

Opening Pandora's Box

By Margarete Wolfram

A few weeks ago, a former student called me to ask for my support in finding a position as a teacher this coming fall. I was surprised that she was preparing to graduate as a teacher, because the student is learning-disabled. While she took her courses with me, she wrote all her exams in the learning disability centre which provides a variety of supports, from extra time to word processors to proctors who actually read and write for the students. I do not recall what degree of help this particular student received, but I can remember one situation where the class did a little exercise which required the reading of a few type-written lines of instruction. She did not even attempt to figure out the text.

Probing into this situation soon revealed it to be a "Pandora's box" rather than just an isolated accident. The student, who is currently teaching once a week in a grade six class, assured me that her learning disability really is not much of a problem, because "kids don't write exams anymore, so there isn't a lot to read and correct".

The director of the learning disability centre confirmed that not only is it possible for this student to be in the Faculty of Education, but also that several other students who have graduated with the assistance of the learning disability centre have taken this route. He pointed out that the Faculty of Education subscribes to a policy of non-discrimination against candidates with disabilities, and that this includes physical as well as learning disabilities. Also, the director argued, these learning-disabled students know their limitations and are generally hard-working, which is not the case for many of the so-called "normal" students who don't know how to read and write either and who also manage to slip into the Faculty of Education.

The Faculty of Education does indeed advertise an Access Initiative to increase the number of minority students entering the teaching profession. One of the categories explicitly mentioned is the one of students with learning disabilities. Since the human rights code states that disabled individuals are not to be discriminated against in situations where their disability is not relevant, the Faculty's policy seems to imply that literacy skills are considered irrelevant in teaching. However odd this position may sound, it was subsequently made explicit by a number of people from within the Faculty of Education.

One of the education students advanced the argument that "just because the teacher has a reading disability does not mean that he or she can't teach reading". The very same argument was made by Professor

Gary Bunch from the Faculty of Education. To prove his point, he gave the example of one of his graduate students who, according to him, has severe difficulties in reading and writing and yet has been teaching for over 20 years.

Lorna Wiggins, who co-ordinates the Access Initiative, also echoed the view that a reading disability is no obstacle. She knew of a teacher who, even though reading-disabled, was excellent in mathematics. Wiggins was not sure why the Faculty of Education no longer requires their student applicants to write an essay in class or obtains proof of literacy and numeracy; however, she expressed her confidence that their students can be assumed to have enough skills to be get since they did make it into university. Also, since the education student works with a classroom teacher for either one or three years, depending on the program, the classroom teacher would surely notice if the student couldn't read or write effectively or had a math phobia. Of course, the classroom teacher would let the Faculty know, wouldn't he?

While it is difficult to understand how the Faculty of Education could have come to its present positions and policies, part of the oddity undoubtedly stems from their definition of the word "teaching". To them, teaching is not, as it is understood by most people, the transmission and development of skills and knowledge by whatever means are effective, but rather it is the act of "facilitating", "offering opportunities", "allowing the child to discover", etc., with no requirement whatsoever that anything tangible actually has to be achieved.

We find a lot of emphasis on the need to foster the advancement of people with learning disabilities. After all, a number of people who made considerable contributions to society were learning-disabled. Examples are Thomas Edison, Albert Einstein, Winston Churchill, Woodrow Wilson, Nelson Rockefeller, and others. A detail which is usually omitted is the fact that, even though these individuals may have been learning-disabled, they were taught to overcome their disability. They were taught to function independently, rather than being fitted with crutches to support their disabilities.

One major problem with pushing students through the system with the help of the crutches provided by the learning disability centres is that students can easily be tempted to hide their needs in a tough job market. Visually-impaired drivers have a note in their driver's licence stating that they have to wear corrective lenses to operate a motor vehicle. There is no indication in the diploma of learning-disabled students stating that they need double-time, readers or scribes to function in their jobs. Can we really rely on the perceptiveness and courage of a classroom teacher to blow the whistle on students who have gone through the Faculty's

stringent selection procedure yet lack skills because of disability or other reasons?

What we have here is a case of massive educational neglect being pushed on to victimize the next generation.

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