

Learning Mythabilities

Because there is no way to differentiate students with learning disabilities, the label is meaningless.
By George K. Cunningham

The classification of students who are behind in reading into the categories of learning disabled and non-learning disabled is an anachronism. There are large numbers of students, primarily boys, who have reached grade 4 unable to read at anything close to grade level. Whether you call them learning disabled or poor readers changes nothing.

There are a number of different studies that have shown that there is no difference between students in these two categories in terms of their reading characteristics or in terms of the designation of the most effective remedial strategies. In fact, there is no reasonable way to differentiate between the two groups at all.

In the early 1960s, it was noticed that among students who were unable to learn to read in the early grades, there was a subgroup, made up primarily of boys, who displayed what were called neurological soft signs. That is, they were distractible, they tended to perseverate, they had difficulty with figure ground distinctions, and/or they often failed to correctly identify gestalts.

The children in this group were labeled 'minimally brain damaged,' or 'possessed of a cerebral dysfunction,' or another of a host of names — until the term learning disability stuck. Other students who had reading problems but who didn't display the neurological soft signs were presumed to have undetected minimal brain damage.

A whole industry of treatments that addressed the brain damage and treated that symptom prior to reading remediation were adopted. At the time, one seeming prerequisite for distinction in this field was to have an odd name, and Newell Kephart and Helmer Myklebust became leaders in this field. They had students walking balance beams; writing on chalkboards with both arms making large letters; and so on.

Then, Samuel Kirk and his wife developed the Illinois Test of Psycholinguistic Abilities (ITPA) to assess

learning disabilities from a cognitive psychology model focusing on different input modalities such as visual, aural, kinesthetic, integration, and output modalities. Specialists in the field gave up on this test when it was recognized that the test seldom yielded useful results.

At this point, the neurological approach was pretty much abandoned. First of all, there was disenchantment with what was, after all, a purely medical model. More important, none of the neurological approaches in fact worked. Rather, all students seemed to benefit most from a conventional reading remediation approach that focused on systematic phonics.

For a while, educators tried to maintain the fiction that learning disabilities had something to do with discrepancies between ability and achievement. This was a convenient policy because it allowed them to manipulate the size of the gap in order to control the size of the classes.

There is, however, no evidence that a gap between achievement and cognitive ability has any special meaning when it comes to deciding how to remediate reading difficulties. Variability in test performance and discrepancies in test performance are typical of all students. If you administer enough tests, almost all students will display discrepancies large enough to get them labeled.

Despite the fact that there is no empirical way to distinguish between learning disabled and non-learning disabled students, we now have a mandated, extremely-expensive process of making distinctions among poor readers.

In the past, there was a sort of class distinction between the two groups. A child with a learning disability, by definition, was a child whose inability to read was unexpected. He (and it usually was a he) had educated parents who provided a middle-class home. If the child couldn't read, there had to be something specific malfunctioning in his

brain, although of course no one knew what the problem was.

A child with poor or uneducated parents, on the other hand, could be expected to do poorly in school. Ergo, such a child did not have a learning disability.

Today, this class distinction has diminished, mainly because nowadays almost any child who is doing poorly in school is deemed to be learning disabled. While it is gratifying that low-income students are no longer being discriminated against, it does raise the question as to whether the new policy is helping them.

The main impact is that there are more services available to those given a 'special education' label. There is no way of telling, however, whether or not these services are valuable.

Dr. John Marks of England's Centre for Policy Studies reports that the number of children with 'special educational needs' in that country has nearly doubled in the last four years. There are now about one and a half million students in this category.

Dr. Marks' influential paper "What are Special Education Needs?" points out that although one third of the English education budget is being spent on these children, no one knows what the criteria are for classifying students, how the money is being spent, or whether the special arrangements and funding are having any impact on the students' learning.

The author suggests that the root cause of the huge increase in students with special needs may be found in the retreat from traditional teaching practices.

In light of the fact that, despite many years of searching, researchers have been unable to isolate any indicators of learning disabilities, then perhaps it is time educators stopped wasting their time trying to categorize poor readers and started spending their time teaching them to read instead.

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