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EARLY DIAGNOSIS OF
LEARNING DISABILITIES

by 6781

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I. THE EDUCATIONAL SIGNIFICANCE OF LEARNING DISABILITIES

He is not blind, but he cannot seem to see; he is not deaf but he cannot seem to hear; he is not retarded but he cannot seem to learn. He is the learning disability child which authorities tell us comprise up to twenty percent of our classrooms. He is defined by Dr. Jeanne McCarthy¹ as a child with normal or potentially normal intelligence who has disabilities of a perceptual, conceptual or coordinative nature.

During the past few years there has been a great increase in the discussion of children with learning problems that seem to defy classification, in the literature directed toward educators. There seemed to be a pattern of problems, subtle in nature and hard to define, to be found in varying degrees in many children. The child may have progressed quite well to a certain point and from thereon seemed to stand still. He may have made only slight progress rather than to have developed a consistent learning pattern. These problems come to the attention of the teacher, particularly the primary teacher, because of accompanying or secondary problems such as poor self-discipline or hyperkinetic behavior. It is for these teachers, of whom I am one, that I am writing this paper in an attempt to set forth some guidelines by which we can determine if the child who does not learn as well as he should, when compared with his general intelligence, abilities and other factors, could possibly have a learning disability which can be defined and diagnosed, and by application of diagnostic teaching, corrected.

Learning disabilities may be known by many names. In some states, minimal brain dysfunction is used: the first word to compare it to cerebral

¹ Jeanne McCarthy (Interview) "How to Teach the Hard to Reach," Grade Teacher, (May/June, 1967), Supplement.

palsy which might indicate clinical or institutional care, the second to indicate the area affected, and the third to cover damage as well as genetic developmental or other causes of the problem. California calls learning disability children educationally handicapped and in 1967-68 had 24,000 children in a program providing education suited to them, a number greater than in all the rest of the United States.

Learning disabilities may be present in children with very low I.Q. all the way to those in the genius classification. They may exist in children from low socio-economic homes or come from children in the highest socio-economic level of the community. The learning disability child may exhibit school failure or he may achieve academically but this achievement may make exorbitant demands on the child. Learning disabilities may be accompanied by major disturbances of conduct or they may be internalized so that the child suffers in silence.

Since the learning disorder is so closely related to the learning function, it becomes a primary problem of education. To meet the needs of these children, the school must learn to design educational presentations with their problems in mind. The basic nature of the syndrome is a disruption in the processing of information and response. The individual's symptoms composing the syndrome (distractibility, hyperactivity, perseveration, detailed response, emotional lability, etc.) can be seen as a specific manifestation of the overall disruption. These children do not spontaneously integrate information and form generalizations as does the child with no learning disorder. It follows that educational presentations must be designed to encourage the development of such generalization to a much greater degree than is necessary with the average child.²

One survey of a normal school population³ investigated the incidence of behavioral symptoms characteristic of learning disorders. This survey

²Newell C. Kephart, Learning Disability: An Educational Adventure, the 1967 Kappi Delta Phi Lecture (West Lafayette, Indiana: Kappi Delta Phi Press, 1968) p. 5.

³Robert E. Valett, Programming Learning Disabilities (Palo Alto, California: Fearon Publications, 1969) p. 16.