

Learning Disabilities as Deus Ex Machina

By Heinz Klatt

Parents walk into the office of the school's principal in order to discuss their child's school failures. The school is located in an affluent suburb, the parents are well-dressed – perhaps have university degrees – and are clearly concerned about their child's low achievement. The principal, together with the attending school personnel, are aware that the problem can have any one of three origins: the pupils, the family, or the school.

The school authorities ponder their options. Looking at the parents and contemplating their accomplishments, they conclude that a lack of intelligence on the part of the child cannot be the problem – anyway, who would have the courage to suggest such a possibility to such well-dressed parents? Considering their articulate speech and polished manners, the child must surely be motivated and making every effort to succeed.

The second option (i.e., that the family creates the problem) does not offer the principal an attractive hypothesis either. The demeanor of the parents precludes the possibility that the child is watching too much television, spending too much time with his friends, or involved in other non-scholastic activities. Certainly, even if both parents work outside the home, they spend “quality time” with him while doing the cooking and cleaning when they come home in the evening. The child cannot possibly be neglected, deprived, culturally-disadvantaged or preoccupied with too many distractions.

The third option (that the school is at fault) is unthinkable. The school, after all, is child-centred, applies the whole language program, knows that language skills must not be taught by the teacher but somatically absorbed by the student, and guarantees success to every child. Every teacher in Canada knows that written work should rarely be corrected (and certainly not with a visible red pen), diaries should never even be read, and students should always work on projects which they choose themselves.

Even guidance in the form of proposing a list of well-chosen books would violate the pupil's individuality and autonomy, and the teacher would be seen as a teacher rather than a facilitator. In the unenlightened past, teachers even used to exercise authority! In light of the fact that Canada's expenses per student are the second highest in the world, with enormous administrative superstructures and armies of specialists, it is

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inconceivable that all these monies and efforts are being wasted. No, the schools cannot be at fault.

Recently, a drunken man from Montreal who raped a woman in her wheelchair was acquitted by Canada's highest court because no one can be held responsible for acts committed when inebriated. We live in a society that makes excessive accommodations in order not to hold criminals, delinquents and underachievers responsible for their acts. What are the options for the principal who has to suggest a cause and a remedy? In our current culture, he has only one: to indict the brain of the child. The brain cannot defend itself; the brain does not have rights; and the brain's self-esteem cannot suffer.

The notion of "learning disabilities" serves the purpose wonderfully. It *had* to be invented. Everyone who might have contributed to the problem – the student, the family, and the school – is exonerated. The brain is the culprit. Since nothing in the brain can be found to substantiate the condition, despite repeated assertions to the contrary, the definitions of "learning disability" elegantly claim a *presumed* neurological disorder. Although advertised as a "progressive" notion, the concept of learning disabilities is conservative and reactionary, in that it is used to preserve the status quo and prevent a long-overdue radical reassessment of educational theories and practices.

By claiming that "learning disabilities" explain school failures, the chain of absurdities has just begun. One of the most often-heard assertions is that learning disabilities have nothing to do with intelligence – yet learning disabilities are measured with intelligence tests! When someone scores very low on a particular intelligence sub-test, this discrepancy between the low score and the other higher scores is often interpreted as constituting a learning disability. This conclusion, however, is dictated more by political and social requirements than by logic, because the only legitimate conclusion is that the tested student has scored very low in that particular intelligence measure.

In view of the continually-bolder demands made by the learning-disabled in education and employment, it is today increasingly admitted by some critics that the problem is over-diagnosed and that the regulations are abused. This is reminiscent of the admission two centuries ago that witchcraft was being over-diagnosed and that tribunals were overly prosecutorial. It was argued that the regulations and procedures should be refined so that only "real" witches would be

identified as such. Today, we hear that our tests should be refined in order to uncover only the “really” learning-disabled.

(Dr. Klatt is professor of psychology at the University of Western Ontario.)