

School achievement impaired by learning disabilities Intelligence is not enough for kids

by Maggie Coates

Between 10 and 15 per cent of the school population are learning disabled children, bright kids who cannot function well in a school setting.

Dr. H. Janzen of the Department of Educational Psychology in the Faculty of Education wants to help these kids by identifying them more accurately with psychological and educational tests.

A learning disabled child is, by definition, one with average or better intelligence but a deficit of at least 1 1/2 - 2 years in some achievement area.

These children form a diverse group. Some have difficulty with memory, while others have problems with motor co-ordination or visual or auditory abilities.

Theories of the cause of learning disabilities are equally diverse. They may be caused by chemical imbalances of an organic disorder, such as a brain injury received prior to or during birth. Developmental delays in perceptual motor abilities may also underlie learning dis-

abilities. There is also some suggestion the problem may be emotional. Some researchers even believe it's teacher-produced, the result of a series of incompetent teachers.

The only thing these children have in common is they can't learn in some areas. And it's not something they'll grow out of and there is no cure. They have to learn to cope with it.

But learning disabled children can be helped with special classes if they can be identified. That's where Janzen's tests come in.

By definition, learning disabled children can't be caught until they've had some schooling, so Janzen concentrates on Grades 3 to 6.

He visits various schools and administers a standard battery of oral and written cognitive tests. These tests measure intelligence, achievements such as reading, spelling, and math, personality, and motor co-ordination. Grades and teacher ratings are also included in the assessments.

In total, 23 different scores on each student are averaged and fed into a computer. The computer then selects the children with learning disabilities.

The first time the computer was used, it only caught 30% of the children already identified by the school as learning disabled. On a second try, using more sensitive measures of the test results, it improved to 74%.

Teachers in the school are still able to predict students with learning problems better than all the tests combined. But no matter how well teachers know their kids, it'd hard for them to distinguish poor students, or those with other disadvantages, from the truly learning disabled. Hence the tests.

Janzen says it's important to identify and help these children before they become so frustrated and hostile they turn to juvenile delinquency.

Alberta has a good record, largely due to a Learning Disabled Fund provided by the provincial government for special education.

There's still a lot to do, though. Janzen is now attempting treatment of learning dis-

abilities based on the child's self-concept. His theory is that

continual failure produces anxiety; if the anxiety is removed, the child will be a better learner.

The goal? Anything that keeps these kids from being left behind.

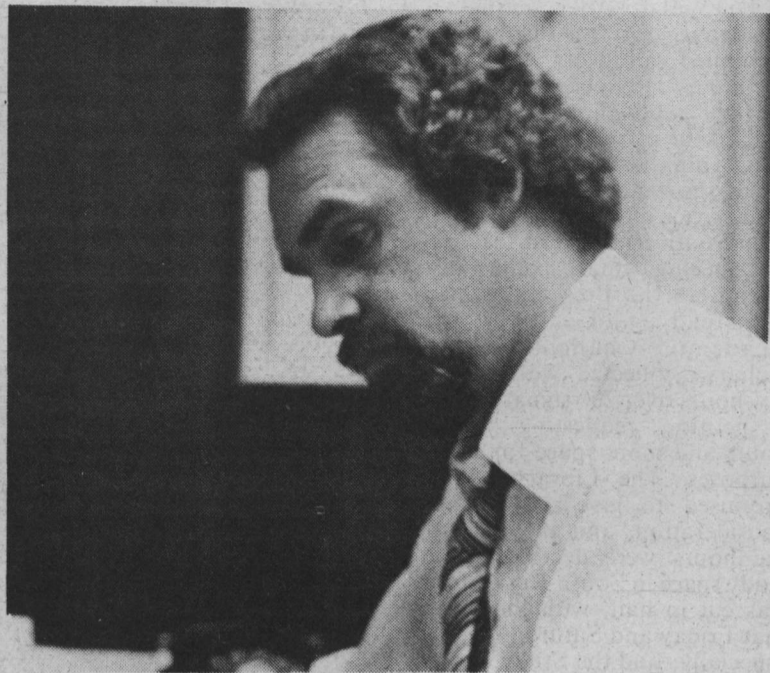
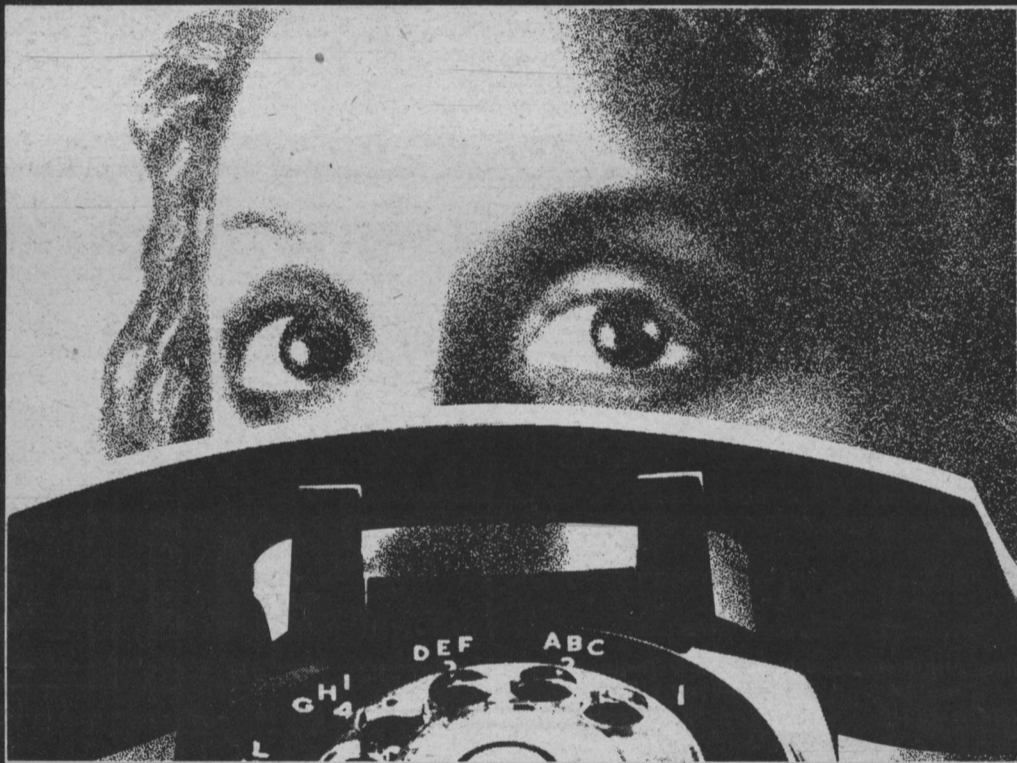


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