

Learning disabilities: Are universities helping?

by George Chalmers

During the past twenty years the subject of learning disabilities has developed into an important field of study. Although a topic rarely researched, it is now easy to find information on learning disabilities. However, this information is often biased and simplistic says Dr. S.S. Sodhi, Education Professor at Dalhousie.

Professionals today are only too willing to place a label on a child who is having difficulty in school, in expressing himself verbally, in writing, or one who is disorganized, said Sodhi.

The term learning disability and the forty labels associated with it have negative connotations attached to them. This has come about as a result of ignorance in the area and the attitudes that several professionals project in their writings.

- Defects in the sense organs: eyes, ears and other organs are not damaged. They receive accurate impressions, but the brain cannot translate them correctly.

- Emotional Troubles: except in a few cases such troubles usually result from the attitudes of others.

- Mental Retardation (consistent intellectual slowness): learning disabled children do well in

some areas and very poorly in others.

- Cultural Deprivation: children from stable, stimulating homes may still have speaking, writing or other problems pertaining to learning.

As a result of these myths and negative connotations many children are falsely diagnosed as learning disabled. Often these children come from poor families, ethnic groups, a culturally deprived background or children who have low I.Q., according to one Fredericton learning disability specialist. She claims she deals with very few true cases of learning disabilities.

Sodhi sees this medical model as harmful as it reinforces the labelling and categorizing of children which in turn creates a sense of helplessness.

There is no clear-cut evidence that "special class" placement for handicapped children leads to higher academic achievement or better social adjustment than does placement in the regular classes, says Sodhi.

By saying that learning disabilities are the result of inheritance the researchers have shifted the blame from the school system (their own inadequacies), society

(their attitudes) to the parent and especially the child.

This analysis is unrelated to the school system which is where the problem lies, states Sodhi. He criticizes the school system because it has arranged things so that the system looks "good" and that it is the child's fault that they are doing poorly.

It has created labelling, and a system that separates these children from their peers, which creates an attitude of being different, says Sodhi. The whole ideology behind this is to make these children feel guilty, different and helpless.

When these children are placed in the regular classroom they are ignored and made to feel insignificant by the teacher who feels uncomfortable. This is because these children don't fit the norm and represent the teacher's inadequacies as a teacher as well as the system's.

When the "special ed" teacher comes to work with the child for an hour a day the regular teacher often is happy to get the child out of the class for she no longer wants the responsibility.

Sodhi claims that with this treatment it is no wonder that these children have low self-

esteem, hate school, misbehave, or withdraw within themselves. The system is self-fulfilling.

Personality profile

John has been diagnosed as being dyslexic. This term is now widely used to identify children with normal intelligence who are having difficulty in public schools. Some of the systems of dyslexia are as follows:

- Impairment in left right orientation
- Shows a tendency to read words backwards (was for saw)
- Lack of finger dexterity
- Difficulty with mental arithmetic
- Memory and immediate recall may be impaired

- May have auditory difficulties such as the inability to sound back words and sounds that are heard

- Visual memory may be impaired so that the child is not able to revisualize objects, words or letters

- May not be able to convert

visual symbols into their auditory equivalents to pronounce words correctly when reading aloud

When John's teacher first hears that John exhibits some of the traits of dyslexia their first response will be to classify John as dyslexic. The damage has begun for by saying that John is dyslexic they are making the problem sound like a disease. By doing this she is not looking at John's specific problem, which could be one or more, but not necessarily all of the above. They will focus on all of the traits rather than John's problems. As a result of their attitude John will soon believe what the teacher says he can't do. Teachers may not try to help in these areas. The prophecy is self-fulfilling. Therefore we, the system, have created John's helplessness.

"The term learning disabilities has to be used as a concept rather than a category," says Sodhi. "Too many people are too willing to accept the way things are and jump on the learning disabilities bandwagon."

"It is time to slow down and have a second look at what we are doing" and where we are going in this field, as the situation stands now, he said.

THE CRISIS IN EDUCATION

Why tuition? So only the rich get to go, silly

by Charlene Sadler

What do Britain, China, the USSR, Australia and parts of Scandinavia have that Canada doesn't? If you guessed universities that are almost completely subsidized by the government then you're right. In Canada we are not so lucky. While the

government provides a majority of the university's budget, Dalhousie still suffers from lack of funding resulting in programme cutbacks and higher tuition fees.

These fees in turn make the university almost inaccessible to students from lower middle income

facilities, yet these tuitions comprise less than 10%, or approximately \$10 million of the whole university's budget.

Stirling, a university in Scotland, is one of those in which British-born students are subsidized by the government.

Although wealth and prestige are traditionally associated with receiving a higher university education in the U.K., it is accessible to students from lower income families as well—unlike Canada. Said John Gray, a professor at Dalhousie and a coordinator of the Stirling exchange programme, British universities enjoy a high priority when it comes to receiving money from their government—they sit right next to defence in terms of subsidies.

Ken Heard, a professor at Dalhousie admitted at universities are in a bind. With the university needing more and more subsidies and the government not willing or able to give more, the university can only look to raising tuitions, cutting back programmes and limiting the enrolment. And with decreasing student aid, scholarships and bursaries, Canadian universities are fast becoming elitist institutions available only to those people who can afford them.

A survey conducted at Dalhousie by the Dal Student Union in 1982 showed that less than 1% of students attending were from families with incomes below \$5000 and that 48% were from families with incomes above \$30,000.

Tim Hill, president of Dalhousie's Student Union, said that the university is not listening to the student's arguments, but only to the government's. Once the university finds out how much they will receive from the government, the tuition fees are then determined to fit the following year's budget. The integrity of the university and the students' situation are not considered, said Hill. Issues like the expected increase in student assistance and the infiltration rate should both be examined before the tuitions are set. He also said that the government should recognize that it has certain obligations to maintain, such as the university's physical integrity. To extract more government money, public support for education is needed. The students have to get behind this—"they have to get off their asses or they themselves are to blame," said Hill.

Peggy Munn, a first year arts student agrees that university tuition fees are too high but she does not believe in abolishing fees. She said the government is being greedy in not giving out the bursaries needed for so many students to afford university. Munn started working three years ago knowing she would have to pay for her tuition fees or else apply to student aid.



This little student could afford to go to university this little student couldn't.