

Learning Disabilities : A DANGEROUS MYTH

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To many ,Learning Disabilities is a popular and curent education fad. To others ,Learning Disabilities is a popular fraud. The fact is that whatever Learning Disabilities are they are spreading at an enormous rate and children are "getting" this new disability label in epidemic proportions.

Consider the statistics:

Currently in U.S. schools, an estimated total of 1.8 million children are categorized as learning disabled, approximately 42% of the 4.3 million children formally identified as educationally handicapped...Moreover the number of children categorized as learning disabled continues to grow rapidly. The number for 1985 is more than twice the approximately 800,000 children who were in this category in the 1976-77 school year. (Coles, The Learning Mystique, p. 9)

The first question to ask is *"What in fact is a learning disability?"* After a great deal of debate and compromise six professional organizations formed the National Joint Committee for Learning Disabilities and issued the following statement:

add quote pg 13 Coles
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In an era when according to even conservative educators 50% of the school age population is not being well served especially at the high school level, it is convenient to design a paradigm to blame the victim while taking the focus away from educational reform, parent action, and school accountability.

Learning disabilities as a concept comes directly out of the medical model which attempts to diagnose, prescribe and ultimately cure the disease. But what if the disease is not in the child but in the social system.?What if in fact the system has the disease -- now who do we blame.?

Some would lay the blame on teachers, others on parents. Few want to take a cold hard look at an education system that is symbolized in 1989 by Joe

Clark of New Jersey -- the principal with the baseball bat whose line is "educate the best and shoot the rest!"

There is no data to show that Joe Clarke's tough guy tactics work for anyone but Joe Clarke himself whether in New Jersey, Toronto or Saskatoon. But it is common educational practice these days to suggest that building more prisons , and setting up more special classes will solve social and educational problems . A simplistic way to deal with issues is to say that all children and adults having learning difficulties and that those already in prisons all have severe learning disabilities.

A recent article in the Toronto Star (Sept. 1989) by Janice Dineen quotes Linda Siegel , a University of Toronto education professor as saying, "Many of the people in our jails are learning disabled. A study at a drop-in centre for street kids in downtown Toronto found that most of them had learning disabilities that had not been taken care of."

This is pure and utter nonsense. This is an example of "The Emperor is Naked" Those of us who are educators need to stand up and loudly say that all this psychobabble and jargon about learning disabilities is a myth and a hoax. The Emperor is indeed naked i.e. he has on no clothes!!

We at Frontier College want to clearly state our position on the subject The truth is that the students in the downtown Toronto drop-in centres are poor, hungry, abused, lonely, isolated, addicted and school drop outs. They are mostly the products of broken homes and special education.

One real look at the basic level courses in the high schools is enough to convince anyone that it is amazing that more students don't drop out. The curriculum is watered down, irrelevant and often just plain boring.

We know from studies done by the Toronto Board of Education among many others that there is a direct correlation between reading scores and poverty. The poorer you are the worse your scores This is quite straightforward. Therefore either poor people are by definition inferior, a premise we loudly reject, or "something is rotten in Denmark,,"a premise we heartily endorse.

We at Frontier stand among the many noted educators who agree that "learning disabilities, is an "ill defined and poorly conceptualized term that is used to characterize a vast number of children who are unsuccessful in school. (Lipsky and Gartner, p. 122.)

The fact that *millions* of school children are classified as having 'minimal neurological dysfunction' calls the classification into question. (Armstrong 1987;Coles 1988;Ysseldyke and Algozzine, 1983,etc.)

L.D. AS A TRAP

We believe that the majority of parents want the best education for their sons and daughters. Rich people can buy quality education and do so at expensive private schools. They can hire private tutors and get the extra help that many school age children need. Families with money can afford the piano lessons, dance lessons and travel that add so much breadth of knowledge. Families with money can buy the books and the theatre tickets that bring culture to young children.

By selling the concept of L.D. to poor families we undercut their complaints against the education system itself and focus their frustration and anger at the child himself/herself. Expert solutions with magic sounding latin phrases are thrown at the parent who nods in embarrassment at not understanding a word being said.

Instead of banding together with other parents to demand quality education,more educational assistants, peer tutoring programs, after school cultural activities --the frustrated parent is running around trying to do exercises for auditory memory span and perceptual motor function.

The Association of Children with Learning Disabilities is today one of the strongest and most vocal advocacy groups in the field of education. It is controlled by mostly white and mostly affluent parents who loudly proclaim the truth that their children have a disease and that this disease can be cured by either providing small specialized classes or accessing public money for private education.

These mainly well intentioned parents have fallen into a dangerous trap and are doing the dirty work for an education system that has to take a good hard look at itself if it is to survive into the 21st Century. Many mainstream education critics forecast doom for the current system that they say is excluding more and more children with better and fancier labels and jargon.

In an era when the adult disability rights groups are fighting back against the abuse and misuse of labels like mental retardation, autism, etc a counter movement arises to create a new jargon.

Along with People First, an advocacy group made up of people once labelled mentally handicapped we at Frontier College say **LABEL JARS NOT PEOPLE!**

Young children once noisy, active, annoying, loud and rambunctious are now called "hyperactive." These children in 1989 have the popular new disease ADD (attention deficit disorder) and the cure is most often *ritalin* a perscription drug that slows the child down. No one knows the long term side effects of this drug on young children.

Children themselves today ask for the drug that "makes me learn better at school." Who inded are the drug pushers of our society?

We know one young man ,George, who developed "waves of dyslexia" whenever he didn't feel like working. at school He had bought into the jargon of his doctors and is now spending his life in and out of psychiatric hospitals using this label to hang all his problems on. We personally know George could read and write but he was so convinced that the doctors were right that he never tried again to learn. A real tragedy and a wasted life.

George did indeed have problems. He was the sexually abused and battered child of an unemployed and alcoholic family. Let's say that and not hide the ugly reality of some people's lives under meaningless labels. George and his family needed help -- education, jobs and a decent standard of living. They needed a clean roomy apartment. They didn't need fancy labels about hyperactivity and attention deficit disorders.

It is interesting and scary to note that while the overall special education student population grew 20% in the decade between 1976-77 and 1986-87, those labelled as learning disabled grew 119%. They now constitute 44% of all special education students (Lipsky and Gartner, p. 13)

THE CURE

We at Frontier College believe the cure for people who have been labelled as L.D. is to quality teaching If someone comes in to one of our adult literacy programs and says she has this or that label we don't have a big fight we simply teach the person what she wants to learn.

If a student is convinced he is dyslexic, the best way to prove otherwise is to teach him to read and write.

Of course we believe that some people learn faster than others and many people have great difficulty learning. Our aim is to find out how to teach that person and to access the technology and people necessary for learning to occur.

If someone uses sign language we must find teachers who know that language.. If someone needs braille as a tool we need a teacher who knows braille. Let's not BLAME THE VICTIM let's teach the person to be an empowered individual who can access education and thus begin to change his/her life.

Since 1964 when the Supreme Court of the United States declared that the term educable mentally retarded was used in numbers far out of proportion to black and hispanic children a veritable epidemic of learning disability labels has abounded, particularly in North America and Europe.

At first it was a more "middle class" label but now it has spread into all aspects of this society. If you are rich and L.D. you get private tutors and private school. If you are poor and L.D. you go to special classes where you are streamed early for failure, for the street, or for prison.

The rich get "gifted" as their label; the poor get A.D.D. (attention deficit disorder). We recently even heard the newest term "the gifted learning disabled." Will the labels never cease.

Last June one of the authors (Marsha Forest) attended an IPRC (Identification, Placement and Review Committee) meeting with a parent she knew. This parent is a single mom, poor, and scared of the school system. She wanted her son to have more regular education. He was currently in the "behaviour" class. The IPRC suggested he might make it to the L.D. program. This was the school's idea of progress.

This young mother was at the mercy of 12 well dressed professionals who used big words and handed her a report that only a Ph.D in psychology could have written and understood. She couldn't read the text and when Marsha suggested it be read aloud they refused on the grounds that they had no time.

Little did this mother realize or know that the "small classes" and "specialized teachers" would doom her son to a life of poverty and lack of any opportunity to get even the basic skills. Because this woman has a educational advocate her son will slowly get what he needs. But most single moms on welfare have no advocates and so their children are streamed into

failure at an early age. As Jonathan Kozol so poignantly writes -- "death at an early age."

We are not saying that all people learn in the same way. Scientific investigation particularly by Howard Gardner, Professor of Education at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, says that educational evaluation must move beyond the stereotypical pupil abilities that happen to be valued in the West to encompass a broader range of abilities.

Gardner postulates not ONE but SEVEN intelligences: linguistic intelligence, logical mathematical intelligence, spatial intelligence, musical intelligence, bodily-kinesthetic intelligence, interpersonal intelligence, and social intelligence. (For further information on this interesting work see Gardner, H. *Frames of Mind; The theory of multiple intelligences*. New York; Basic Books.

We were recently at a meeting of student teachers at a major Canadian teacher education centre and overheard a group of undergraduates in education discussing their L.D. students. One of the student teachers had been "spit at" by a 12 year old during her student teaching stint. They were analyzing the spitting as a result of the 12 year old's severe learning disability and "hyperactivity."

Another education student interrupted, "Maybe the kid spit at you because she hates school, she hates students from this university who are mostly white, mostly upper crust and don't have a clue about life outside the suburbs."

This viewpoint was dismissed out of hand and the discussion went on and on about the perceptual motor problems of inner city youth.

The above is a sad but all too true reflection of the mood at our major teacher education centres. Postgraduate LD training grew from 538 students in thirty U.S. universities in 1969 to 2,148 students in forty-seven universities in 1972. (Coles, p.200)

In his book *The Learning Mystique* Gerald Coles argues that LD is part of a wider "conservative restoration" from kindergarten through college, typified by a back to basics movement, an emphasis on "quality" more than on equality, a turn away from critical education and toward career training and the reestablishment of central school boards' authority. (Coles, p.200)

Unlike the criticism of education in the 1960's the LD movement is not a call for fundamental educational changes in school and society.. The balm for

children's school failure is thus placed on the children themselves and as a result a victory has been won for the forces of reaction in the schools.

The scientific explanation for LD is meager at best and therefore the results of the LD intervention are not hard to imagine. One teacher says:

"Two years ago I quit my job as a teacher of children with learning disabilities. I no longer believed in learning disabilities...I came to the realization that these classes and the whole notion of learning disabilities were basically destructive to children."(Coles,p.201)

Here are some disturbing quotes from the Coles book that challenge the dominant educational thinking on this matter:

"Most tests currently used in the psychoeducational decision-making process are technically inadequate."(p.202)

In other words, LD was no more than "a sophisticated term for underachievement." (p. 203)

Unlike other criticisms of the 1960's, which charged that the schools were classist, racist, authoritarian, hierarchical, and sexist, LD criticism fundamentally protected the schools and the social order to which they are tied. Governmental agencies were willing to back LD, thus enabling the schools to respond.. (p. 199)

However, the LD field is not predicated on the proposition that failure and inequality are built into the schools and into society as a whole, and that learning failure is bound within and shaped by systemic conditions. (p.209)

THE FRONTIER COLLEGE POSITION

We believe that all people have unique gifts and talents, strengths and needs and that under the right conditions these gifts flourish. Given the conditions of many people's lives it is difficult for them to learn. Given the social conditions of the 1990's it is difficult for many children bombarded by decadent culture and lack of honest adult role models to want to learn.

We will teach anyone who comes to our programs wanting to learn. We use one label THE PERSON'S NAME. We asses and teach. We do not use traditional tests nor diagnositic labels and the proof of the pudding is in the

eatting. Our students do learn to read and write and many go on to finish high school and university courses if they so desire.

If illiteracy were a matter of one or two people, it could be said they are exceptions. But when a problem is so widespread, then we have to look into the society. The society is not going to tell us unless we make an effort. This effort will also lead us to find a solution to the problem.

Every adult who can't read and write is NOT learning disabled. Every adult according to us can indeed learn

The LD establishment and we have different interests. It is time to get these interests out on the table and have an honest and open debate on the issue. We ask our students to think about why they didn't learn to read and write and we encourage their healthy anger at a school system that failed them again and again.

We urge the student to ask whether he needs a pill or a new way of thinking. We find many of our students need personal counselling to help them over their problems with lack of self esteem after years of failure. We find that good counselling and good teaching are the antidotes to their years of failure.

Surely the man or woman in jail doesn't need perceptual motor practice but needs a job, a decent wage and a tutor who can help the person learn.

Coles suggest at the end of his excellent book that professionals in the field should be partisans, not just researchers and providers of service for educational failures. We agree wholeheartedly. We see the Frontier College staff and tutors as partisans who serve to assist ,not label the students and who will serve and to tell them the truth about the system in which we live.

It is interesting to note that Coles has found two items on the agenda of the conservative U.S. education groups such as the Heritage Foundation. On their agenda are the issues of LD and special education.

Their position is that" Public schools should not be required to educate those children who cannot, without damaging the main purpose of public education, function in a normal classrrom setting."

We stand firmly against this position and believe that our schools and adult education programs must sserve ALL especially those who have been traditionally missed or left out of the system. We will continue to serve the

most difficult and challenging people for that is our history and our mandate. We will go to where these people are and educate them based on who they are and what they want to learn.

Ron Edmonds in 1979 did the landmark research that marks the effective schools movement. His oft quoted remarks are appropriate here:

"We can, whenever and wherever we choose, successfully teach all children whose schooling is of interest to us. We already know more than we need in order to do this. Whether we do it must finally depend on how we feel about the fact that we haven't done it so far."

Frontier College is part of the growing challenge to the LD paradigm. We stand with the best educational analysts, social policy makers, and practitioners when we say that learning disabilities is a dangerous and damaging trend and that at Frontier no one is disabled and **all are welcomed** as "gifted."