

The right to learn

by Beth Burke

'No nation can afford the number of special classes needed for learning disabled children.' Dr. Lillie Pope told a packed auditorium during the second annual Atlantic Conference for Children with Learning Disabilities for Nova Scotia, held at Dalhousie University, September 19-21.

Dr. Pope, the director of the Psycho-Educational Division and Learning Disabilities Clinic at the Coney Island Hospital, New York, said that such geniuses as Albert Einstein, Thomas Edison, Winston Churchill and Leonardo da Vinci were all learning disability cases who made it. She went on to say that while not every disabled child is a potential genius, every child has something to contribute to society.

Dr. Pope stressed that if competent help is not given to children who have learning problems the result is disastrous. She said that personal frustrations and social maladjustment may lead to feelings of alienation from society and result in drug and delinquency problems. Dr. Pope said that a recent study of a number of delinquents indicated that 80 per cent of those studied had learning disabilities. A lot of understanding and a good sense of humor will go a long way toward helping these children' she said.

Dr. Charles Drake, President of the Learning Disabilities Foundation, Inc., Reading Research Institute, and Headmaster for Landmark School, Mass., attacked the slogan 'right to read' as 'a cheap political trick used by the American politicians to milk the awful condition of illiteracy in the nation. They did not even provide any realistic help or even a readable piece of literature.'

Children should be systematically tested to find out what the problem is, continued Dr. Drake. He called for educators to start treating the causes of the problem rather than just talk about the symptoms and effects.

Testing, Dr. Drake pointed out, consists of several basic questions: Can he see and hear?, can he keep things in the proper order?, can he separate the meaningful from the unmeaningful?, is he slow in responding to questions?, does he have the ability to carry out two or more simple tasks at the same time?

Several learning aids long frowned upon by the teaching profession were suggested by Dr. Drake as a means of helping children to overcome learning problems. He advocated the use of the finger to help alleviate the problems of reading, counting on the fingers to help solve math problems and moving the lips while reading to aid in learning to verbalize.

Pharmaceutical firms are to blame for the panic over so-called hyper-active children Dr. Drake claimed. He insisted that teachers must teach children with behavioral problems how to act appropriately rather than drug them into obedience.

One of the most informative speakers at the conference was Mr. William Page, director for Educational Programs and Resources, Nashville, Tennessee. He advised teachers to make their class structures flexible in order to accommodate every child in the class. Page attacked the foundations of traditional education by suggesting that

perhaps it is teachers, not students who should change.

Page listed what he called 'the teaching Hierarchy of Beliefs. He told teachers to examine their beliefs to see if they were conducive to teaching children how to learn.

Page, an anti-test campaigner, told teachers that test should not always be given to all students at the same time and only once. He stated that tests should be given only to show the student what he has learned, not to judge his worth.

'The whole concept of failure is preposterous,' Page declared 'No-one has the right to tell another person that he has failed. It is the teacher who has failed to teach the student not the student who has failed to learn,' Page added.

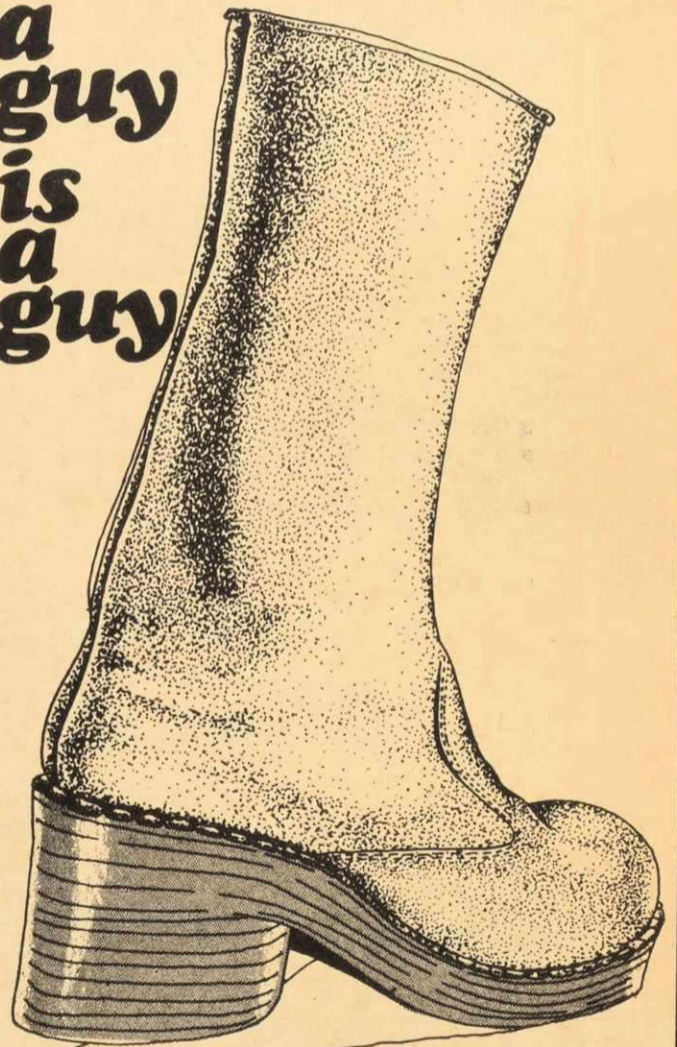
Page advised teachers to give every child an alternative when an assignment is given so that he might accommodate for his personal needs. He insisted that teachers must be willing to examine themselves to change themselves before they try to change others. "A good teacher," Page suggested, "Should always be asking himself, 'Am I getting better?'"

All problems concerning children in the classroom or in the home should be met with directly and immediately by direct confrontation with the child, according to Page. Children should be given the same rights and privileges as an adult concerning his life if he is to be prepared to live in society. Why should children be taught in a dictatorship if they are going to live in a democracy?"



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