

Learning Disabilities

How much do you know?

by Ryna Brideau

Learning disabilities. . . Automatically, a vision of a thick glasses and severely impeded speech comes to mind. For some odd reason, people's perception of the word "disability" usually turns out to be demeaning. It portrays a "dumb nut" image to the uninformed mind.

"Learning disability" is the term currently used to describe a handicap that interferes with some one's ability to store, process, or produce information. Such disabilities affect both children and adults.

In simple words, this means some people, (a buddy from your Arts 1000 class maybe?) have a harder time processing basic information. They can understand the concept well, but may not be able to express it in a way that lets others know they "got the messages". Humans feel levels of intelligence, of all ages and cultures, children and adults can be subject to it. They form 10% of our population.

Of the several types of learning disabilities known, three are retained:

Attention: *By far the most common kind of learning disorder is difficulty in keeping attention focused. Because these children keep tuning in and out, their performance is unbelievably and confusingly inconsistent. Because they've been caught doing something well once in a while, people keep accusing them of not really trying the rest of the time. These children are likely to be impulsive, to do things too quickly, and get into trouble because they haven't thought through the risk they take. They grasp the big picture and understand overall conceptions. They often have rich imaginations and are extremely creating. They're accused of various forms of moral turpitude: laziness, poor motivation, and so on.*

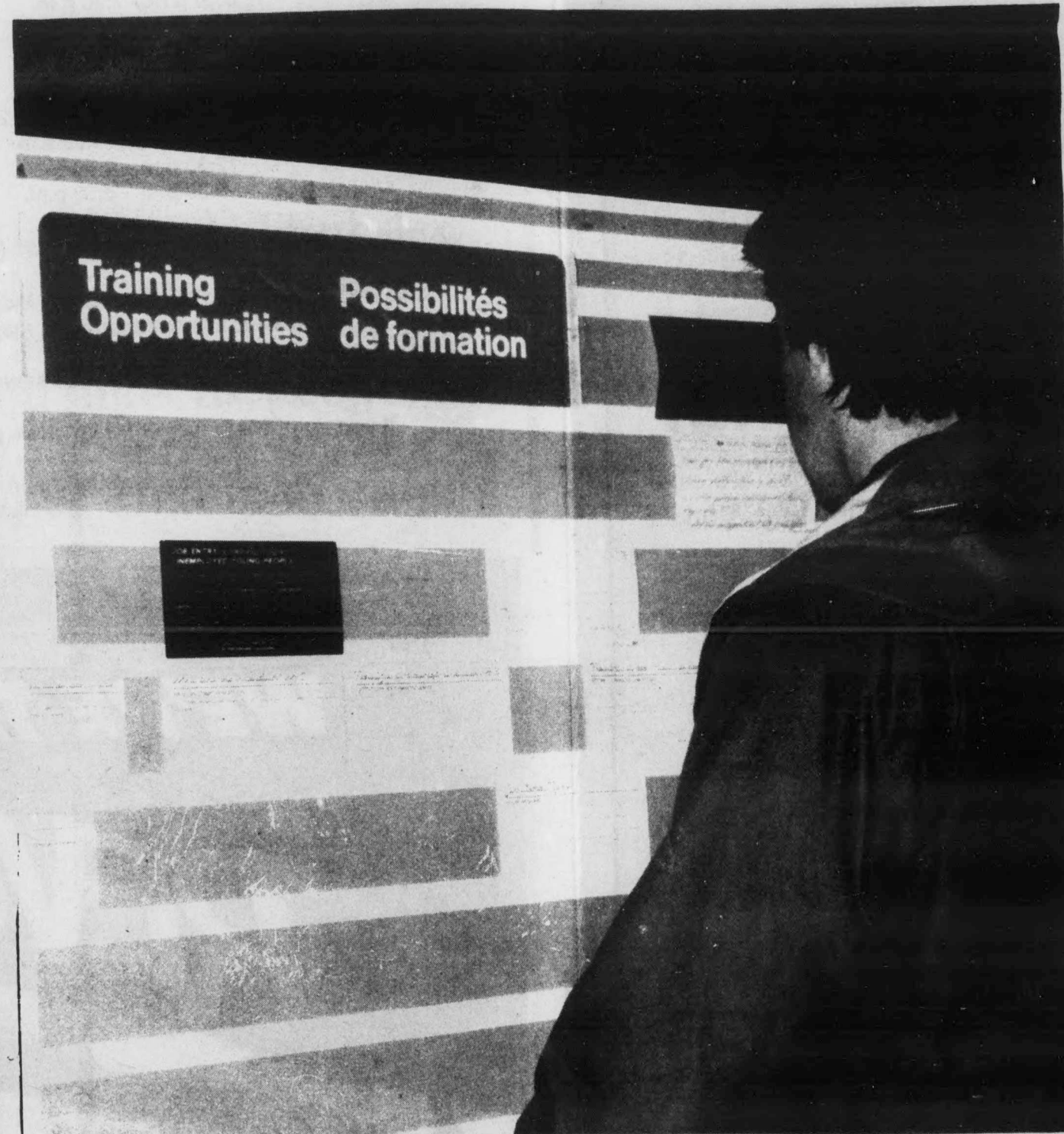
Language: *Good at understanding things that they see but have real difficulty interpreting complicated verbal instructions and may not be able to grasp and follow spoken directions. When they can't keep up with other children on a verbal level, some develop terrible social problems including delinquency.*

Memory: *Retrieving information from memory - not all information, but certain specific kinds. Upper grades increasingly require rapid recall of stored information. If you can't find out what you need and quickly, you're in trouble.*

So the kid you baby-sit on Wednesday nights might not be dumb after all. Look more closely next time. It's relatively easy to detect a possible disability, especially in students up until high school. Does he/she slave over homework and still get poor marks? Can he/she pay attention long enough to a lecture or follow instructions correctly?

Most children are caught in a vicious circle.

Children with learning disabilities are often caught up in a vicious cycle of learned helplessness. According to Licht, these children experience a large number of academic failures, beginning early in their school career. As a result of a failing



repeatedly, they come to doubt their intellectual abilities and thus, to doubt that anything they do will help them overcome their difficulties. As a consequence of these beliefs, these children lessen their achievement efforts, particularly when confronted with difficult material.

Obviously, learning disabilities and poor self-esteem are tightly correlated. Did you ever wonder why so many people of our generation commit suicide or turn to crime? A large proportion of them suffer(ed) from learning disabilities which got the better of them in the long run. Basically, it starts in grade school, where they soon realize they cannot keep up with the rest. Their efforts are disappointing to the four most important figures in their life: Mom, Dad, Teacher and themselves. Led to believe hard work leads to nothing, motivation slips, bringing on more deceptions and it gets deeper and deeper as the circle closes in on them. . . Then one day, an attempted crime is successful, or that bottle of blue pills looks inviting. . . Dreadful? Yeah! Amazing how self esteem affects people's lives. Brent MacPherson, who works with the Equal Opportunities Employment Program, expressed this well, saying,



"It's impossible to describe the frustrations and fear that result from such handicap...To never measure up, no matter what you do or say...Some find it impossible to make it up the hill. They choose to give up the struggle and are discovered lifeless..."

He laboured through school thinking he never would fit in with the other kids. After two attempts at college life and several jobs, a friend finally put him in touch with Mr. Doug Bridgeman of the Equal Opportunities Employment Program. This is how he reached his present status of permanent employee with the provincial government.

As you can see, there is a brighter side: **Learning disabilities can be overcome!** Through proper identification of the problem and with constant support from friends and family, those people are on a roll! In most cases, counselling rehabilitation or light medication is appropriate.

Over the past few years, much has been said over the integration of the learning disabled in "normal" schools. Ideally, it is an appealing concept. But in many schools, limited availability of qualified personnel, a adequate material as well as social prejudice pose a major problem.

The Fredericton Chapter of the Learning Disabilities Association of New Brunswick has made recommendations to the Special Committee on Integration. These are:

- 1- That priority be given to identifying and accepting learning disabilities... Labelling children as "lazy and unmotivated" must be abandoned immediately.
- 2- That courses on learning disabilities be a mandatory part of every university education curriculum.
- 3- That special support programs for children with learning disabilities be instituted at the elementary, junior high and high school levels.

So basically, a person who has difficulty learning could be anyone from a mentally impaired child to Tom Cruise (he's dyslexic!). Properly looked after he/she usually turns out to be a fantastic adult with full capacities and incredible charisma. (just like that cute blonde in the 3rd row of Chem. 2110 class!)