9 *Why Is There Learning Disabilities? A Critical Analysis of the Birth of the Field in Its Social Context*

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Abstract

This chapter presents an interpretation of why the category of learning disabilities emerged, that differs from interpretations that currently prevail. It argues that the category was created in response to social conditions during the late 1950s and early 1960s which brought about changes in schools that were detrimental to children whose achievement was relatively low. The category was created by white middle class parents in an effort to differentiate their children from low-achieving low-income and minority children. The category offered their children a degree of protection from probable consequences of low achievement because it upheld their intellectual normalcy and the normalcy of their home backgrounds, and it suggested hope for a cure and for their ability eventually to attain higher status occupations than other low achievers.

Many school structures are built around accepted categories for children. Categories such as first graders, gifted children, slow children, and learning disabled children all presume to designate 'real' commonalities among children, and form bases on which children are grouped and taught. As educators, we tend to take for granted that these categories accurately reflect differences among children, and

that their use enables children to be taught better. After all, many of these categories were discovered and researched by 'experts', so they *must* have validity. But in accepting commonly-used categories for children, we also tacitly accept an ideology about what schools are for, what society should be like, and what the 'normal' person should be like. Far from being objective fact, ideology rests on values and assumptions that cannot be proven, and that serve some people better than others.

This chapter illustrates the hidden ideology in 'scientific' categories and resulting school structures, by examining one category: learning disabilities. The chapter will show that, while discussions surrounding the emergence and subsequent use of the category were ostensibly about similarities in a certain identifiable group of children, the category developed largely on the basis of an ideology regarding the 'good' US economic order, the 'proper' social function of schooling, and the 'good' culture.

Learning disabilities is the newest special education category in the US, having achieved national status as a field in 1963 when the Association for Children with Learning Disabilities was founded. In 1979, learning disabilities overtook speech impairment as the largest special education category. By 1982, 41 per cent of the students in special education in US schools were categorized as learning disabled; they constituted 4.4 per cent of all students enrolled in the public schools (Plisko, 1984).

Learning disabilities is commonly viewed as an organically-based disorder within a small percentage of children that interferes with their ability to learn to read and write normally. Hallahan and Cruickshank (1973) have offered an interpretation of why the field emerged when it did, that has been widely accepted within special education. They date it back to the early 1900s when European physicians began to document behavioral and language patterns of individuals with known brain damage. Kurt Goldstein was one of the earliest of these; he studied the behavior of World War I soldiers who had suffered head wounds. Goldstein's work greatly influenced two German scientists, Heinz Werner and Alfred Strauss, who left Germany in the 1930s and eventually came to the US, where they continued their research on neurological foundations of perceptual-motor dysfunction. Their line of research was extended by William Cruickshank, who studied intellectually normal children with cerebral palsy. Through the efforts of these and other physicians, psychologists, and educators (such as Kephart, Getman, Barsch, Frostig, Orton, Mykelbust, and Kirk), the foundations were laid for

a data base about neurological impairment and its effects on learning behavior.

This data base was used by frustrated parents of LD children, who organized and lobbied for the establishment of special classes in schools for the learning disabled. According to Kirk and Chalfant (1984), parents pushed for LD programs in schools for two main reasons: many did not see their failing children as mentally retarded and therefore refused to accept placement for them in classes for the mentally retarded, and schools did not provide services for children with severe reading or language difficulties unless they qualified for an existing special education category. Thus, according to conventional explanations of the field's history, by the late 1950s, medical and psychological research, combined with parental pressure, led to the development of special school programs to meet the needs of a population of children that always had existed but only recently had been recognized.

The ideological message in this interpretation is that schools, supported by medical and psychological research, are involved in an historic pattern of progress. Problems that have always existed are one by one being discovered, researched, and solved. Many problems in schooling result from a lack of responsiveness to individual differences among children, which schools are increasingly learning to accommodate to the benefit of increasing numbers of children. Progress is schooling is brought about mainly by individual thinkers involved in research, and at times by pressure groups who are able to use that research to advance the interests of the underdogs. Once alerted to problems, the American public tends to support their amelioration. The main beneficiaries of such progress are those whose needs are finally recognized and met.

This chapter offers a different interpretation for why learning disabilities exists. It argues that the category emerged for a political purpose: to differentiate and protect white middle class children who were failing in school from lower class and minority children, during a time when schools were being called upon to raise standards for economic and military purposes. Rather than being a product of progress, the category was essentially conservative in that it helped schools continue to serve best those whom schools have always served best: the white middle and upper-middle class. This political purpose, however, has been cloaked in the ideology of individual differences and biological determinism, thus making it appear scientifically sound.

Learning Disabilities and the Escalation of Standards for Literacy

Learning disabilities in the US is essentially a category for reading failure. Learning disabled children are identified in part by comparing their performance in reading, writing, or oral language with norms for children for their age or grade level. These norms become the standards for helping to determine who is classified as learning disabled. It is important to recognize that low achievers are formally identified by tests that are specifically constructed to give meaning to the notion of 'average', and rank-order children to determine who is performing at an average level and who is not. Thus, one is not learning disabled in some abstract sense, but specifically in relationship to statistically-derived standards for literacy.

Standards for literacy have changed historically with changes in requirements of the race for international supremacy, the American economy, and notions of 'culture' and 'national security'. As Chall (1983), and Resnick and Resnick (1977) have described, before the twentieth century, standards for literacy were much different than they are now. Most Americans were not expected to be able to acquire new information through reading since most necessary information could be exchanged face to face and records were relatively simple. Children with reading difficulties, for the most part, did not present a great social problem. Industrial expansion escalated literacy standards, requiring more and more people who could keep and understand increasingly complex records, pursue advanced professional training, and follow written directions in the workplace. As literacy standards in society were raised and schools responded by emphasizing reading increasingly, most students were able to keep up, at least reasonably so. The higher standards went, however, the greater was the spread in achievement levels, and the farther those on the bottom were from the norms. In the late 1950s, this became a very definite problem.

During the decade and half a immediately preceding the founding of the Association for Children with Learning Disabilities, schools were vigorously pressed to raise their acheivement standards; a brief review of economic, political, and cultural conditions during the 1950s will illustrate why.

America emerged from World War II with an interrelated set of economic and political needs. As Hodgson (1976) has pointed out, a major economic need was to redirect production from war-time to

peace-time goods, while at the same time providing employment for returning war veterans. With the Depression still fresh in the minds of many, this was a large concern. Hodgson tells us that 'the answer to the riddle — or so thoughtful Americans in the late 1940s and 1950s thought with startling unanimity — lay in abundance' (p. 51). The American economy was to supply consumers with an abundance of material goods. To do this, markets were to be cultivated among middle class consumers, production of consumer goods was to be stepped up rapidly, and prices were to be held down. Technological inventions that could increase production, and cheap raw materials imported from abroad, were needed.

Both needs affected schooling. Increased automation directly affected schooling because it greatly expanded the white-collar labor market while simultaneously reducing demand for blue-collar labor. According to Gilbert (1981), between 1945 and 1970, 'jobs in manufacturing and construction increased only about 35 per cent, while available positions in government and the retail, finance, and insurance sectors rose by more than 200 per cent' (p. 178). As a result, schools were called upon to produce more workers with skills and attitudes for white collar employment, which meant making sure more children attained increasingly high standards of achievement.

The need for raw materials from abroad coincided with the demand that America step up its defense program in an effort to avoid another war; indirectly these demands also affected schools. Business demanded access to resources from abroad, which meant that the US needed to cultivate allies that could provide both raw materials and eventual market demand for American products. Gilbert has pointed out that America's postwar foreign policy of supporting 'political democracy and economic liberalism' and preventing the spread of Communism were both directly connected to business's need for foreign raw materials and markets (p. 34). The interests of business complemented the military's interest in developing America's defense system. The military establishment after the War was huge and powerful, employing millions of Americans in various capacities, and federal funding for defense and military research was relatively abundant (see Gilbert, 1981, p. 167–75; Hodgson, 1976, p. 129–33).

Thus, both business and the military had a strong interest in schools producing young people trained to carry on military research. Military spokesmen criticized schools for their failure to produce enough scientists, although their criticisms were not very fruitful at first. For example, Rear Admiral H.G. Rickover warned the public in March 1957 that,

> Our schools do not perform their primary purpose, the training of the nation's brain power to its highest potential. The result is an alarming shortage of trained professionals . . . scientists and engineers to push on with our atomic energy program . . . (p. 19).

Rickover saw the US and the Soviet Union engaged in a 'cold war of the classrooms' (p. 19). He saw the two nations competing for political and economic control over the rest of the world, with schools being crucial in the production of brainpower for this cold war.

> The Soviet aim is achievement of world scientific and engineering supremacy. She is training more scientists and engineers than her economy now requires. In the United States we are not keeping up with the needs of our armed forces and our industry. (p. 108)

Until the Soviet Union's launching of Sputnik, however, most white American citizens did not see schools as needing major reform. Sputnik changed this. It provided a focal point for debates about schooling, and 'proof' that Americans had allowed schools to be too soft and lax on young people. One can see a sudden outpouring of concern over American schools by examining the popular literature during the late 1950s. Before Sputnik, criticisms of schools were somewhat sporadic; after Sputnik, a deluge of articles and books blamed schools for being too soft and lenient. In 1958–1960, the public read numerous articles condemning schools and advocating raising standards in such lay magazines as *Good Housekeeping*, *Vogue*, *Life*, *Ladies' Home Journal*, *Time*, *US News and World Report*, *Look*, *Newsweek*, and *Readers' Digest*.

A theme that reappeared in many of these articles was the belief that schools exist to serve American's race for international control. Rickover, for example, saw a direct connection between schools and the cold war with Russia. He told the public in December 1957 that,

> Sputnik is, of course, of great significance because of its relation to missile weaponry and because of the potential military advantages of outer-space control. In the long run, the more disturbing fact which emerges from the Russian satellite program is her success in building in record time an educational system which produces exactly the sort of men and women her rulers need to achieve technological supremacy day after tomorrow. (p. 86)

Rickover's view of the purpose of schools was reaffirmed to the public by others, such as Arthur Trace, who asked *Saturday Evening Post* readers in 1961, 'Can Ivan Read Better Than Johnny?'

> What Russian students learn in school and what American students learn in school may do much to determine whether the free world will check and defeat Communism, or whether Communism will check and defeat the free world. (p. 30)

Others did not directly link schools with military interests, but condemned schools for a lack of intellectualism. A major spokesperson on behalf of intellectualism in schools was Arthur Bestor. In an interview in 1958 in *US News and World Report*, he charged that, 'The basic trouble is that the persons running our public school system lost sight of the main purpose of education — namely, intellectual training' (p. 68). He went on to condemn 'anti-intellectualism in the schools', and the

> tendency of professional educationists to 'pooh-pooh' the idea of mental discipline, and to say that the aim of public education ought to be 'life adjustment', instead of training in fundamental fields like science, mathematics, foreign languages, history, and English. (p. 68)

Bestor's definition of the aim of schooling as intellectual training supported the push for military development. Even though he generally did not discuss military needs, his views, like those of many others, accepted and complemented them. After condemning 'life adjustment' education, Bestor reaffirmed his belief in intellectual training by pointing out that, 'We have wasted an appalling part of the time of our young people on trivialities. The Russians have had sense enough not to do so. That's why the first satellite bears the label, Made in Russia' (p. 69).

Dubbed by *Time* magazine in 1958 'Wasteland, U.S.A.', American schools were compared with Russian schools and found wanting. The chief problem, critics believed, was laxity of standards. While American schools were described as soft and undemanding, Russian schools were described as tough. As a feature article in *Life* magazine pointed out in 1958, 'the laggards are forced out [of school] by tough periodic examinations and shunted to less demanding trade schools and apprenticeships. Only a third — 1.4 million in 1957 — survive all ten years and finish the course' ('Schoolboys Point up a US Weakness', p. 27). The public was urged that, 'We should not need the

threat of Russia to be convinced that it is time to close the carnival and go to work' (Wilson, 1958, p. 37).

Recommendations for reforming American education were prolific. Among them were the following:

1. Toughen elementary reading instruction. 'Unlike Ivan's first-grade reader with its 2000 word vocabulary, ... Johnny's reader is likely to have a vocabulary of fewer than 400 words' (Trace, 1961, p. 30).
2. End the practice of social promotion — insist that students master subject matter in order to be promoted, and test students' achievement of higher and uniform standards for promotion through a regular, nation-wide examination system. ('Back to the 3 Rs?', 1957; 'What Went Wrong with US Schools', 1958; Rickover, 1957b).
3. Group students into three groups by ability so the bright students can move through school more quickly ('Famous Educator's Plan', 1958; 'Harder Work for Students', 1961; Rickover, 1958; Woodring, 1957).
4. Assign the most intellectually capable teachers to the top group of students (Rickover, 1957b).

The primary beneficiaries of these reforms were to be business and the military, but Sputnik helped coalesce public opinion in support of them. Business would gain by having a more clearly stratified workforce earmarked and trained differentially for blue-collar, white-collar, and professional or scientific research positions. A diagram in *Life* magazine in 1958 illustrated this: 'bright' students (20 per cent of the student body) would be placed in the top track to learn upper-level math and science, and a foreign language, and then sent to college for more specialized training; 'average' students (60 per cent of the student body) would occupy the general track and leave school to enter jobs such as 'building contractor'; and 'slow' students (20 per cent of the student body) would take simplified academic courses and work experience to prepare for blue-collar employment in places such as 'Joe's Garage' ('Famous Educator's Plan', 1958). The military would gain by having more scientists to conduct research, as well as a public schooled to respect and support science and technological growth. However, these interests were not made explicit. Instead the public was told in article after article that school reform was needed for the good and safety of the average citizen: for the intellectual welfare of the young, for their develop-

ment of self-discipline, and to avert eventual take-over by the Russians.

To some extent, these reforms were all implemented. Standards in reading and math were raised, and tests revised to reflect raised standards. For example, based on analysis of the readibility levels of textbooks over a twenty-eight year period. Chall (1977) found elementary readers to offer progressively less challenge from 1944 until 1962. In 1962, first grade readers appearing on the market were more difficult, and became increasingly difficult into the 1970s, in 'greater vocabulary difficulty, in greater vocabulary diversity, in the varied content, and in the stronger decoding program' (p. 27). In sixth grade readers the changes were not as marked, but the trend toward difficulty showed up in:

> levels of reading stages, the proportionate number of pictures to print, the amount and kind of literature included in the reader — particularly unabridged literature, stories written expressly for the reader, and the ratio of expository to narrative writing. (p. 27)

Raised standards for reading acheivement were built into revised test norms of widely-used acheivement tests. The 1958 version of the Metropolitan Achievement Tests was renormed in 1964. The new norms reflected between 2 and 13 months gain in reading achievement made by students in grades 2–9 (no gain was found for first grade) ('Special Report No. 7', 1971). Similarly, the 1957 version of the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills was renormed in 1964. Hieronymus and Lindquist (1974) report that overall, 'the average change for the composite was 3.0 months at the 90th percentile, 2.3 months at the 50th percentile, and 1.1 months at the 10th percentile' (p. 66). In reading, the average gain was 1.9 months at the 90th percentile, 2.6 months at the 50th, and 1.0 months at the 10th.

Ability grouping and tracking were implemented with vigor, and the raised standards were used to assign students to groups. *US News World Report* told the public in 1957 that the old methods of hetergeneous grouping had 'diluted' the quality of schooling for all children. 'Watered-down instruction for everybody' was replaced by tougher standards and ability grouping, which was to 'enable bright students to forge ahead of others. Until recently this was frowned upon by educators as being "undemocratic"' ('Back to the 3 Rs?', p. 39).

What this means is that, in the name of international political and economic competition, students in the early 1960s were expected to

acheive at higher levels than their counterparts in the 1950s, and the public was told in no uncertain terms that this was necessary. Students were tested more to determine whether they were performing, and at least two major achievement tests required them to have mastered slightly higher levels of reading. If they were not performing up to standard, they were less likely to be promoted and more likely to be placed in the low ability group. As articles in popular magazines informed parents, low group children were destined for unskilled labor, and might be deprived of the better teachers.

Race, Social Class, and School Failure after Sputnik

American big business and the military have always been controlled by economically privileged whites. This was certainly the case in the 1950s and early 1960s. School reforms described above were advocated and supported primarily by white Americans of the middle and upper classes. Reforms were to help schools more efficiently fit every child for a 'place' in society, with some 'places' clearly more desirable and profitable than others. Advocates of school reform envisioned their own children among those who would rank as 'bright' or at least 'average', and therefore would receive the better teachers, beefed-up programs, and more lucrative opportunities.

Of course, it was not new that the more socially privileged receive the better schools and opportunities. But the legitimacy of this was increasingly contested after World War II. Following the war, blacks migrated in large numbers to Northern cities in search of jobs, better housing, and better schooling. Blacks' quest for better schooling received legitimacy with the Supreme Court's 1954 decision in *Brown v the Board of Education*. For the first time, the court system declared that citizens were not to be denied equal access to the 'good life' on the basis of race, and that this specifically meant that whites and blacks were to share schools.

It was not until the mid-1960s that serious efforts were made to desegregate schools. For example, Tyack (1974) has pointed out that in 1954 the New York school board issued a statement supporting desegregation, but a decade later, 'the number of schools with 90 per cent or more Negro and/or Puerto Rican pupils had jumped by more than 200 per cent' (p. 280). But when schools were desegregated, minority children were seen as 'behind' and resegregated within the schools in special programs, which helped retain white privilege. Kirp (1982) has described the desegregation process of California Bay Area

school districts during the late 1950s and early 1960s. He found them to vary widely in their interest in desegregating schools, but those districts that desegregated (as well as those that did not) 'held a shared and quite conventional understanding of the mission of public education ... The task of the schools, it was felt, was to provide a differentiated education that matched the varied abilities of a heterogeneous population' (p. 225). To do this, schools at all levels were tracked as described above, with minority children placed in compensatory or remedial classes.

Teachers came to see it as 'natural' that a sizable proportion of the student population would be unable to keep up with requirements of the 'average' child, and to explain this by seeking supposed deficiencies within 'slow' or failing children, or within their home backgrounds. For example, in the first volume of the *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, Park and Linden (1968) noted that,

> In grades two and three, 15 per cent of the children may be unable to do the reading required by the average classroom at that level, and approximately 30 per cent of the pupils in grades four, five, and six show that they have not developed the reading skills necessary to handle the program of the typical school. (p. 318)

It would seem logical to wonder why 'average' and 'typical classrooms' required students to use skills 15–30 per cent had not yet acquired. The article did not raise this question, nor did many people involved in education. Instead, what the article did was to describe psychological, physical, emotional, and environmental problems preventing many children from making the required progress.

Educators had developed four syndromes they used to explain why many lower class and minority children could not keep up. They were less certain how to explain failures of white middle class children. This problem, I want to argue, eventually led to the development of a new category, learning disabilities. Let us first review categories of failure 'explaining' lower class and minority children, then examine how learning disabilities was constructed to explain and protect failing white middle class children by differentiating them from the other four categories in ways that made them seem almost 'normal'.

Mentally Retarded

One category into which many lower class and minority children were placed was the mentally retarded. These included children scoring below 70–75 on an IQ test. Only about 10 per cent of the retarded population had known organic damage; the rest did not and were termed 'cultural-familial retardates' (Dunn, 1963). Disproportionate numbers of those considered mentally retarded were from low-income or minority families — these constituted most of the 'cultural-familial retardates'. For example, Wakefield (1964) found about 86 per cent of the retarded students he studied to be from low income homes, although only about 38 per cent of his sample was from such homes. Cultural-familial retardates were believed to suffer 'physical and cultural undernourishment', 'impoverished' language, and 'lack of motivation in schoolwork that arises from the family's apathy or lack of understanding of the purposes of education' (Goldstein, 1962, p. 12). These supposed cultural deprivations were believed to retard neurological development, or retard acquisition of basic skills, concepts, and attitudes needed for learning.

The belief that environmental 'deprivation' causes mental retardation was well enough accepted that it was used, for example, to explain why there were fewer retarded persons in the Soviet Union than in the US. In 1963, Dunn and Kirk wrote that, '... slums are being rapidly cleared in the Soviet Union ... Cultural deprivation may also be reduced for Russian children of lower socio-economic status by the availability and frequent use made of the Palaces of Culture, museums, ballets, operas, summer camps for children, etc.' (p. 301). The prognosis for this group was very pessimistic. For example, Goldstein (1962) predicted that retarded children would rapidly fall behind their peers and would be suitable as adults only for unskilled labor or sheltered workshops. Many of those born into slum areas would be destined to remain there because they were 'less well-endowed intellectually' and therefore would 'have difficulty in competing for well-paying jobs' (Dunn, 1963, p. 66).

Slow Learner

'Slow learners' comprised children scoring between 75 and 90 on an IQ test. Johnson, then a leading authority on slow learners, wrote in 1963 that 'slow learners compose the largest group of mentally retarded persons. Among the general school population, 15 to 17 or

18 per cent of the children can be considered slow learners' (p. 9). Like the mentally retarded, slow learners were thought to include disproportionate numbers of low-income children and children of color because of presumed cultural 'deficiencies'. According to Johnson,

> Preferred suburban communities where executive and professional persons reside will have very few slow learners . . . The subcultural areas of large metropolitan communities where the children receive little psychosocial stimulation present quite a different picture . . . Fifty per cent or more of the children can appropriately be designated as slow learners. (p. 9)

The prognosis for slow learners was almost as poor as it was for the mentally retarded. They could be expected to fall farther and farther behind their 'normal' peers in school achievement, especially reading, and many could be expected to drop out before graduation. For that reason, they should be pulled out of regular classrooms so that 'the slow learner can proceed at his own best rate without holding brighter children back' ('Slow Learners', 1962, p. 53). As adults they could be expected to occupy semi-skilled and unskilled occupations (Goldstein, 1962), and to be followers rather than leaders; as Abraham (1964) explained, they could not be expected to understand the complexities of the social order.

Emotionally Disturbed

Like the above two categories, large numbers of children classified as emotionally disturbed were from low-income backgrounds. Professionals believed that the lower class neighborhoods produced a larger proportion of emotionally disturbed children than middle or upper class neighborhoods. As Dunn explained (1963), in lower class neighborhoods 'security and stability are often lacking' (p. 245). A sub-category was the 'socially maladjusted', who were concentrated in black, Puerto Rican, and immigrant neighborhoods (Shaw and McKay, 1942). Although mental health specialists viewed the emotionally disturbed as suffering 'psychoses, psychophysiologic disturbances, psychoneuroses, personality disorders . . . and transient situational disturbance' (Eisenberg, 1960), educators viewed them mainly as unduly disruptive children (Dunn, 1963). Prognosis for emotionally disturbed children was unclear, but if treatment for

mental illness or 'maladjustment' was effective, they could be prepared for jobs in accordance with their IQ levels.

Culturally Deprived

A fourth category, which overlapped with the previous three, was the 'culturally deprived'. In 1964 the National Conference on Education and Cultural Deprivation identified the culturally deprived as Puerto Ricans, Mexicans, southern blacks and whites who moved to urban areas, and the poor already living in inner cities and rural areas (Bloom, Davis and Hess, 1965). Even those who were not classified as retarded, slow learners, or emotionally disturbed were still believed to suffer learning handicaps due to environmental conditions. Deutsch (1963) described their cognitive development as severely handicapped by lack of environmental stimuli, lack of systematic ordering of stimuli sequences (in other words, he believed their lives were chaotic) and lack of language training at home. Ausubel (1966) informed educators that these lacks within the home produced:

> poor perceptual discrimination skills; inability to use adults as sources of information corrections and reality testing, and as instruments for satisfying curiosity; an impoverished language-symbolic system; and a paucity of information, concepts, and relational propositions. (p. 251)

The language poor and minority children learned at home was often cited as a major culprit retarding their ability to learn. For example, Warden (1968) pointed out that 'a restricted language development places limits on intellectual potential. Thus, socioculturally disadvantaged children may begin school with a deficit, not only in using formal language but in conceptualizing as well' (p. 137). Prognosis was not optimistic. Educators believed that the 'culturally deprived' did not value intellectual work and lacked values necessary for success in school and society, such as delayed gratification, individuality, and the belief that hard work brings success (see, for example, Riessman, 1962). It was hoped that compensatory education might provide them with developmental experiences believed unavailable in their homes, and the motivation to succeed in school, but catching them up to the 'average' child was seen as very difficult (see, for example, Bereiter and Englemann, 1966; Rees, 1968).

All four of these categories accepted the school as being essentially as it should be. Children who did not fit its program and its

standardized conception of the 'good student' were held to be inadequate, with either their homes or their organic development, or both, at fault. This view was conveyed in the popular press as well as the professional literature. For example, readers of *Saturday Review* in 1962 were told that all schools have 'slow learners', but that 'slow learners appear most frequently in groups whose home environment affords restricted opportunity for intellectual development ...' ('Slow Learners', p. 53). In a later issue they were told about 'culturally deprived children', who grow up in communities in 'virtual isolation from the rest of society', learning 'ways of living [that] are not attuned to the spirit and practice of modern life', and where 'physical punishment is common'. ('Education and the Disadvantaged American', 1962, p. 58).

All failing children, however, were not lower class or minority. As standards for achievement were raised, more and more white middle class children were also threatened with school failure. What to do about them became the basis for the creation of the category of learning disabilities.

Learning Disabilities as a Category for White Middle Class Children

Before the 1960s, there was no recognized category called 'learning disabilities'. There were, however, other labels that eventually were consolidated to form the category of learning disabilities. In the US, since the early 1900s, a small number of physicians and psychologists had conducted a limited amount of research on people with brain-injury resulting from trauma to the head, people with severe language disorders, and people with severe difficulties learning to read. One can find early professional writings about people (usually adults) with conditions termed 'congenital word blindness' (see, for example, Hinshelwood, 1900), 'developmental alexia' (see, for example, Bender, 1958), 'specific dyslexia' (see, for example, Hallgren, 1950), 'brain injury' (see, for example, Strauss and Lehtinen, 1949) and 'psychoneurological learning disorders' (see, for example, Myklebust and Boshes, 1960). However, until the late 1950s and early 1960s, as Myklebust and Johnson (1962) put it, 'only minor attention has been given to the porblem of dyslexia in children' (p. 15).

For the most part, these conditions were described as having an organic basis, although there was dispute over this. Professionals who argued for an organic basis suggested diverse organic problems,

including minimal brain damage (Strauss and Lehtinen, 1947), a maturational lag in general neurological development (Bender, 1957; Rabinovitch, 1962), a failure of the brain to establish cerebral dominance (Orton, 1937), a failure to progress through stages of neurological development (Delcato, 1959), or a failure of the cortex to focus and sustain attention on specific details (Burks, 1957). Often such professionals explicitly ruled out environmental causation. For example, Burks distinguished between children whose learning difficulties stem from 'impoverished cultural background' and those whose difficulties result from 'an underlying brain dysfunction' (p. 169). Strauss and Lehtinen (1947) differentiated between 'the familial type of mental deficiency ... due either to adverse phychological or physical conditions which restrict growth opportunities' and brain injury 'resulting from faulty genes within the germ plasma, which is the child's biological inheritance' (p. 112). One of the criteria Strauss and Lehtinen recommended for distinguishing the brain injured child from the child with familial mental deficiency is that the brain injured child is essentially 'normal' or comes from a 'normal family stock' (p. 112).

In some early writings, there was also mention of the child or adult's IQ level. Cruickshank has been the main defender of the idea that persons at any IQ level could suffer dyslexia, or processing deficits. As he was still arguing in 1977, 'perceptual processing deficits are to be found in children of every intellectual range' (p. 54). Others have disputed his contention, and their perspective prevailed. For example, Mykelbust and Johnson (1962) argued that 'the [LD] individual is of normal mental capacity' (p. 16), and Bryant (1964) noted that 'dyslexia is not a broad defect in general intelligence; IQs tend to be in the normal range and occasionally reflect very superior ability' (p. 196).

The belief that some sort of organic defect causes some people difficulty in learning to read was not accepted by all professionals. For example, in 1957, Stevens and Birch cautioned against making 'leaps of verbal logic' that are 'only vaguely supported by research evidence'. They pointed out that, 'Much more work will need to be done before differing kinds of perceptual experience can be firmly linked to variations in everyday life behavior and to central nervous system lesions in anything approaching a cause-and-effect way' (p. 348). Capobianco (1964) argued against assuming organic causality on pragmatic grounds: the diagnosis of brain injury is of little help to the teacher and may suggest that this is a child who cannot learn.

The idea that reading difficulty among children with normal or

above IQs had an organic basis held appeal, however. One reason was that the nature of the presumed organic cause for learning disabilities suggested it might be curable, in contrast to more general organic defects thought to characterize other categories of failure, especially retardation. Americans were well aware of medical successes in treating various diseases, and were generally optimistic that diseases could not cured. Minimal brain injury as an organic defect was not exempt from that optimism. The cure was hypothesized as involving the training of healthy brain cells to take over functions of damaged cells (see, for example, Cruickshank *et al.*, 1961; Frostig and Horne, 1964; Strauss and Lehtinen, 1947), the promoting of overall neurological development (see, for example, Doman, Delcato, & Doman, 1964), the training of the brain to assume greater hemispheric dominance (Orton, 1937), or the altering of chemical balances through diet or drugs (see, for example, Feingold, 1975; Sroufe and Stewart, 1973). So far these hypotheses have proved less fruitful than hoped (Kavale and Forness, 1985). But in the early 1960s this optimism, especially in the popular press, was quite alive.

For example, in 1959, *Newsweek* readers were told about 'Johnnies who can't read' due to inherited neurological conditions. These children were described as 'often hav[ing] very high IQs'. They were also described as educationally treatable using the Gillingham reading method: 'Of the seventy-nine Parker students taught under the method so far, 96 per cent have become average or above average readers' ('Learning to Read', p. 110). In 1964, Maisel, writing in *Reader's Digest*, gave another optimistic account of a treatment for 'brain-injured' children. Case descriptions of children who were brain-injured at birth and experienced difficulty learning language, physical movements, and reading were provided. A new treatment developed by Delcato and the Doman brothers, involving having the child daily complete prescribed patterned motor movements, was reported to 'activate the millions of surviving [brain] cells to take over the functions of the dead ones'. Prognosis was reported excellent: 'Hundreds of other brain-injured children have traveled the same path toward normal or superior development, under an unconventional, and controversial, form of medically supervised home treatment' (p. 137); readers were told that this treatment even helped affected children learn to read.

A second reason the idea of organic damage had appeal was that it explained reading problems of white middle class children without raising questions about the cultural integrity of middle class homes, or the demand by white middle class business and military leaders

that standards in certain areas of school achievement be raised. It was simply easier to believe that some children suffered minor neurological damage through nobody's fault, than it was to question a culture that required economic expansion and economic imperialism, and social institutions that would shape the young for a stratified labor market.

A third reason was that it provided a way of differentiating between the learning disabled and the mentally retarded while at the same time locating both problems within the child. Gould (1981) has argued that many people throughout history have justified a stratified and segregated society by believing people have innately different capacities for learning, and due to their own biological inheritances, can be expected to achieve at different levels.

By borrowing from the ideology of biological determinism, educators and parents gave the ideology some legitimacy, but at the same time elevated those they classified as learning diabled from those classified as slow or retarded by specifying that the organic damage affected specific areas of learning, not learning in general.

This perspective is still quite prevalent. For example, Cruickshank and Johnson (1975) have presented the trainable and educable mentally retarded as two categories on a continum, and discussed both in terms of organic causes and physical characteristics. They also described children with specific learning disabilities in organic terms, as 'those who have experienced a disturbance of some sort in normal cephalo-caudal neural maturation' (p. 247). The implication is that learning difficulties can be rank-ordered, with severe retardation at one end and learning disabilities at the other, and all are wholly or in part caused by organic deficiencies.

To underscore the hierarchical distinction between mental retardation and learning disabilities, Kirk (1972) has explained:

> To some, the term 'learning disabilities' is confusing since mentally retarded children also have difficulty learning, but it should be noted that their [the retarded] disability is a general difficulty in learning rather than difficulty in a more limited area. (p. 44)

Many parents with failing school children accepted the idea that their children were neurologically impaired or brain injured because it explained the problem in a way they could accept. For example, in 1962, Barsch reported a study of explanations parents offered for the failings of their 'brain damaged' children. The sample consisted of parents of 119 children reported to have organic damage, although

the article did not explain how it was known they had organic damage. Barsch found 72 per cent of the parents to use the term 'brain injured' when explaining their children's problems to others. Fifty-seven of the eighty-five parents who used the term reported feeling better when using it. They reported, for example, that it explained the child's deviant behavior and made people stop asking questions, it elicited sympathy, and it helped differentiate the child from the mentally retarded. Parents did not use the term if the child's behavior was near normal, or if they had experienced adverse reactions from neighbors when using it before. Quite likely they found brain injury to be an acceptable explanation because it absolved the home from blame, it gave the problem a disease-like causality, and it fit within prevailing notions about what 'normal' children can do. The 'brain injured' were abnormal but only partially so, and no one could be blamed for their abnormality.

Accepting the idea of brain damage, many middle class parents used it as the basis for organizing to advance the interests of their children. Persons from advantaged social class backgrounds are most likely to organize a pressure group in response to a problem they see as threatening to their own interests. For example, Presthus (1974) found about 80 per cent of the members of American interest groups to come from middle and upper middle class backgrounds (p. 110). So it was with the organization of a pressure group on behalf of 'brain injured' children. It was middle class parents of children who seemed almost 'normal' but were failing in school who lobbied the hardest for the creation of a nationally accepted diagnostic category for their failing children.

Before 1963, parents in various states had banded together to form organizations with names such as 'Minnesota Association for the Brain-Injured Child', 'Fund for Perceptually Handicapped Children', and 'Michigan Children's Neurological Development Program'. These organizations served as support groups for parents, networks for disseminating information, and pressure groups for making physicians and educators more aware of 'normal' children with severe reading problems.

In 1963, the Fund for the Perceptually Handicapped in Evanston, Illinois, sponsored a conference for parents from these various organizations. The announced purpose of the conference was:

> to obtain information, share ideas, and open channels of communication with all groups who are interested in the PERCEPTUALLY HANDICAPPED CHILD. We will move toward investigation of the child who has average or above average intelligence but is not learning (*Conference Proceedings*, 1963).

In the first major address of the conference, Samuel Kirk opened his remarks by specifying which children the conference was not concerned with, and by implication which children it *was* concerned with: 'As I understand it, this meeting is not concerned with children who have sensory handicaps, . . . or with children who are mentally retarded, or with delinquent or emotionally disturbed children caused by *environmental factors*' (my emphasis, *Conference Proceedings*, p. 1). He went on to propose that the children be called 'learning disabled' because this term directs attention toward a school problem without specifying that there be a firm diagnosis of organic damage. The term stuck, and the Association for Children with Learning Disabilities was founded. By 1966, it had enough members that it was able to sponsor a large, very well-attended international conference in Oklahoma. Two years later the first volume of the *Journal of Learning Disabilities* appeared.

For purposes of obtaining funds for special classes and teacher training, the category required a legal definition. The definition that was accepted in 1968 incorporated elements that helped differentiate the LD child from categories of failure described earlier, and that reaffirmed the belief that this was an organically based problem. The National Advisory Committee on Handicapped Children (1968) defined LD children as exhibiting disorders in one or more of the following: 'listening, thinking, talking, reading, writing, spelling, or arithmetic'. (Since then, the main way to determine whether the child has a disorder has been to give a standardized reading test; oral language tests and standardized math tests are also used.) It specified that 'these disorders are *not* due primarily to visual, hearing or motor handicaps, to mental retardation, emotional disturbance or to environmental disadvantage'. (In other words, this category does not include children who can be classified as mentally retarded, slow learner, emotionally disturbed, or culturally 'deprived'.) The types of conditions that were said to be the same as learning disabilities were mainly organic: 'perceptual handicaps, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia, developmental aphasia, and so forth'.

Thus, by the mid-1960s, white middle class parents and educators had borrowed from medical research the notion of minimal brain injury to explain why their children were unable to keep up with the

schools' raised achievement standards. How do we know the category was really created for white middle class children?

The literature did not specify the family background or kind of neighborhood believed most likely to produce learning disabled children, although it was very explicit about the kinds of the neighborhoods most likely to produce other categories of school failure. But there is evidence that the great majority of students placed in LD classes during the category's first ten years (1963–1973) were, in fact, white and middle class. This was born out by an investigation of the race and social class composition of subject samples of research studies of students classified as learning disabled during that period. Of a total of 460 subjects in the samples of twelve research studies, 98.5 per cent were white. Of a total of 588 subjects in sixteen studies, 69 per cent were middle class or above (Sleeter, 1986).

Similar findings have been reported in studies of the composition of special classes in Westchester County, New York and Missouri (Franks, 1971; White and Charry, 1966). For example, White and Charry found students in Westchester County who were labeled 'brain damaged' had no significant IQ or achievement differences from those labeled 'culturally deprived', but were from significantly higher social class backgrounds.

If the category of learning disabilities was used primarily for white middle and upper class children, this use was tacitly sanctioned by professionals. Many professionals believed that LD children were distinct from 'culturally deprived' children, even though the two shared similar learning characteristics. This can be seen in the professional literature, which treated the two categories as if they were distinct. Volumes 1 and 3 of the *Journal of Learning Disabilities* (1968 and 1970) contained twelve articles about culturally 'deprived' or 'disadvantaged' children. Most of these were reported studies; none of the subjects were reported to be in LD classes (many were in Head Start programs), nor did the authors suggest they could or should be. Authors of just two of the twelve articles criticized the practice of distinguishing between LD and culturally 'disadvantaged' students, arguing that a significant proportion of such students probably belonged in LD classes (Grotberg, 1970; Tarnopol, 1971). In 1973, the *Journal of Learning Disabilities* featured a symposium questioning the distinction between the disabled and the disadvantaged. Although the symposium did not resolve the issue, two authors suggested it was wise to keep the two groups separate for funding purposes. As Myers and Hammill pointed out,

> . . . disadvantaged pupils who read significantly below MA expectancy or who evidence basic linguistic disorders could be considered learning-disabled. Many professionals in the field of learning disabilities are reluctant to accept this because it would mean that between 25 per cent to 50 per cent (or more) of urban center-city school children would qualify for learning disability programs when adequate funding and personnel are not available. (p. 409)

I have argued that learning disabilities emerged in response to increased pressure on schools to raise the achievement levels of students, and to group students for instruction and eventual occupational distination based on achievement and ability. The fact that many children were not able to reach those standards was explained in terms of deficiencies within children rather than the social system that was pressuring schools to treat children in certain ways. Learning disabilities was created to explain the failure of children to meet those standards when existing explanations based on mental, emotional, or cultural deficiency did not seem to fit. Learning disabilities seemed to explain white middle class children particularly well because it did not level blame on their home or neighborhood environment, it upheld their intellectual normalcy, and it suggested hope for a cure and for their eventual ability to attain relatively higher status occupations than other low achievers.

Learning Disabilities Today

In the last ten years, there has been a shift in who is classified as learning disabled and how the category is used. During the late 1960s and early 1970s, pressure on students to achieve at increasingly high levels seemed to wane, as various test score patterns indicate (such as scores on the SAT or the Iowa Test of Educational Development). This probably caused some parents from advantaged backgrounds who had children experiencing difficulty in school to feel somewhat less need for having their children placed in a special category. At the same time, minority groups exerted pressure on educators to discard the notion of cultural deprivation and stop classifying disproportionate numbers of minority children as mentally retarded. As a result, children of color have recently been classified increasingly less as retarded, emotionally disturbed, or slow, and more as learning

disabled. Although the majority of LD students are still white, the proportion of minority students in LD classes has climbed. Tucker (1980) examined the racial composition of LD and MR classes in over fifty school districts between 1970 and 1977. He found the proportion of black students in classes for the mentally retarded to decrease, while at the same time their proportion in classes for the learning disabled increased. In school year 1978–1979, nationwide, 15 per cent of the LD students were black, 8 per cent were Hispanic, 1 per cent were Native American, 1 per cent were Asian, and 75 per cent were white (DBS Corporation, 1982), while enrollment in the public schools was 15.7 per cent black, 6.8 per cent Hispanic, 1.4 per cent Asian, 0.8 per cent Native American, and 75.3 per cent white (Grant and Eiden, 1981). By 1980, LD students were 16 per cent black, 8 per cent Hispanic, 1 per cent Native American, 1 per cent Asian, and 74 per cent white, almost identical to the racial composition of public schools during that year (DBS Corporation, 1982).

However, it appears that LD classes are still disproportionately middle and upper middle class. Gelb and Mizokawa (in press) have analyzed recent national data on the social class composition of various special education categories. They found that students classified as learning disabled are disproportionately middle class and above, while those classified as retarded are disportionately lower class.

So far analyses of race and social class have been done separately, but it appears that middle class parents of color may be using the category increasingly as a way of distinguishing their children who are having difficulty in school from lower class children of color, who are still being overclassified as retarded. It also can be suggested that some districts may be using the category increasingly as a 'dumping ground' for minority students, similar to the way other categories had been used previously, while other districts still reserve the category primarily for middle to upper class white students.

As schools currently are being called on again to raise standards, it is not clear yet how white middle class parents of failing children will protect their children. A new category (such as the 'gifted disabled' or the underachiever) may be created and defined to suggest high expectations for success if certain modifications are made for them in the school program. Or, learning disabilities may regain this function by being redefined to make it more restrictive. Some professionals are in fact, advocating restricting who is classified as learning disabled to ensure that the category once more serves those

for whom it was originally intended. For example, in 1984 Kirk warned that:

> In this country we seemd to have confused those children who are educationally underachieving because of extrinsic reasons (economic and cultural disadvantage, lack of opportunity, inadequate instruction) with those children who are underachieving for intrinsic reasons (mental retardation, sensory handicaps, serious emotional disturbance, learning disabilities).

He went on the express concern that 'the needs of the real learning disabled child are neglected' (p. 9). This must cause one to wonder who the real learning disabled child is. A strict conception of who is to be served in LD programs may lead to programs that once more serve primarily white middle class children.

Conclusion

School structures are created and used by someone to serve the interests of someone with a particular context. This may be done with excellent intentions, but it may also reaffirm existing assumptions about who deserves what and why. Learning disabilities in the US was constructed as a way of understanding certain kinds of low achieving children by those who accepted the need to push children to achieve in specific areas at increasingly high levels. It was a category that was used politically by concerned parents and educators who believed white middle class failing children should not be failing, or at least should suffer the consequences of school failure as little as possible.

The category affirmed the necessity for the US to engage in international technological competition, and for schools to sort and select the young for future work roles. It also affirmed the use of class and race biased procedures and beliefs for conducting schooling and for distinguishing among children. This was not accomplished by a top-down mandate, but by parents and educators who were attempting to make the best possible life for their children within a social context they accepted. Rather than being a discovery of science and an instance of progress, learning disabilities has represented an attempt to maintain race and class stratification (although probably not consciously so by many who were involved in it), but to do so in

a way that appears to be based on innate human variation and objective assessment of individual characteristics.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Michael Apple, Carl Grant, Thomas Popkewitz, and James Ysseldyke for their helpful and constructive comments on earlier drafts of this chapter.

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