.**

A Positive Aspect

A positive aspect of all this ferment has been diagnostic refinement, recognition, and differentiation of some of the subtle, complex, conceptual, or perceptual disabilities which result in academic achievement far below a child's intellectual potential. The intellectually, neurologically, psychologically, audiotically, or visually handicapped child may be given a clean bill of health. Yet this child too often cannot see words for the letters in them or sentences for the words in them.*** On standard intellectual examinations such as the WISC,⁴ he shows a significant discrepancy between the verbal and performance scores: the

* The Aid to Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (P.L. 89-10), Title I. Basically (although the guidelines alone require several volumes and the Act has been amended several times), Title I funds are to be used to provide classroom teacher aides and teachers of remedial reading, music, art, physical education, and audiovisual education, and their hardware and software equipment, for designated elementary schools. (A school's eligibility can and does shift annually since it is based on a percentage of that school's population which falls in a federally designated income level category.) Also provided for are social, psychological, and community workers and personnel. All these persons, services, and equipment items must be provided in addition to any or all regular or special service programs funded by either and/or both the state and local school district of a given school, however.

**One example: Joseph is one of four siblings of an eligible Title I family attending a Title I school in a Title I classroom with 20 children, a Master Teacher, and two teacher aides. He is taught art and music twice weekly and receives remedial or supplemental reading help daily. His school happens to be in a state where extra state funds are provided to help defray the costs of specified special education programs. Joseph is tested and found to be "P.I.," or "perceptually impaired," so that he needs the specialized help of the state-supported specialized P.I. teacher. Joseph is moved to a class for perceptually impaired children. The class has 12 children (the usual number for a P.I. class). Each has some type of perceptual disability, so each child's daily program — including Joseph's — is designed specifically to meet his needs. But what of all the other services available to Joseph in his previous class? His P.I. class has no teacher aide. Music and art are now taught to him once weekly. None of the children has remedial reading except what the special P.I. teacher provides. Joseph is no longer eligible for guidance counseling or help by the community workers or social workers unless these assistances are provided by his particular school district as a regular service. Since Joseph's is one of the many districts — urban, in particular — which do not provide such additional help as a regular service because of the expense, Joseph is no longer eligible for that help despite his need for it.

*** More specifically, superficial observation indicates that his abilities seem intact. Classically he is often fluent, but his proficiency breaks down in the face of the printed symbol. Despite an extensive vocabulary, he may have difficulty with modality concepts of words which indicate auditory, visual, tactual, temporal, quantitative, or spatial relationships. He often shows perseverative thinking, disorganized or dissociative thinking, attention, concentration, and coordination problems.

capacity for learning and the functional level. On such tests as the Bender⁵ and the Benton,⁶ he often shows perseveration, reversals, difficulty with angulation, closures, shapes and spatial relationships, and peripheral figures.

Educators, teachers, parents have struggled to determine how to help this obviously intelligent child who can't read, or write, or spell, or do arithmetic; who has problems with encoding or decoding; who has perfect hearing acuity, but can't differentiate between a long A and a short A; who has 20/20 vision, knows every letter of the alphabet, can verbally spell his name backwards and forwards but can't recognize it when written in isolation.

Psychological and medical research have brought recognition of physiological and emotional factors which can block full usage of cognitive potential. The intellectual potential of these neurologically impaired or emotionally disturbed youngsters may range from either end of the continuum to any place in between. Unfortunately there is little acceptance of this deviation by parents and society until the child through utter frustration acts out or withdraws.

From Strauss⁷ down through Kirk,⁸ Cruickshank,⁹ Kephart,¹⁰ Johnson,¹¹ Myklebust,¹² and Vallett¹³ (to name a few), facets of the extraordinarily complex sequence of muscle and nerve events needed for the information-processing and application for a specific learning task are being identified. Remediation for each is as unique as the problem.

Learning Process Alteration

Gradually a definition has evolved. The basic tenet is that the child's learning process has been altered, possibly by neurological dysfunction or developmental lag, which has resulted in a disability, not an incapacity in learning. He has adequate motor ability, average to high intelligence, adequate hearing, adequate vision and adequate emotional adjustment. The homogeneity of the group is a deficiency in learning of perceptual, conceptual, or coordinative nature.

Psychologists, sociologists, neurologists, oculists, pediatricians, teachers, language therapists, early childhood developmental specialists, parent groups, and legislators have become involved. Each, it seems, has developed a causative theory for the schools to attempt to resolve.

Hundreds of surveys, tests, programs, theories have evolved. More than 70 educational supply firms have rushed into publication and production materials for correcting learning disabilities, each touted as the panacea. Experience, however, has shown that none works for all the handicapped.

In some states, as in New Jersey, a new crash program was born. Legislators decided that a child with a learning disability was and is perceptually impaired and decreed that each such child be evaluated by a Learning Disability Teacher-Consultant. (That title was changed from specialist to teacher-consultant in less than two years.) The fact that only a few persons had completed training for such highly specialized work was ignored. Start now!

Foresighted state teachers colleges continued to refine, modify, and expand the educational offerings for their teacher students; meanwhile, in schools and centers, speech

therapists, psychologists, guidance counselors, and reading teachers were thrown into the breach. Thousands of dollars for "learning disability materials" were spent. Private learning centers mushroomed. Parents either rejected the new classification and help or saw it as the solution to the problems of all children.

New Jersey is noted for the scope and depth of programs it provides for children who have special educational needs. Until recently its certification requirements for special education teachers were among the most stringent in the nation. Only teachers who had demonstrated success in the regular classroom were admitted to training programs in the specialties. In recent years, the previous teaching success criteria have been relaxed. New Jersey's state colleges now graduate students who are certified to teach both elementary grades and the "handicapped" without regard to any kind of specific "handicap" except for profound deafness.

However, at the same time, their graduate schools have moved to train teachers and specialists to work with the intellectually intact child who has a learning disability. In the past four years they have expanded their programs to meet the influx of special education teachers who have voluntarily returned to the college classroom. These are the teachers who work with the mentally retarded, the neurologically impaired, or the emotionally disturbed. Fortunately, there are school systems in which the special education division has adopted one of the basic tenets of the learning disability teaching prescription: identify the child's strengths and weaknesses. Then teach to his strengths. If his intellectual capability cannot be changed, he can at least be taught to use every bit of it to the fullest extent possible.

While many specialists accept and apply these basic tenets, programs intended to help the educationally handicapped child are too often inadequate, fragmented, or even conflicting. What can be done to promote the accord and consistency necessary for effective programming?

Three Suggestions

First, all persons concerned must acknowledge that varying levels of educative potential do exist. They must also accept that identification of a child's learning handicap, while often initially painful—particularly for the parents—is essential if that child's special needs are to be met.

Second, the public, as well as those most directly involved in program implementation, must be persuaded and educated to accept the realities of learning disability. This can be achieved through broadly disseminated publicity, workshops, inservice training, civic group involvement, and individual counseling. Local, state, and federal agencies of education—as well as private foundations and organizations—should be encouraged to use their resources to support such efforts.

Third, legislative action must be coordinated with educative experience and competence if its application is to be both practical and effective. Researchers and other educators knowledgeable in remediation techniques should cooperate to develop long-range programs, to organize professional and civic groups in support of such programs,

and to seek legislative consideration of appropriate measures.

Such coordinated effort can be justified by more than the idealism motivating humans with vision: Over the years the internally educationally handicapped child who is helped to mature to his full potential can be a cheerful, participating member of society at considerably less cost—human or monetary—than if he is handicapped externally by self-interest forces. It's time we stopped working so stridently against each other and began to cooperate for the good of that child and our own society.

FOOTNOTES

1. "Benjamin Harrison, The Coalition for the Civil Rights of Handicapped Persons, et al. v. State of Michigan," U.S. District Court, Eastern Division of Michigan. *A Continuing Summary of Pending and Completed Litigation Regarding the Education of Handicapped Children* (Arlington, Virginia: The Council for Exceptional Children, October 1972), p. 16.
2. "Larry P., M.S., M.J., et al. v. Riles, et al.," Civil Action, Northern Division, California. *A Continuing Summary, op. cit.*, p. 32.
3. "Lebanks, et al. v. Spears, et al.," Civil Action, Eastern Division, Louisiana, New Orleans. *A Continuing Summary, op. cit.*, p. 33.
4. David Wechsler, "Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children (WISC)" (New York: Psychological Corporation, 1968).

5. Laretta Bender, "Bender Motor Gestalt Test" (New York: American Orthopsychiatric Association, 1938). Sixteenth printing, 1971.

6. Arthur L. Benton, "Benton Visual Retention Test" (New York: Psychological Corporation, 1963).

7. Alfred S. Strauss is known as the "father" of the learning disabilities concept and is noted for his work with brain damaged and neurologically impaired persons.

8. Samuel A. Kirk is noted for educational research involving mentally disturbed persons and for his development, with J. J. McCarthy, of the Illinois Test of Psycholinguistic Abilities (ITPA).

9. W. M. Cruickshank is noted for his research and work with emotional and psychological needs and attitudes of exceptional children.

10. Newell Kephardt is noted for his work with brain damaged children and slow learners and for the development of remediation programs for the learning disabled through motor activities.

11. Doris J. Johnson is noted for her research concerning dyslexic and learning disabled children and her development of remediation programs.

12. Helmer J. Myklebust is noted for his research in and development of identification and remediation of learning disabilities in children.

13. Robert E. Vallett is noted for his development of psychoeducational resource programs for the remediation of learning disabilities.

"We have entered the era of **pluralistic models of schooling** for a universal population target for which we will need pluralistic models of evaluation thoughtfully matched. With different models of schooling, we will need to evaluate how well each succeeds in reaching its specific goals for its target population, at what costs—educational, social, economic—and in terms of the values and outlooks that arise from each model."

—Mary Alice White and Jan Duker

Education: A Conceptual and Empirical Approach, p. 162
(New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1973)