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Learning Disabilities: Individual Needs or Categorical Concerns?

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Abstract:

Despite the fact that the field of learning disabilities has grown dramatically in recent years, many questions remain unanswered or disputed. In the absence of a clear definition of learning disabilities, the authors suggest that it has become an educational simile with children described as "like a learning disabled child." It is postulated that the learning disabled label has become reflective of a problem related more to social structure than to children. It is time that the optimism orginally connected with the term should lead to greater attention to individual needs and less emphasis on categorical concerns.

Article:

An information explosion in the field of learning disabilities has occurred during the 1970s. Television specials and series, magazine articles, and newspaper reports have spread the word that a new ailment is rampant in the land. Although this media exposure has probably made the public more sensitive to variances in the educational needs of all children, the essential message has too often been that a plague is being visited upon our public schools. Frames of reference for discussions of learning disabilities range from classic ("dyslexia") to contemporary ("process dysfunction") to avant-garde ("allergic reaction to food additives").

There has been an accompanying population explosion of practitioners who consider their professional bailiwick to be learning disabilities. Considerable effort and rhetoric have been devoted to defining the roles of the reading specialist, the special educator, the speech and hearing professional, the physician, and others who deliver services to learning disabled children. Each of these professional groups approaches the needs of learning disabled youngsters from a different conceptual orientation. This difference is dramatically reflected in the lack of agreement about the definition of learning disabilities.

INVESTIGATING THE CONCEPT OF LEARNING DISABILITIES

The problem of defining what constitutes learning disabilities has been discussed and debated by numerous professionals in the field (Bryan 1974, Lerner 1971, Hallahan & Kauffman 1976), and the advantages and disadvantages of the various approaches need not be mentioned in this paper. However, before the question can be resolved, it is essential that some agreement about the implications of the term and the concept be reached. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to investigate the concept of learning disabilities within the context of the labeling process. Crucial

to this investigation is distinguishing between problems residing in the person and problems that have their source in the group or social structure (Mills 1959).

The nature of a label itself is the initial concern. Superficially it summarizes the resolution of the classification process and serves as a vehicle for providing special services. However, as Blatt noted (cited in Jordan 1973), special education labels also function as metaphors for values and prejudices. In this sense labels become the tools of vested interest groups who seek to define reality as they preceive it.

Following this analogy, the learning disabled label might be more accurately described as a simile that becomes a metaphor. Parents and teachers, in their attempts to explain the learning behavior of a child who does not meet their expectations, often describe the child's behavior as being like that of a learning disabled child. Then, in the absence of other acceptable explanations, it is accepted that the child is learning disabled. The description of behavior offered through the simile becomes the metaphor of causation. The label ceases to be descriptive of the child's behavior and becomes the identity of the child. If, in fact, these observations about the learning disabilities field are valid, it is logical to investigate the social structure that spawned the label.

THE ORIGINS OF THE LEARNING DISABILITIES FIELD

As clearly noted by Hallahan and Cruickshank (1973), the learning disabilities field traces its historical roots to research on the learning characteristics of exogenous mentally retarded children. However, since the time of the initial description of the Strauss syndrome, much has occurred to change the fundamental picture of the learning disabled child. Lilly (1977) cautioned that the term learning disabled, which currently serves the purpose of providing a label for children falling between the cracks of pre-existing categories, cannot be equated with the field that initially was identified as dealing with sensory perception and brain damage in children.

What is the message that the all-inclusive term of *learning disabilities* carries with it? A primary concern must be the role of the social structure that has served as a major influence in the creation of this new exceptionality. It is difficult to overlook the relative stigmas attached to the labels of mentally retarded and learning disabled when considering the rapid development of this new field. It did not take long for professionals and laymen alike to realize the key message: some children are identified who experience learning-related problems that are not a function of social class or family rearing practice and hence are not retarded. The link between social structure and definition was cemented when the exclusion clause in most learning disabilities definitions was developed, in part, to discriminate between the two categories.

The implication of this class distinction has been apparent. Children from the lower socioeconomic classes have increased possibilities of being identified as retarded (Mercer 1973), while children from the higher socioeconomic classes are more likely to be the recipients of the learning disabled tag (Kealy & McLeod 1976).

EVOLUTION OF A DIFFERENT CONCEPT

The significant influence of the social structure has led to the evolution of the concept of learning disabilities from one of a perceptually handicapped child to one of a nonretarded child with learning problems. Is it also possible that this pervasive social influence may have created the

category itself by transposing the problem from society to the individual learner? Simmons (1968) suggested that "deviants" reside in the eyes of the beholder. Has this new deviant group of children been created in the eyes of society because of the existence of a number of children who share the learning difficulties of previously identified educable mentally retarded and emotionally disturbed groups but not the identifiable social class and family circumstances? Does the problem as traditionally defined actually exist?

In her review of the learning disabled stereotype, Bryan (1974) pointed out that it has not yet been confirmed that learning disabled children differ from normal children when using the most commonly identified measures. Her review of the existing research indicates that children identified as learning disabled do not show marked differences in visual processing, auditory processing, level of activity, signs of neurological deficit, or cross-modal integration. The learning disabled stereotype simply does not hold up under empirical investigation. Thus little evidence exists that the category of learning disabilities does represent a distinctive population.

DETERMINATION OF THE REAL PROBLEM

Where, then, does the real problem lie? The case has been made that the locus of concern is the child. With this assumption comes the implication of brain disturbance and minimal brain dysfunction. Quay (1973) categorized this viewpoint in the realm of process dysfunction explanations. Remedial approaches would need to bypass such basic, constitutional problems to be successful. However, if the roles of school and society as creators of the category are considered, it would be more appropriate to place the locus in these influences. The problem might be viewed better as an experience deficit (Quay 1973), and thus the burden of change is placed more on society's agents, especially the teacher. Consistent with these sentiments are the notions of dyspedagogia, or instructional disabilities (Cohen 1971).

Learning disabilities thus presents a dilemma to the field of education. In some ways it is a dilemma that has existed since Kirk (1963) initially coined the term for the precursors of the Association for Children with Learning Disabilities. In one way, we are presented with a positive approach to working with children with learning problems. Inherent in the term *learning disabilities* is the concept of individual differences and, hence, specific educational needs. In another way, however, we are attempting to fashion a label and a category out of a composite of individual children. By doing so, we run into built-in problems stemming from the great degreee of intraindividual variation, the substantial latitude of within-group differences, as well as the general overlap with other categories of mildly handicapped children.

With the negative reactions to labels and categorization, it has become increasingly essential that educators become concerned again for the individual child. As Silberberg (1971) pointed out, it is sufficient to note that children are different without having to describe them as "disabled" or "deprived."

Again the time has come when, out of tension and confusion, education in general and special education in particular can resolve some fundamental problems and move forward. The basis for this resolution must be the rejection of the simile—like a learning disabled child—and the acceptance of the differences inherent in all children. Society must move away from the idea that any child who does not meet the criteria for at least average achievement must have a problem

image affixed to his school behavior. Individualized, educational programming should be based on children's needs rather than on their problems. Funding patterns bound to existing classification schemes must be made more responsive to individual rather than categorical concerns despite any logistic problems it causes our public school structure. Logistic problems should be dwarfed by our commitment to provide the best educational services to all children with learning problems.

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