

# The Pernicious Notion of Learning Disabilities

By Heinz-Joachim Klatt

Andrew Nikiforuk wrote a confusing column in last June's *OQE Forum*. Those who know his earlier contributions to the debate on education must find his "Child Abuse" astonishing, for he has in the past made often insightful comments on many educational issues.

Nikiforuk relates his childhood experience of having hated school because he could not read. He explains his being "out of control" as a consequence of his "illiterate rage." Then his mother found a learning centre, faddishly and pretentiously called a "clinic," that offered a "systematic curriculum, a clear focus on the code and logical thinking," and Andrew learned to read! His mother, moreover, "helped establish the first special education classes in North York." All the pain he had suffered he attributed to his so-called learning disability, and the eventual learning to read to the special education class! Today, he wonders, "what might be my fate if I was progressing through today's schools." His conclusion is that "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."

The emotional language I find unobjectionable. Indeed, it is quite understandable in light of the great harm that is done to our children with whole language, whole math, child-centred education, social promotion, and other demonstrably harmful practices. Only the prohibitive costs and the uncertainty of court actions explain why parents do not take school boards to court for child neglect and abuse.

What is wrong is to claim that a child is "learning-disabled" if s/he does not learn to read because of bad instruction. It is further wrong to claim that a reading "clinic" with special education experts is required to "treat" the child's "neurological disorder," if all it

takes is for the teacher to use whatever technique works. Nikiforuk's story is the classical example of a child, among hundreds of thousands, who is systematically handicapped by schools that are committed to Deweyite principles.

Let us not forget that every definition of "learning disabilities" presumes that the said malady is neurological in nature and, in particular, that the children so "affected" suffer from a neurological disorder! Consistent with this assumption, special educators with their presumably vast expertise in neurology are then called upon to "treat" the "disorder," and this is supposedly what happened to little Andrew in the Toronto "clinic!" How much more absurd can it get?

According to Nikiforuk, "science has made great strides in the realm of learning disabilities. We now know how to teach all children how to read." The reader wonders what science he is referring to and what the great insights are. I find it incomprehensible that someone would argue that research published in "learning disabilities" journals has taught us *anything*, let alone anything about "how to teach all children how to read."

What teachers need to know was known long before "research" on "learning disabilities" confused the minds of so many, including Nikiforuk. We need phonics together with reading of meaningful texts. We need repetition, drill and discipline, and we need teachers with the courage and skills to defy the ukases of the school boards. Our insights today consist primarily of regaining some common sense, and this always against great odds, i. e., against the constant opposition of the "professionals" and "experts" who push one destructive fad after another.

It has recently become acceptable to propose "teaching disability" as a

more honest explanation of poor reading. Nikiforuk, as well, indicts "negligent and incompetent educators." I find this substitute notion unfair to teachers. The reality is that young teachers, who come from education faculties where they have been bombarded with faddish educational dogma, are grateful for jobs and will do what it takes to keep them. Which young applicant would have a chance of obtaining a position by arguing common sense and sensible educational principles? Thus, it is not so much incompetence of the teachers as it is lack of courage. Teachers are victims almost as much as are the pupils.

If, some decades ago, when psychoanalysis dominated our thinking, school boards had institutionalized the Oedipus Complex the way we have included "learning disabilities" in our laws and policies, we would have today Oedipal Departments, Oedipal Programs, Oedipal Classes, Oedipal Teachers, Oedipal Journals, etc. Furthermore, we would be prohibited by the Human Rights Commission from discriminating against persons who have not resolved their Oedipal Conflict and mastered their Phallic Impulses.

With respect to the Oedipal conflict, there was at least some empirical evidence, whereas "learning disability," the mythical neurological disorder, is a notion that had to be invented to prevent anyone from holding schools accountable. If the brain of the child can be blamed, then nobody else is responsible for poor performance, and we can preserve a bad educational system and the lucrative "learning disability" business. "Learning disability" has been hailed as a progressive scientific notion when, in fact, it is a very conservative concept used to justify the status quo with whole language, child-centred learning, and every other harmful educational practice.

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