

# Child Abuse

*Look at the hell endured by schoolchildren who aren't taught to read.*

**By Andrew Nikiforuk**

Many years ago, I hated the idea of attending a rectangular shoebox of a school in Willowdale, Ontario, because I couldn't read worth a damn. To me, Dick and Jane were supreme bullies. And I feared Spot the same way some kids feared vampires.

At the time, special education didn't exist, and the concept of learning disabilities was still heresy to educators. So, I came home swearing and fit to be tied.

As a consequence of my illiterate rage, I spent an enormous amount of time in the principal's office. By grade two, I was pretty much out of control. Just above everyone including my parents were flummoxed by my academic failure and emotional turmoil.

Finally, a friend of the family — a great Danish man and a dyslexic — recognized the source of my pain. My mother did a great deal of research and found a clinic in downtown Toronto that specialized in restoring little folk like me with a systematic curriculum, a clear focus on the code and logical teaching. To make a long story short, I learned how to read and write over a period of three years. And my mother helped establish the first special education classes in North York.

Now, some 30 years later, I often wonder what might be my fate if I was progressing through today's schools. And, based on what I have heard and observed, the odds would still be against me. In fact, without committed and informed parents, a child with learning disabilities in Canada is simply damned — and damned to hell.

This write-off of nearly 10 percent of the school population is criminal in scope. I say criminal, because there are only two things denying LD children solid instruction, and they are negligent and incompetent educators.

Since I struggled in school so long ago, science has made great strides in

the realm of learning disabilities. We now know how to teach all children how to read. We can prevent reading failure wherever we have the will to do so. We can pinpoint with a simple seven-minute test exactly who will need extra instruction in kindergarten. We have good programs such as Orton-Gillingham and Auditory Discrimination in Depth. We know the importance of structured lessons, repeated drills and persistent teachers. It's all there in black and white.

Yet, as Dr. Carl Kline or anyone in the field knows, "It's just not happening...there is a complete evasion of responsibility." In fact, most public schools remain oblivious to all these important developments, while most teachers have never heard of Ray Barsh's 1968 definition of a learning disability (it's still the best around): "any learner who fails to benefit from an existing curriculum into which he has been placed."

So, if I were an LD child in Canada today, I'd get little respect and even less instruction, no matter where I lived. In Vancouver, for example, I'd simply be served more of the existing curriculum, which is really no curriculum at all. I might also get drugged with Ritalin, but I'd never get a crack at Auditory Discrimination in Depth.

In Calgary, my fate might differ slightly because most LD classes have been wiped out by the school board. According to the new doctrine of fiscal responsibility, all of those with no bank accounts and no history of fiscal irresponsibility must bear the burden of past mistakes. The Calgary board, by the way, is also committed to two educational monocultures: whole language and constructivism. This stuff is napalm to LD children.

If I lived in Toronto, the great dogma of "inclusion" would seal my destiny, and I'd never see any special class at all. But I'd be terrorizing an entire classroom somewhere.

If I lived in the Atlantic provinces, my fate would be equally dismal. Structured curricula and successful reading programs simply don't make the grade in Nova Scotia, New Brunswick and PEI, home to some of Canada's very worst schools.

Regardless of my geographical location in Canada, I would eventually find myself in an over-sized high school in a state of miserable underdevelopment. I'd be headed towards the drop-out door, the street or some friendly correctional institute, a horror to myself, a burden to my family, an affront to my community and a big and ongoing bill for taxpayers.

No child, dyslexic or otherwise, deserves to be abused this way, but this is the future Canadian educators have chosen for far too many children.

The actions that public educators have studiously avoided for 30 years are pretty basic: early identification, more structured classrooms and effective reading programs. Given the failure of professionals to do the right thing, it's probably time to award parents what I call "curriculum-disabled vouchers."

Rather than abandon LD children to a system that doesn't give a damn about them, parents should be simply given the funds to pay for accountable schooling. After all these years, the public system ought to be honest about its limitations and biases.

When I struggled in school, most educators didn't know better and, as a result, couldn't do better. But that's not true these days. And that's why the situation is much worse than when I was a child. To know there are effective curricula for struggling LD children and yet steadfastly refuse to use them is not only bad work but outright child abuse.

*(Mr. Nikiforuk now earns his living by his pen, thus proving that learning difficulties can be overcome.)*