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MUSIC AND THE LEARNING DISABLED CHILD

by

DONNA J. STAHL

B.M.E., Wichita State University, Wichita, Kansas, 1972

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A MASTER'S REPORT

submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree

MASTER OF MUSIC

Department of Music

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY  
Manhattan, Kansas

1978

Approved by:

  
Major Professor

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A handicapped child may be placed into one of two large categories: physically handicapped, or learning disabled. Physical handicaps include muscular dysfunction, nervous system dysfunction, genetic deficiencies such as Down's syndrome (mongoloidism), and severe mental retardation. Physically handicapped children are easily recognized. The learning disabled child is not so easily recognized. This paper deals only with the learning disabled child, because he is most likely to inhabit the normal classroom.

## WHO IS THE LEARNING DISABLED CHILD?

Take a pencil and a small tablet, about three by five inches, and stand in front of a mirror. Now hold the paper against your forehead and write your name on it with the pencil. Sounds easy?

The first thing you'll notice is that you can't hold the pencil in the usual fashion because if you do, you have trouble controlling its movement and difficulty seeing what you are writing. After finding a new way of holding the pencil you'll write your name without too much difficulty. Now look at the paper and see what you have written. You did not do what you had set out to do! The task was not to write the mirror image of your name; it was to write your name. Take a fresh piece of paper and try again.

Now imagine that there is someone standing over you who says, "Come on, that's not hard. Why don't you pay attention? What's the matter with you? You are not really trying. Everybody else is already finished!" This is what many learning disabled children experience. How does it feel?

The learning disabled (LD) child is one of at least average intelligence whose academic performance is impaired by a developmental lag in the ability to sustain selective attention. He has a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved with understanding or in using language, spoken or written, which may manifest itself in a discrepancy between expected and actual achievement in one or more of the following areas: listening, thinking, speaking, writing, spelling, mathematical calculations, and spatial orientation. Such children require specialized instruction in order to permit the use of their full intellectual potential.

Learning disabled children are neither damaged nor permanently impaired. Children not included in the learning disabled category are those whose primary problems are mental subnormality, educational or cultural deprivation, severe emotional disturbances, and/or sensory deficits (blind and/or deaf.)

Occasionally, and erroneously, the word "exceptional" is used synonymously with "learning disabled." Although these terms are related, they are not equivalent. A learning disabled child is a specific type of exceptional child. Neither term is generic for all children who have problems in school.

Basic learning processes are necessary for perception, expression, and association. These are brain functions. The inadequate functioning of the brain can result in a learning disorder. The dysfunction is related to one of three impairments: 1) loss of an established basic process; 2) inhibition of the development of such a process; or 3) interferences with the function of such a process.<sup>1</sup>

Brain dysfunction results from conditions that can be either pre- or post-natal. Pre-natal conditions include premature birth, Rh factor, heredity, and poor pre-natal care on the part of the mother. Post-natal conditions include lack of oxygen during the first minutes of life, physical or emotional trauma, head injuries, and malnutrition. Learning disabilities can also be caused by poor environmental conditions and insufficient perceptual-motor experience. Children raised in crowded, dark, and/or extremely filthy homes have little opportunity to explore and develop the normal perceptual-motor

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<sup>1</sup>Donald D. Hammill and Patricia I. Myers, Methods for Learning Disorders (New York: Wiley and Sons, Inc., 1969), p. 6.